

**H2020-ICT-2018-2 /ICT-28-2018-CSA**  
**SOMA: Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis**



## D5.3 The measure of online disinformation

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<b>Document description</b>	D5.3 reports the results of the assessment of the SOMA activities considering two overlapping dimensions. From one hand, the impact achieved by the consortium towards the project activities. On the other hand, the impact on the SOMA Observatory network. Both dimensions have been evaluated according to the methodology discussed in D5.1 and here briefly reported. Whole assessment provides policy recommendations to inform European policy makers.

## Document Revision History

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<b>V0.1</b>	15/02/2021	ToC	T6ECO
<b>V0.2</b>	12/03/2021	Request for partners' inputs	T6ECO
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<b>V0.7</b>	30/04/2021	Final version	T6ECO

## Executive Summary

The deliverable 5.3 “The measure of online disinformation” finalizes the work done under the WP5 over the project lifetime. Main objective of the WP5 has been the establishment of a methodology to assess the impact of the project in relation to disinformation topics.

To evaluate this element, a combined methodology was proposed in the first half of the project. During the second half, then, the methodology was applied to project outcomes and results have been collected and analysed.

D5.2 already contains part of the methodology implementation referred to the assessment of the disinformation diffusion via social media. In particular, as reported in D5.2 *“To provide evidence on a relevant topic, the assessment methodology has been tested during the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim was to understand the effects of disinformation related to Covid-19 on people's attitude in relation to information, trust in institutions, and on how this is reflected in their behaviors in everyday life”*.

Moreover, aim of this deliverable is to assess the main impacts of the project on the consortium itself and on the overall SOMA network according to the SOMA activities.

Accordingly, the deliverable reports the results of the investigation considering impact assessment activities and derives main lessons learned to be passed to the policy makers in the form of policy recommendations. The results are reported extensively over the Chapters, then the Whitepaper is attached in the Annex and will be used for dissemination purposes without the entire deliverable's text.

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## List of Terms and Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
<b>DOA</b>	Description of Action
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>GA</b>	Grant Agreement
<b>HLEG</b>	High Level Expert Group
<b>STI</b>	Source Transparency Index
<b>UGC</b>	User Generated Content
<b>WP</b>	Work Package

# 1 Introduction

As written in the Description of Work (DoW), the overall objective of WP5 is to increase the understanding of actions, processes and impacts of online disinformation. In line with this, the goal of WP5 is twofold. From one side the intent is to develop an impact assessment methodology able to quantify and measure the impacts of online disinformation. On the other side, the aim is to assess the impacts of the European Observatory on Disinformation and Social Media established by SOMA.

Following such scope, the specific objectives of the WP5 are:

- to develop methodological guidelines, selection criteria, Source Transparency Indicators and variables to analyse disinformation;
- to apply the methodological framework to the European Observatory activities, using a qualitative approach and delivering an in-depth analysis of the processes, their emergence, implementation, outcomes and impacts;
- to use the results of monitoring and impact assessment activities to produce a policy report to support evidence-based decisions for policy makers.

The first objective has been already achieved in D5.1 and D5.2.

It is fair to remind that in D5.1 it was reported that the methodology would have been tested on two main topics: health and migration.

In D5.1, indeed, it was pointed out that originally the aim was to organize interviews or questionnaires to reply to the indicators and variables to assess the impact of disinformation to investigate one topic related to health and one topic related to migration. However, due the pandemic, the methodology validation has been slightly adjusted.

The adjustment has been explained and justified in D5.2. The reason for the slightly change is that to respond to the crisis, the methodology has been tested to investigate Covid-19 and particularly looking at one aspect related to migration and one aspect on the diffusion of the virus. Such decision allowed us to test the methodology on a sensible topic and also providing results to the EC during the spread of the virus.

Also, in D5.1 the target for stakeholder engagement in the validation phase was 100 people. Testing the methodology on a such relevant topic allowed to engage in the qualitative phase more than 1600 stakeholders, largely overcoming the target of 100 stakeholders that was originally planned in D5.1.

The current document focuses mainly on the evaluation of the SOMA activities and on the policy recommendations emerged from the analysis of those elements.

