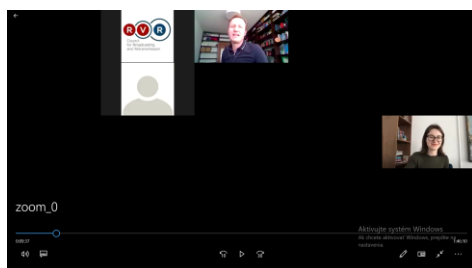


COVID-19-related disinformation on social media platforms and ways to tackle it

Draft version 19 April 2020

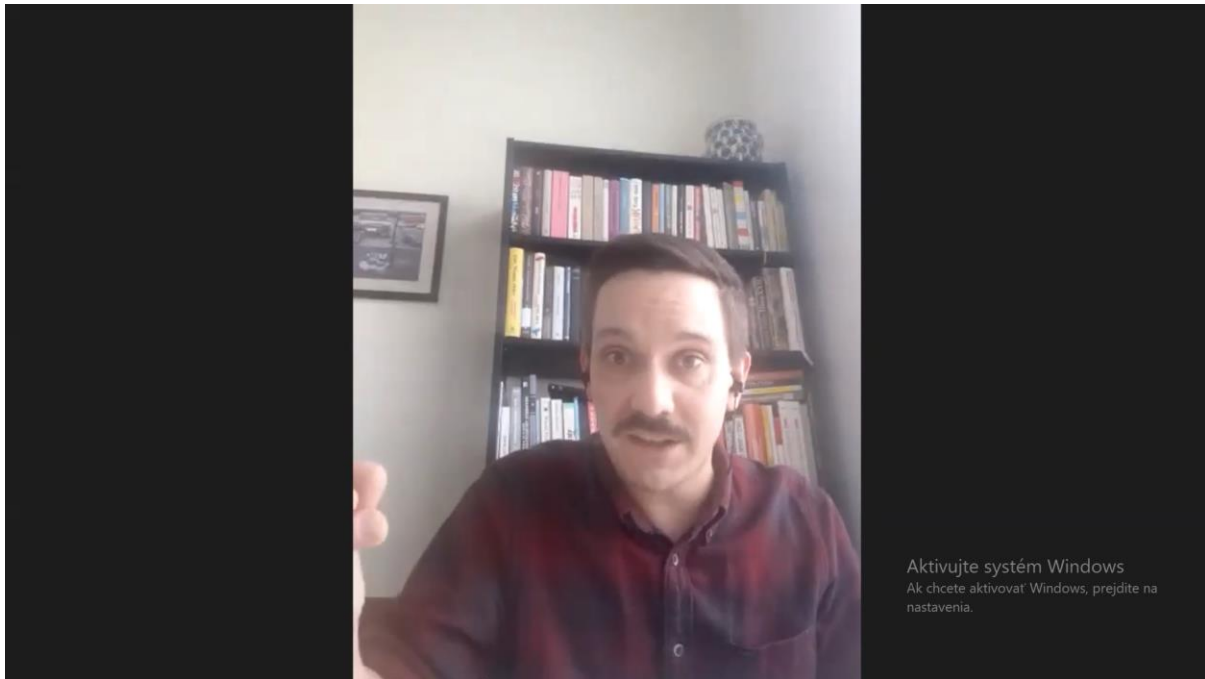
Bratislava – On 14 April, the [Slovak Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission](#) and [MEMO 98](#) organized a webinar to discuss how to counter the spread of COVID-19-related disinformation on Facebook, Google and Twitter and ways to tackle it. More than 100 people registered prior to the event which indicated a high level of interest as well as relevance of the topic. As many as 90 participants, including media regulators, experts on disinformation, journalists, academia, interested CSOs, donors and others, joined the webinar.



The Council and MEMO 98 both have experience with monitoring social media during elections. However, while disinformation during elections impacts its integrity, during the pandemic, it could impact our ability to survive. This is why today it is even more important than in other times that people, including most vulnerable audiences, have access to relevant and objective information. In an era of ever-evolving challenges related to the pandemic, disinformation takes centre stage as a crucial issue in the current situation.

