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# Policy recommendation report

Whitepaper from the SOMA project

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Nowadays, the widespread of digital services has highly impacted our lives. Among others changes, it has affected the way in which we access, share and delivery information online. In such context, malicious acts through the use of digital services and platforms provided negative impulse to the media ecosystems causing a need of evolving European legislations.

Accordingly, the European Commission has put in place a set of actions and tools to better regulate the media digital ecosystem and its actor.

Recently, the EC has launched the “European Digital Strategy” a series of rules governing digital services in the EU. The European Digital Strategy proposes two legislative initiatives: The Digital Services Act<sup>1</sup> (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act <sup>2</sup>(DMA).

As reported by the EC, the DSA and DMA have two main goals:

- to create a safer digital space in which the fundamental rights of all digital services users are protected
- to establish a level playing field to foster innovation, growth, and competitiveness, both in the European Single Market and globally

Two other relevant efforts have been accomplished by the EC over the last years.

The first one is the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), adopted in 2018, to establish a coordination at European scale for national legislation on all audiovisual media, both traditional TV broadcasts and on-demand services.

The second is the European Democracy Action Plan, launched in December 2020, to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU. The European Democracy Action Plan sets out measures around three main pillars:

1. Promote free and fair elections
2. Strengthen media freedom and pluralism
3. Counter disinformation

Referring to the last point, as stated by the EC “*The Action Plan proposes improving the existing EU's toolbox for countering foreign interference, including new instruments that allow imposing costs on perpetrators*”. Aim of the EC is to improve the efforts to translate the Code of Practice on Disinformation into a co-regulatory framework of obligations and accountability of online platforms, in line with the upcoming Digital Services Act. Basically, the strategy is to enhance the Code of Practice, setting up a more robust framework to monitor its implementation.

Among the different actions, the EC funded in 2018 the Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis (SOMA) to fight disinformation.

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<sup>1</sup>More information is available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment_en)

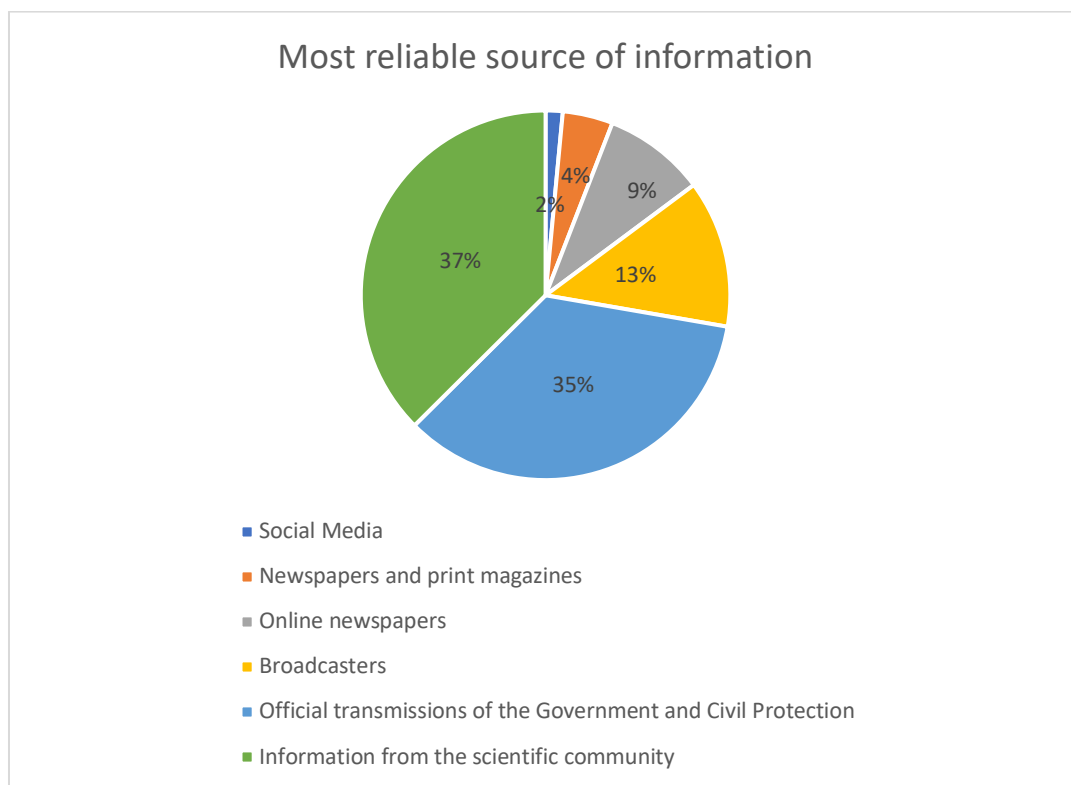
<sup>2</sup> More information is available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-markets-act-ensuring-fair-and-open-digital-markets\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-markets-act-ensuring-fair-and-open-digital-markets_en)