As it was requested by the DoA to provide a whitepaper, the policy recommendation described in Chapter 4 are translated in a single document (Annex 1) and disseminate according to the scope of the document. This strategy allowed to report extensively the results of project evaluation (Chapter 2 and 3) and then transform the policy discussion elaborated in Chapter 4 in a specific report.

## 1.1 Purpose and Scope

As stated in the DoW, aim of the T5.2 is reported as following *“The methodology will be tested within the SOMA activities in order to derive the impact of the Observatory during the project lifetime. Indicators and variables will be collected to map the impact of the Observatory in relation to the*

*spread of disinformation”. Then the work continues in T5.3 “Results from the impact assessment analysis together with a final description of the methodology will be described in a report addressed to policy makers. The intent is to provide additional data and information to measures the scale of the problem together with a concrete action to tackle with the issue”.*

In line with this, aim of the deliverable is to briefly describe the methodology applied and the results collected and to report the policy recommendations for the policy makers to implement further actions to fight disinformation.

## **1.2 Structure of the Deliverable**

The deliverable is structured in three main chapters from 2 up to 4, apart from the chapter 1 which contains the introduction.

Chapter 2 reports the methodology used to assess project’s impacts.

Chapter 3 describes the results from the evaluation of the SOMA observatory considering both the consortium level and the network overall.

Chapter 4 outlines the policy recommendations as a result of the work of the analysis conducted in WP5.

The annex contains a whitepaper on policy and main figures from the Observatory for dissemination purposes.

## 2 Impact assessment methodology

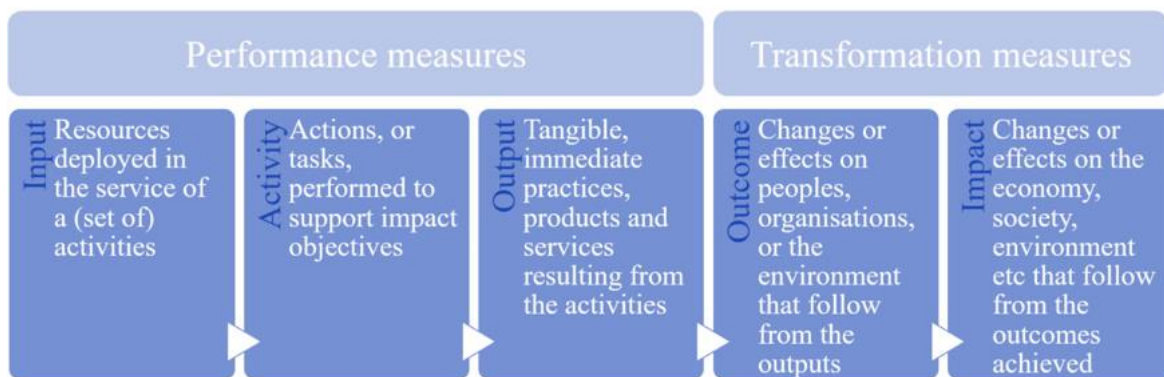
As described in the DoW, WP5 has the task to analyze the impact of the SOMA Observatory during the project lifetime. The methodology has been explained in depth in D5.1 and D5.2; to avoid repetitions, the following paragraphs briefly reports the approach to contextualise activities performed and to provide new information on the areas of impact identified to perform the assessment.

### 2.1 The impact assessment approach

To evaluate the impacts of the SOMA project, the impact assessment methodology has been structured on the guidelines of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA)<sup>1</sup>. According to IAIA definition *“Impact Assessment simply defined is the process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action. The “impact” is the difference between what would happen with the action and what would happen without it”*.

EC INFOREGIO Unit (European Commission, 2012: 119) defines impact as *“a consequence affecting direct beneficiaries following the end of their participation in an intervention or after the completion of public facilities, or else an indirect consequence affecting other beneficiaries who may be winners or losers. Certain impacts (specific impacts) can be observed among direct beneficiaries after a few months and others only in the longer term (e.g. the monitoring of assisted firms). In the field of development support, these longer-term impacts are usually referred to as sustainable results. Some impacts appear indirectly (e.g. turnover generated for the suppliers of assisted firms). Others can be observed at the macro-economic or macro-social level (e.g. improvement of the image of the assisted region); these are global impacts. Evaluation is frequently used to examine one or more intermediate impacts, between specific and global impacts. Impacts may be positive or negative, expected or unexpected”*.