Eliška Pírková, Access Now: It is essential to uphold fundamental human rights in the time of the health crisis

The *Europe Policy Analyst* at [Access Now](#) Eliška Pírková introduced the work of her organizations and talked about the dangers of instrumentalizing the COVID-19 situation for significant restrictions of free expression, access to information, and other fundamental rights. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every part of our lives, including our human rights, but privacy, free expression, access to information, and other fundamental rights are even more essential in times of crisis. We at Access Now are working to ensure responses to COVID-19 strengthen rather than undermine those rights.



Milan Zubíček, Google: We are committed to help people discover trustworthy and useful information

The *Public Policy and Government Relations Manager* at Google Milan Zubíček talked about what Google and YouTube have done, as the COVID19 pandemic evolves, to help people discover trustworthy and useful information. This work by Google is organized in three areas, with the first one being the help provided to people in finding authoritative content online (such as [SOS Alerts](#)). The second area concerns the protection of people against harmful disinformation. It was mentioned during discussion that Google does not demote content based on the factcheck labels but based on their own policies. The third area includes cooperation with Google's partners such as governments, health authorities, researchers, NGOs, and the [European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services](#) (ERGA). Google also provides ad grants for governments and WHO (15 million USD).



Kateryna Kruk, Facebook: We will remove misinformation that contributes to the risk of imminent violence or physical harm

The *Public Policy Manager* at Facebook Kateryna Kruk explained what Facebook has done to deal with the COVID-19 situation in general and to tackle disinformation on its platform in particular. Facebook established an [information center](#) which is a hub accumulating [information](#) coming from WHO, UNICEF, as well as other regional or local state health authorities. Also, the platform has provided educational pop ups appearing in the newsfeed when people type COVID-19. The platform's [Disease Prevention Maps](#) are aggregated sets of information that health researchers can use to better understand how population dynamics influence the spread of disease.

In the field of fighting misinformation, which Kateryna Kruk considers to be one of the biggest burdens for the industry, Facebook has been working in two directions. First of all, there is so called [community standard about misinformation and harm](#) (misinformation that contributes to the risk of imminent violence or physical harm) which has been in place since 2018 (for example, Facebook took down the content about measles in Somalia or other health outbreaks in other countries and regions of the world). Ever since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic globally, Facebook included the COVID-19 related information into this policy. What it means is that the platform is working with WHO and other authoritative health organizations to come up with a list of most popular hoaxes and infactual or twisted information about the number of cases in a given country as well as availability of the emergency services. According to Kateryna Kruk, all the information which has violated this community standard on misinformation and harm will be removed from Facebook.

As for the work with the third party factcheckers, Facebook has over 55 partners working in 45 languages and helping the platform to factcheck the content – in the context of C19, they

are reviewing all sorts of misinformation that might occur in a country but they have not provided any specific trainings on how to tackle the C19-related dis/misinformation.



Ronan Costello, Twitter: Our misinformation policy around C-19 is focused specifically on false claims around diagnostic and treatment

The Public Policy Manager at Twitter Ronan Costello mentioned that their efforts around C-19 and, in general, around elections (or any other issues of public importance), was to ensure that the conversation on the platform is as healthy as possible. Also, Twitter encourages healthy civic participation in the public conversation and amplifies reliable information. Twitter has focused on combating misinformation by providing philanthropic assistance to public health relief efforts. Moreover, Twitter launched a COVID-19 [search prompt](#) and offered public grants to health agencies. The platform's misinformation policy around C19 is to focus specifically on false claims around diagnostic and treatment.