The SOMA project scope was the study and analysis of disinformation path and its impact. Results have been translated in information for policy makers to support future policies development in the sector.

Main findings from SOMA research<sup>3</sup> suggest that in emergency time, such as the period of covid-19 pandemic, trust in non-official sources of information decreases. In parallel, the trust in official sources of information increases, in particular in information shared by Governments and in information shared by the scientific community.

SOMA asked 1600 people, participating to a survey, which are the most reliable information channels during the Covid-19 emergency (Figure 1).

Aggregating the preference, 37% stated that the most reliable source of information is the one provided by the scientific community and 35% by the Institutions. Then 13% considered the broadcasters a reliable source of information. Only 9% relies on online newspapers. These figures show that the low percentage of trust in online newspapers compared to official sources of information.

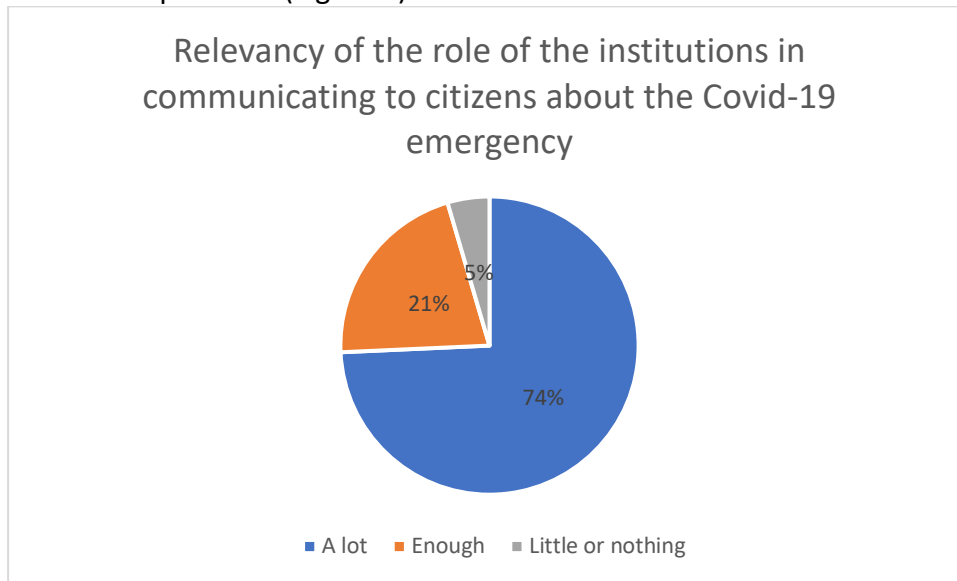


**Figure 1. Most reliable source of information during Covid-19 emergency chosen by the participants**

To better understand how information by public institutions is perceived, we asked about the importance of the role of the institutions (for example: Prime Minister, Government, Civil Protection Agency) in communicating directly to citizens and in

<sup>3</sup><http://www.t-6.it/report-on-the-role-of-the-information-in-the-emergency-covid-19-impacts-and-consequences-on-people-behaviors-report/>

providing information on how to behave to deal with the Covid-19 emergency. 74% of respondents state that this is very important, 21% is important while 5% states that this is of little or no importance (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Replies on importance of the institutional communication on Covid-19 emergency**

Figure 1 and Figure 2 allow to say that, considering the 1600 respondents to the SOMA survey, percentage of trust in online journal and on social media is low while the degree of trust in institutions is quite high (35%) and comparable with the trust in the scientific community (37%). Moreover, 74% of the respondents think that the communication by the institutions is very important.