Based on those approaches, the aim of the deliverable is to answer to the following question: “what is the difference the SOMA project makes?”. The answer is crucial to provide evidence on how project activities, and related investments, impacted different areas and stakeholders.



**Figure 1. Impact Value Chain Approach.** Source: Adaptation from Impact Measurement working group, 2014  
The methodology analyses SOMA project at an aggregated level by using four indices related to key areas of impact: social, scientific, technological and political. These are structured as follows.

#### Social impact:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iaia.org/index.php>

- Impact on community building
- Impact on information
- Impact on education and human capital

**Scientific impact:**

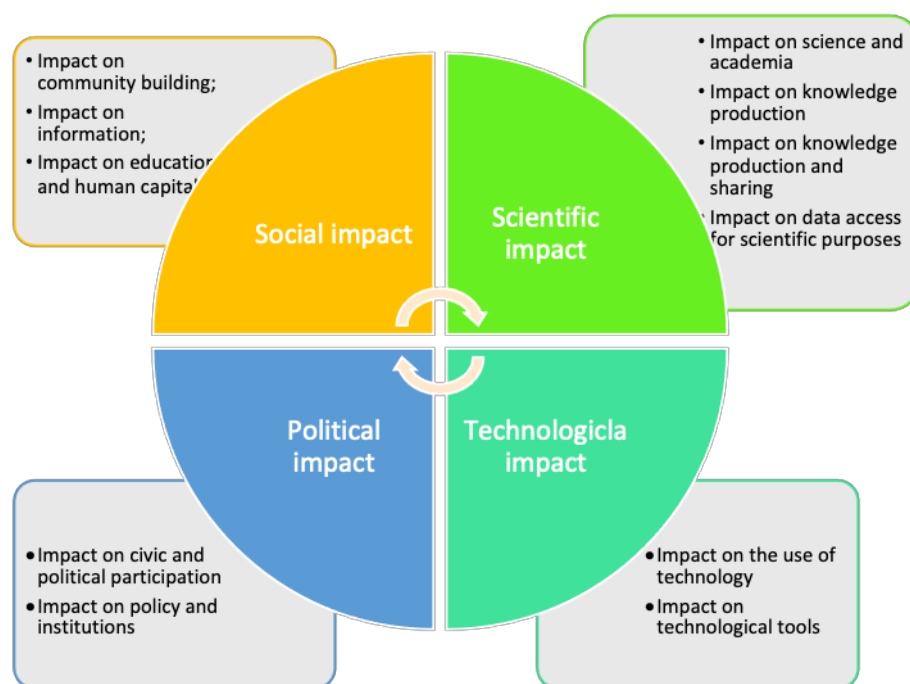
- Impact on science and academia
- Impact on knowledge production
- Impact on knowledge production and sharing
- Impact on data access for scientific purposes

**Political impact:**

- Impact on civic and political participation
- Impact on policy and institutions

**Technological impact:**

- Impact on the use of technology
- Impact on technological tools



**Figure 2. SOMA impact areas and sub-categories**

The methodology has been structured to collect evidence on the impact of the project activities (table 1) on the following dimensions:

- tools and algorithms developed for data analytics;
- SOMA Observatory and platform;
- networking and research activities to improve collaboration between researchers and fact-checkers;
- media literacy sessions;
- methodology developed for impact assessment.

For each of the previous dimensions, expected areas of impact and stakeholders engaged in the evaluation have been indicated (Table 1).

Activity	Areas of impact	Stakeholders	Data collected
Tools and algorithms developed for data analytics	Scientific impact Technological impact	Researchers Fact checkers	Survey
SOMA Observatory and platform	Scientific impact Technological impact	Researchers Fact checkers	Survey
Networking and research activities to foster collaboration between researchers and fact-checkers	Scientific impact Social impact	Researchers Fact checkers SOMA Network	Survey or interview
Media literacy sessions	Social impact Political impact	General public	Survey
Methodology developed for impact assessment	Scientific impact Social impact Political impact	General public	Secondary data from impact assessment exercises (D5.2)

**Table 1. SOMA activities and related impact areas**

In order to map the impacts for each of the previous categories, dedicated surveys have been structured and submitted to SOMA partners (ATC, Luiss, PP, AA and T6 ECO) and to the members of the SOMA Observatory (Table 2).