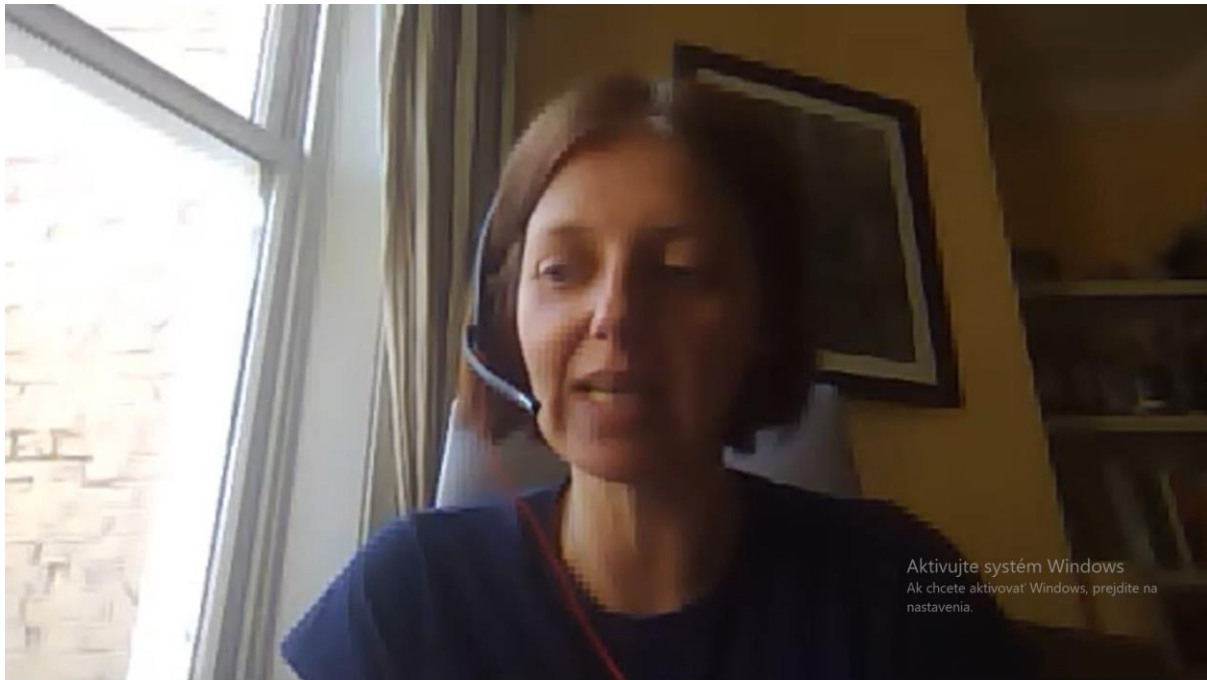


Grégorie Polad, ACT: With great power comes great responsibility. One factchecker for 73.000 users is not enough.

At the beginning of his presentation, Grégorie Polad of the Association of Commercial Television in Europe (ACT) expressed gratitude to all health professionals and journalists. When commenting on the efforts taken by Google, Facebook and Twitter, he said he was delighted to see some of the measures taken by them to stop dissemination of disinformation. Given the previous position of the platforms claiming that such measures were impossible or difficult to implement, Grégorie Polad found it surprising that it was possible to implement them now which, according to him, shows that if there is the will there is the way.

Grégorie Polad: “If anything, this crisis indicates that more than ever the role and responsibility of such platforms shows their role as publishers and possibly as new critical public utilities. While anyone can appreciate the generosity of these platforms to step in to curb the phenomenon, we must point out that we cannot rely just on a good will of these platforms. Instead, we need rules, we need regulations, we need clear KPIs, we need human reviewers and we need sanctions. Platforms are not above the law and community platforms cannot replace regulations. While AI solutions may help, I think they will never be as good as having hired human reviewers and content moderators acting under legally sanctioned editorial responsibility standards, tracking quickly and based on understanding of the local context. I have heard in the past that companies such as Facebook have up to 20.000 people doing this job and I know this seems a lot but unfortunately if you divide this number by 2.3 billion active Facebook users, it means that there is one factchecker for 73.000 users - clearly this is never going to be sufficient. When broadcasters make a mistake (such as what we have seen with the [5G story](#) which claims that 5G technology helps transmit coronavirus) they usually end up paying a fine – unfortunately when the platforms harbor disinformation that goes viral they actually end up making profit. This crisis has shown that these platforms have become essential

public utilities and with the great power comes great responsibility, not just community standards – so I believe they will and must be regulated in the short and long term to ensure public safety, to protect our democratic discourse and the rights of citizens and consumers to be upheld.”



Maria Donde, Ofcom: In the time of crisis, people watch broadcast TV news

The Head of International Content Policy at Ofcom Maria Donde talked about the work of the UK media regulator in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. More specifically, Ofcom monitors the wider industry metrix around C19. Maria Donde: “One of the most extraordinary results that we have seen based on the TV monitoring analysis in the UK is a 92 % year-on-year increase in people watching broadcast TV news which tells us a lot what people want as their source of information in the critical situation as this.” Other findings of the [analysis](#) titled *Covid-19 news and information: consumption and attitudes* include:

- In the first week of the ‘lockdown’, almost all the UK online population (99%) accessed news and information about Covid-19 at least once a day. One quarter (24%) said they were getting news 20 or more times a day.
- BBC services are the most-used source by some margin (see Figure 1). Four in five (82%) say they use the BBC as a source of news/info. Just over half use non-BBC broadcasters (56%), followed by officials (52%), social media (49%), the press either online or printed (43%) and family, friends or local people (42%). 15% say they use closed groups, such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook messenger.