Such results show how relevant is for institutions and governments to adopt a continuous and efficient communication strategy increasing social media visibility and reducing access to misleading and false information. In addition to the efforts to eliminate false news, another action should be to incentivize platforms to increase visibility of prominent dissemination of official and trustful sources opening their algorithms for rating and content visualization accordingly. Such approach follows what it's suggested by Article 7 of the Audiovisual Media Service directive: "Member States may take measures to ensure the appropriate prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest".

It is fair to say that sharing trustful information limiting false news probably won't solve the problem. Another issue emerged from SOMA analysis related to the opportunity to get access to the amount of data handled by the platforms for research purposes, not considering here all the issues related to digital media (il)literacy and the cognitive biases in information elaboration.

## Policy recommendation for European Institutions

Based on the aforementioned debate and on the research carried out by SOMA, the aim of this paragraph is to transfer key recommendations for European Institutions to inform policy discussion on disinformation.

### 1. Increasing trustworthy contents sharing

AVMSD states “Member States may take measures to ensure the appropriate prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest”. Accordingly, platform should be asked to revise their algorithms to incentivize the dissemination of prominent contents based on the trustworthiness of information instead of the number of views, reach and sharing.

Article 7a acknowledges it may be important for Member States to establish incentives for broadcasters and service providers to ensure appropriate prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest with legislative measures. However, the debate among high level stakeholders such as Eu institutions and platforms should follow the same path providing incentives to the platforms to privilege sharing of trustful information.

### 2. More and better access to data for research purposes

Data access for research purposes is one of the most pressing issues related to the analysis and understanding of disinformation. Despite several requests from European institutions, most of platform’s data are still not accessible. Some examples of access for research activities, such as Social Science One (SSO) which could collect and give access to a dataset from Facebook covering 46 countries and 17 trillion values, allowed around 100 researchers to analyse it. SSO has launched also a new research collaboration that enables social scientists to access data to conduct a detailed study of the impact of Facebook on the 2020 US presidential election. The SSO experience has been relevant but it was impossible to secure the same level of data access for European researchers. Indeed, this US research and industrial partnership, allowed a limited number of researchers to access it through a specific grant (Bruns et al. 2018; Vreese et al. 2019). Also, the access to the CrowdTangle API to get the Facebook data has not been evaluated as sufficient from SOMA network.

As reported by Bechmann (2020) “platforms have tried to use differential privacy (Dwork 2008) as the golden standard for securing (social) data that cannot be de-anonymized. This, in turn, means that only high-level data can be shared and thus leaves little room for graph data and textual/visual data mining that can inform a better understanding of disinformation circulation logics, identify best predictors of such, and redesign algorithms, policies and infrastructures for less efficient circulation. And due to intellectual property rights, the disinformation labeling done by the platforms to increase the performance of their machine learning detection algorithms is not a public good, and thus not available to nor consistent with the standards of the independent research community”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Bechmann, A. (2020). Tackling disinformation and infodemics demands media policy changes. *Digital Journalism*, 8(6), 855-863.



Accordingly, more and better access should be guaranteed to improve research initiatives. Efforts in terms of hard law must be implemented to guarantee a fast, secure and large access to data, otherwise researchers' capabilities will be always limited and narrowed.

### **3. More obligations for digital platforms**

Last topic is related to the media infrastructure where information and disinformation spread. Soft law approaches fostered by European Union are not sufficient to guarantee a safe and trustworthy media ecosystem.

A change in the media infrastructure is requested. In particular, two actions are strongly needed:

- i. to improve algorithms transparency and exploitability to empower users in the understanding and comprehension of platforms' mechanisms;
- ii. to clarify and expose advertisements' rules and business model to reduce the monetization of clickbait title.

To achieve this last point more obligations for the platforms are needed in particular for what related to political advertisement on social media platforms. European institutions are asked to develop a co-regulatory framework to put in place strict obligations for the platforms for the public good. Only with long-term policy based on a co-regulatory framework setting up obligations for the platforms it will be possible to achieve concrete and stable results.

## SOMA policy recommendations

### Introduction

Nowadays, the widespread of digital services has highly impacted our lives. Among other changes, it has affected the way in which we access, share and delivery information online. In such context, malicious acts through the use of digital services and platforms provided negative impulse to the media ecosystems causing a need of evolving European legislations.