Activity	Stakeholder for data gathering
Tools and algorithms developed for data analytics	ATC, Luiss
SOMA Observatory and platform	PP, ATC
Networking and research activities to foster collaboration between researchers and fact-checkers	PP, Luiss, ATC, T6ECO, SOMA network
Media literacy sessions	PP, Luiss, Participants to the media literacy sessions
Methodology developed for impact assessment	T6ECO

**Table 2. Stakeholders engaged in data collections**

For the sake of clarity, D5.1 already provided the list of indicators to be considered to evaluate the SOMA project. However, some minor revisions of first set of areas of impact and related categories were needed to properly evaluate project's results. The final list of impact areas and indicators considered for the analysis is reported in Table 3.

Social impact	Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impact on community building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of people attended the media literacy sessions</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact on information</li> <li>• Impact on education and human capital.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of media literacy sessions</li> <li>• Degree of satisfaction for the media literacy session</li> <li>• Articles on disinformation on newspapers</li> <li>• Number of people engaged in qualitative data gathered on Covid-19</li> <li>• Number of analysis produced using SOMA tools on Truly Media</li> <li>• Number of new projects starting from SOMA</li> </ul>
<b>Technological impact</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact on the use of technology</li> <li>• Impact on technological tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree of satisfaction of the SOMA members</li> <li>• Degree of satisfaction of the use</li> <li>• Number of new algorithms developed</li> <li>• Numbers of new features in Truly Media</li> </ul>
<b>Political impact</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact on policy and institutions</li> <li>• Impact on civic and political participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of communications with the social media platforms</li> <li>• Data access for SOMA researchers to the data collected by the platforms</li> <li>• Formal communication with the EC</li> <li>• Percentage of trust in online journal</li> <li>• Degree of trust in institutions</li> </ul>
<b>Scientific impact</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• impact on science and academia</li> <li>• impact on knowledge production</li> <li>• impact on knowledge sharing</li> <li>• impact on data access for scientific purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of scientific publications on SOMA</li> <li>• Number of collaborative investigations</li> <li>• Number of conferences or events attended</li> <li>• Number of stakeholders in the SOMA network</li> <li>• Number of active members of the SOMA Observatory</li> <li>• Data access for SOMA researchers to the data collected by the platforms</li> <li>• Centres of excellence</li> </ul>

**Table 3. SOMA impact areas and related indicators**

To make results more readable the following paragraphs reports the descriptive results for each of the SOMA activities according to the replies provided by the partners. Furthermore, the results are aggregated according to the list of indicators provided in Table 3.

### 3 Soma evaluation' results

#### 3.1.1 Tools and algorithms developed for data analytics

During the project lifetime, new tools and an algorithm were developed. Some of them have been integrated in the technological platform used by the project, Truly Media.

SOMA, indeed, allowed to add some features and tools:

- instant access to trending stories monitored by the European Media Monitoring platform;
- a ticketing mechanism that allows investigators to ask for the official position of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Eurostat;
- access to official information sources such as the European Parliament, Eurostat and OECD

Moreover, one algorithm has been developed by the SOMA consortium. The algorithm is called DisinfoNet and it is a classifier that clusters the dataset into belonging groups. The toolbox is designed to help the SOMA community to understand the dynamics of (fake) news dissemination in social networks. The Classifier component of DisInfoNet provides the ability to upload datasets, taken from Twitter or extracted from the Data Collection component, and carry out analyzes on them. It is possible to create Filters to isolate, manage and analyze a fake news or a set of related fake news through dynamic statistics and visualizations. It is also possible to create one or more binary classifiers to cluster a dataset. Classifier is based on a semi-automatic “self-training” process, in which a list of hashtags associated with two classes of interest are used to automatically extract a training set. The algorithm has not been implemented in the SOMA platform, based on the Truly Media, but has been published in a conference paper<sup>2</sup>.