As a response to the Covid-19 outbreak, Ofcom is providing a range of information about how people are getting news and information about the crisis. Ofcom is publishing this under their [media literacy duties, as part of our Making Sense of Media programme](#). This work furthers Ofcom's understanding around the access, consumption and critical engagement with news at this time, recognising that habits may intensify or change given the nature of the crisis. For the pre-Covid-19 news consumption and attitudes, you can see Ofcom's [News Consumption Survey](#). Given the increased concern about misinformation during this time, Ofcom is also [providing information about fact-checking and debunking sites and tools](#).

Francesco Sciacchitano, AGCOM: We need to get better data from the platforms

The senior legal expert at AGCOM Francesco Sciacchitano thanked the platforms for their efforts to counter disinformation and to comply with the provisions of the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) which was launched in October 2018 as an important pillar of the [Action Plan against Disinformation](#). He acknowledged that the Code has certain weaknesses when it comes to its implementation (the Code is understandably too general) and mentioned the monitoring of the Code's implementation. In this context, he also mentioned the problem with the access to the data. According to Francesco Sciacchitano, the transparency reports by platforms only contain aggregated data for the whole European Union but very little data on the activities carried out at the national level – as such, it is extremely difficult for ERGA to monitor this aggregated data. As such, it is important to understand if it is possible to improve the quality of the data, especially when it comes to the data which is available at the national level. It is also extremely important to ensure consistency in the approach by the platforms. ERGA will publish its monitoring report in two-three weeks from now.

Carlos Perez-Maestro, European Commission: Disinformation on social media platforms during the C-19 pandemic can cause physical harm

Carlos Perez-Maestro of the European Commission (DG CONNECT- Media Convergence & Social Media) mentioned that during the pandemic, the European Commission has very close daily contact with the platforms as everyone understands how important it is in this situation. According to him, it is not that spreading disinformation can create distrust in public authorities, but people can experience physical harm. The general framework of the EU relationship with the platforms is laid out in the Code of Practice on Disinformation and the Commission continues to monitor how the platforms continue to implement the Code in the current situation. Carlos Perez-Maestro also mentioned the importance of:

- avoiding that some people will make money out of the current crisis;
- avoiding to misuse the platforms (fake accounts) to distribute disinformation;
- providing users with access to trustworthy information (WHO and local health institutions)
- taking down illegal content which could cause physical harm



The discussion was moderated by Ľuboš Kukliš, the Chief Executive of the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission and Rast'o Kužel, the Executive Director of MEMO 98.

Mentioned resources:

Facebook:

- Blogposts on COVID-19: <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/coronavirus/>
- Transparency report on community standards enforcement: <https://transparency.facebook.com/community-standards-enforcement>
- Data for Good: <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/data-for-good/>

Google:

- Blogposts on COVID-19: <https://blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/googles-response-covid-19/>
- Support to journalists and news industry: [Journalism Emergency Relief Fund](#), [support to Fact-checkers](#), [Google News Initiative](#), [Google.org support](#)

Twitter:

- Blogposts on COVID-19: https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html
- Data hub for academic research: <https://developer.twitter.com/en/use-cases/academic-researchers>

Access Now:

- Resource website: <https://www.accessnow.org/issue/covid-19/>

EU DisinfoLab:



Rada
pre vysielanie
a retransmisiu



- Resources: <https://www.disinfo.eu/coronavirus>
- Study on conspiracy theories and 5G: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/coronavirus-and-5g-a-case-study-of-platforms-content-moderation-of-conspiracy-theories>

Ofcom:

- Ofcom research: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/coronavirus-news-consumption-attitudes-behaviour>
- Factual resources: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/coronavirus-resources>

ERGA:

- Reaction to COVID-19: <http://erga-online.eu/?p=668>
- Report on Report on the intermediate monitoring of the Code of practice on disinformation: http://erga-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ERGA-2019-06_Report-intermediate-monitoring-Code-of-Practice-on-disinformation.pdf

Reuters Institute:

- Navigating the ‘infodemic’ report: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-coronavirus>