Accordingly, the European Commission has launched a set of actions and tools to better regulate the digital media ecosystem and its actors. Recently, the EC has introduced the “European Digital Strategy” a series of rules governing digital services in the EU. The European Digital Strategy is built around two legislative initiatives: The Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. Two other relevant efforts were accomplished by the EC over the last years. The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), adopted in 2018, to establish a coordination at European scale for national legislation on all audiovisual media, both traditional TV broadcasts and on-demand services., and the European Democracy Action Plan, launched in December 2020, to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU.

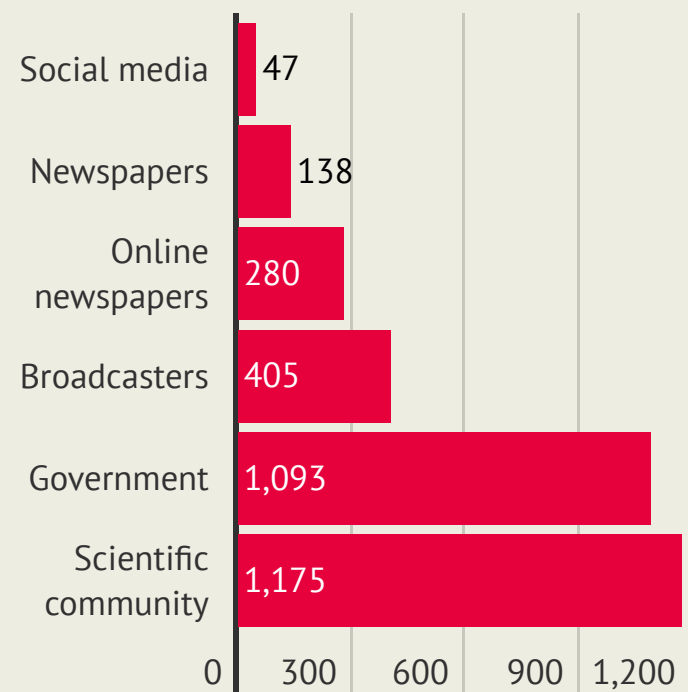
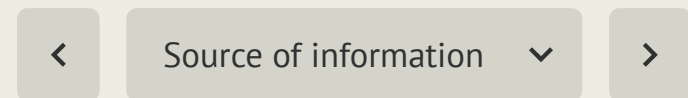
However, additional efforts are needed. Within this set of actions, SOMA project was funded by the European Commission to support measures to fight disinformation.

### SOMA findings

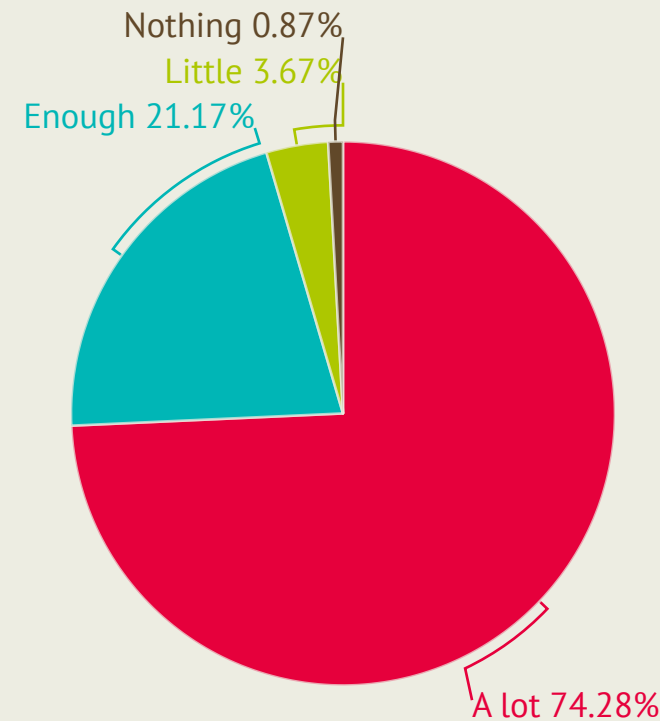
Among its objectives, SOMA launched a survey to measure the impact of disinformation on citizens in relation to Covid-19 pandemic.

More than 1600 people, answered to the survey.

As reported in the bar chart, findings suggest that in emergency time, such as the period of covid-19 pandemic, trust in non-official sources of information decreases. In parallel, the trust in official sources of information increases, in particular in information shared by Governments and the scientific community.