#### 3.1.2 SOMA Observatory and Truly Media platform

At the moment of the writing, the SOMA Observatory can count on 100 members who signed to be part of the SOMA Observatory. The network is composed mainly by think-tank, research centers, NGOs and fact-checkers. Table 4 reports the categories represented in the network.

Network composition
39 Think-tanks/research centers/ NGOs
13 Fact-checkers
11 Companies (8 of which are tech)
11 Freelancers
8 Associations /network of orgs
7 Media literacy orgs
6 Media
5 GOV

**Table 4. SOMA network composition**

<sup>2</sup>“Beyond Fact-Checking: Network Analysis Tools for Monitoring Disinformation in Social Media” is available at [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-36687-2\\_36](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-36687-2_36).

Looking at the territorial coverage, members are spread as follows: 23 from Eu countries, 13 from other countries and 8 from organizations working at international or EU level. Most of the members are coming from Greece (10), Poland (7) and Italy (7). Then, Belgium, Germany and UK are equally represented, counting 6 members each (Figure 3Error! Reference source not found.).

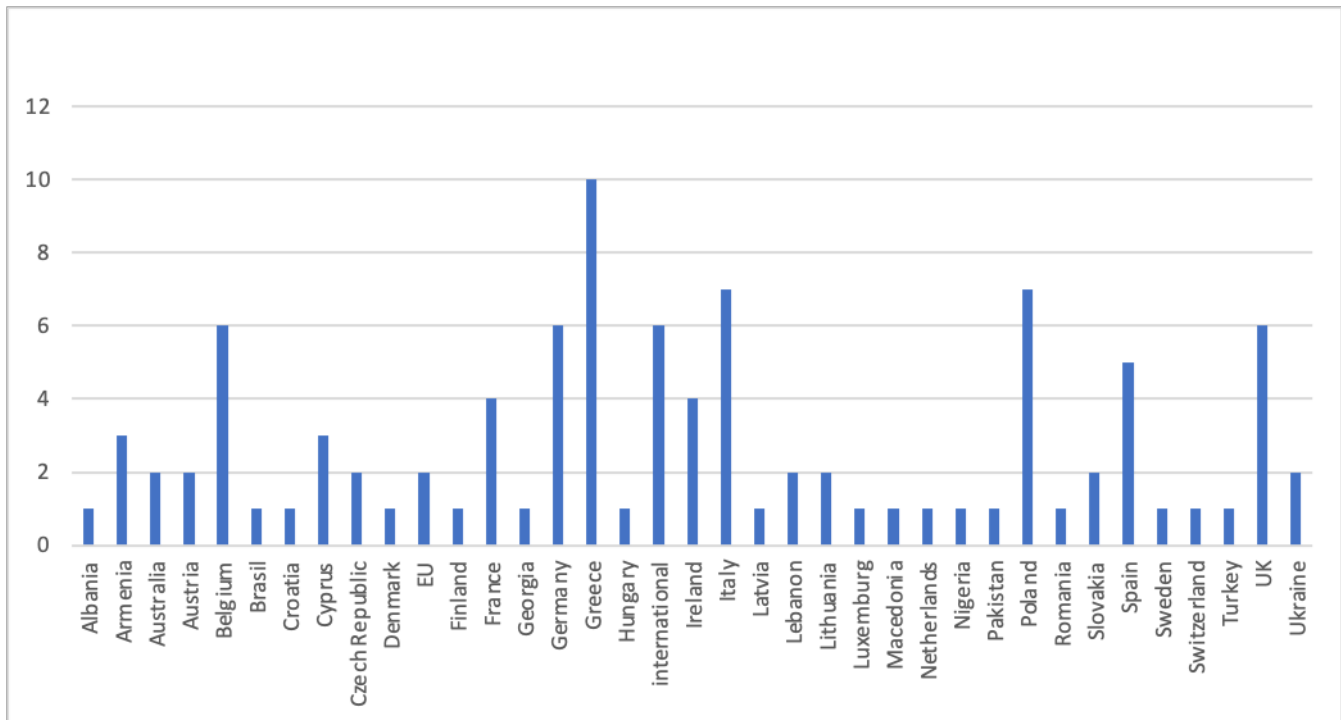


Figure 3. SOMA network territorial coverage

All 100 members are registered on the Truly Media platform. Accessing the platform analytics, it is possible to verify that among the registered members, 110 profiles<sup>3</sup> are active on Truly Media using the tools and features for investigations<sup>4</sup>. Providing a deeper level of detail, 44 interactions among the members are registered. In this case, we are referring to the number of collective folders, request via mail, interactions on facts and news to verify and discuss. The number of investigations performed by two or more members collaboratively using Truly Media is 20. While 7 is the number of individual collaborations performed by a single user. The topics are reported hereafter:

- NATO drills, COVID-19 measures, and alleged interference in Belarus used to target the Baltics and Poland;
- Kremlin related media: Baltic countries and Poland are unable to counter COVID-19;
- Negative posts on Facebook sought to discredit democratic processes in Lithuania;
- COVID-19 related disinformation becomes a tool to promote anti-Baltic narratives;
- All the lies spread by Hold-Up, the new French documentary that turned into a hit among Covid-19 conspiracy theorists;
- Breaches in regulation for political ads on social media pose a risk on electoral transparency;
- “Irrelevant and insignificant”: depiction of the Baltics in pro-Kremlin media.

<sup>3</sup> Each member can access Truly Media with a maximum of three account.

<sup>4</sup> A user is defined “active” if he/she performed at least one activity over the last three months.