SOMA investigated, also, the role of the institutions in communicating directly to citizens and in providing information on how to behave to deal with the Covid-19 emergency. As reported in the pie chart, 74% of respondents stated that communication from institutions is very important, 21% is important while 5% stated that this is of little or no importance.



Results from the survey and from further analysis shows how relevant is, for Institutions and governments, the adoption of a continuous and efficient communication strategy increasing social media visibility and reducing access to misleading and false information. Platforms should be pressed to increase visibility of prominent dissemination of official and trustful sources opening their algorithms for rating and content visualization accordingly. However, findings also suggest that sharing trustful information limiting false news won't solve the problem.

Another issue, emerged from SOMA analysis related to the opportunity to get access to the amount of data handled by the platforms for research purposes.

### Policy recommendations

Based on the research carried out, these are three key recommendations for European Institutions to inform policy discussion on disinformation.

### 1- Increasing trustworthy contents sharing

Art.7 AVMSD states “Member States may take measures to ensure the appropriate prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest”. Accordingly, as broadcasters, also the platform should be asked to revise their algorithms to incentivize the dissemination of prominent contents based on the trustworthiness of information instead of the number of views, reach and sharing.

Article 7a acknowledges it may be important for Member States to establish incentives for service providers to ensure appropriate prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest with legislative measures. The debate among high level stakeholders such as Eu institutions and platforms should follow the same path providing incentives to the platforms to favour the sharing of trustful information.

### 2- More and better access to data for research purposes

Data access for research purposes is one of the most pressing issues related to the analysis and comprehension of disinformation. Despite several requests from European institutions, most of platform's data are still not accessible. more and better access should be guaranteed to improve research initiatives. Efforts in terms of hard law must be implemented to guarantee a fast, secure and large access to data, otherwise researchers' capabilities will be always limited and narrowed. A more stringent implementation of the Code of Practice, as a self-regulation instruments, might be first step in the direction.

### 3- More obligations for digital platforms

Soft law approaches fostered by European Union are not sufficient to guarantee a safe and trustworthy media ecosystem.

A change in the media infrastructure is requested. In particular, two actions are strongly needed:

1. to improve algorithms transparency and exploitability to empower users in the understanding and comprehension of platforms' mechanisms;
2. to clarify and expose advertisements' rules and business model to reduce the monetization of clickbait title.

To achieve this last point more obligations for the platforms are needed in particular for what is related to political advertisement on social media platforms. European institutions are asked to develop a co-regulatory framework to put in place strict obligations for the platforms for the public good.

Only with long-term policy based on a co-regulatory framework setting up obligations for the platforms it will be possible to achieve concrete and stable results.



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## About the Autor

**Simona De Rosa** (PhD) is partner and senior researcher of T6 Ecosystems srl. Since 2015, she has participated in responsible positions in more than 10 European projects funded by the European Commission under the research frameworks FP7 and H2020. She is mainly in charge of policy analysis, participatory processes for policy development and impact assessment analysis. She is currently deeply involved in the research community on social media and disinformation being also an active member of the Media community at European level, as Vice-chair for Liaison of the European Technology Platform funded by the European Commission, New European Media Initiative (NEM), and member of the Aletheia Centre of Excellence to study Disinformation.

**Andrea Nicolai** is founder and director of the research and consulting company T6 Ecosystems. His interest in multidisciplinary research connections between humanities and technologies, led him to a variety of experiences in the field of media, the transfer of research results to the market, European affairs dealing with internationalisation and development strategies with multilateral organisations, deepening the role of innovation deepening the role of technological innovation in their respective areas.

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This policy brief is a collaborative effort of partners of the SOMA project.

### Further information on the SOMA project:

SOMA (Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis) is a project funded by the European Commission, with one of its main aims being the establishment and operation of a European Observatory against Disinformation.

The establishment of the European Observatory against Disinformation has since the beginning of the SOMA project been considered as a multifaceted mission. Various objectives were set that would help towards this aim and finally converge to the establishment of a structure that can be sustainable in the years to follow. These objectives range from: setting up the necessary technological infrastructure; attracting the relevant community; training the corresponding stakeholder groups; coordinating the operation of the observatory; setting up national centers that can act as satellite nodes with a multiplying effect; and finally assessing the impact both of disinformation, as well as of our intervention.

<https://www.disinobservatory.org/>



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