### 3.1.3 SOMA outreach

In addition to the registered members of the SOMA Observatory, the project created a network active on social media to enlarge the range of users reached by knowledge produced by SOMA<sup>5</sup>.

Looking at some figures from social media, SOMA reaches the following users:

- Twitter: 4712 followers
- LinkedIn: 653 followers
- Youtube: 199 views and 28 subscribers.

In the thirty months of project development, the SOMA website counts 45.342 user access and a total of 99.980 page views. While the SOMA newsletter has 319 subscribers.

### 3.1.4 Networking and research activities to foster collaboration between researchers and fact-checkers

Networking activities and collaborations enabled by the SOMA project can be distinguished in two levels.

On one hand, it is possible to look at the internal dimension of collaboration. Indeed, SOMA project led the partners to conceive and put in place new collaborations and projects contributing to the understanding of disinformation diffusion acquired gained in the project. Indeed, within the consortium all the partners mentioned new activities related to disinformation research as a result of being part of the SOMA consortium.

All have started new projects related to the topic funded by H2020. In particular, ATC, PP and AA started the EDMO project. LUISS and researchers working in T6 ECO joined the Media Futures project. This highlights the capability of all partners to continue the work on disinformation but also the earned visibility in the European community on the topic.

On the other hand, the SOMA project fostered collaboration among researchers and fact-checkers.

In particular, in addition to the collaboration done through TrulyMedia, it is worth to notice that 19 collaborative investigations were published by SOMA members.

Out of 19, 6 were published in Italian and 13 in English, reaching a wider audience. The ones in Italian were published on the PP blog, while the others on the SOMA website<sup>6</sup>.

Looking at the list of the investigation, it is possible to emphasis that out of 19:

- 7 were on Covid-19
- 2 were on Covid 19 and 5G
- 3 addressed topics related to i) lockdown measure ii) anti-lockdown protests in Europe and iii) contract-tracing app;
- 5 addressed political topics;
- 2 addressed more general aspects of disinformation.

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<sup>5</sup> More information can be found by D6.4 Dissemination report

<sup>6</sup> All articles are included here <https://www.disinfobservatory.org/blog/>

At the moment of the writing, as reported in Figure 4, 19 collaborative investigations have been performed by 33 active members<sup>7</sup> of the SOMA network. PP is one of the most productive contributors with 14 investigations realised, followed by FaktaBaari. In most of the cases the members are organizations, only in a few cases they are freelancers.

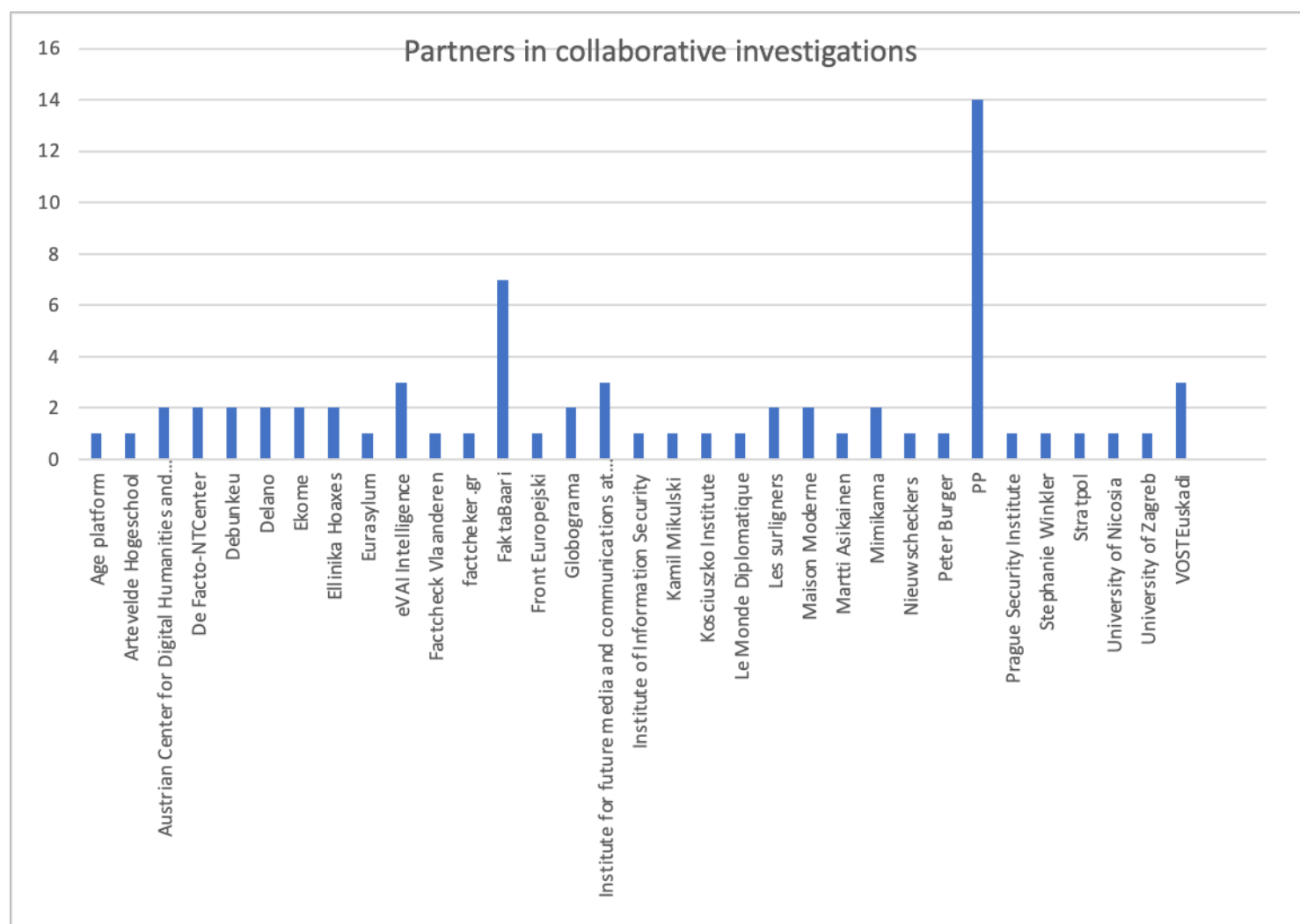
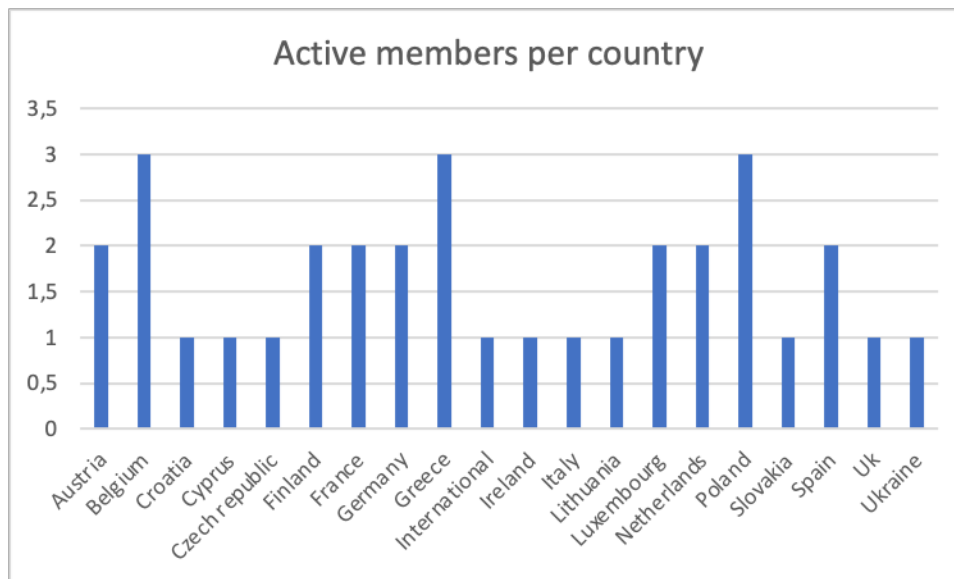


Figure 4. Main partners in collaborative investigations

Looking at the distribution, active members belong to 19 European countries (Figure 5).

<sup>7</sup> To be an “active member” of the SOMA community, it means that at least one collaborative investigation has been performed.



**Figure 5. Active members territorial coverage**

In terms of collaboration among researchers and professionals working on disinformation, Luiss Data Lab is taking part in the dissemination activities against disinformation on Covid-19 and vaccines: VaxFacts<sup>8</sup>. The campaign is powered by NewsGuard with partners Microsoft, Msn, Fortune, Encyclopedia Britannica, Newsweek and others. VaxFacts offers free access to a tool that helps steer clear of misinformation: the HealthGuard browser extension, it provides reliability ratings on thousands of sites that publish news and information on medical and health topics, reporting those that spread untrue information about the COVID-19 vaccine, and directing users to authoritative sources.

AA activated different collaborations with other projects. In particular with HOPE (How Democracies Cope with COVID19) and ROPH projects. The HOPE and ROPH project are led by Prof. Michael Bang Petersen from Aarhus BSS at Aarhus University and they focus on how democracies react and cope with political hostility online and the COVID-19 pandemic and which effects are resulting from these reactions. The projects have a data-driven approach. Collaboration includes research and exchange about data and methods to analyze misinformation on social media. Furthermore, AA collaborates with the NORDIS network, an initiative which aims at creating a Nordic network on online disinformation research and focuses on its effects on democratic and civil processes. The network consists of the IFCN certified fact-checking organizations and universities in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland.

ATC has established liaison activities with the following projects: PROVENANCE, SOCIAL TRUTH, EUNOMIA, WEVERIFY, REINFORCE, MEDIAROAD, CO-INFORM.

Also, 2 webinars have been performed in cooperation with Eurostat.

T6 ECO strengthened the connection with IMT Lucca and the Toffee project fostering a combined approach based on qualitative and quantitative methodologies to study disinformation.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newsguardtech.com/vaxfacts/>

Among the project's aim, SOMA improved the collaboration with platforms in order to provide access to data for research purposes.

For this reason, dialogue with social media platforms was established. In particular ATC and T6ECO opened up to conversation with Facebook and Twitter.

Conversation with Facebook aimed at obtaining elevated access to platform data. As result of the conversations access to CrowdTangle API and application was granted to members of the SOMA Observatory.

#### 3.1.4.1 Scientific production

In terms of scientific production, members of the consortium published 10 papers.

- DATA, Tænkepause (available June 7, 2021), Aarhus University Press.
- Charquero Ballester, Marina<sup>1</sup>; Walter, Jessica G.<sup>1</sup>, Nissen, Ida A.; & Bechmann, Anja (under review): "Different types of COVID-10 misinformation have different emotional valence on Twitter"
- Nissen, Ida A.; Walter, Jessica G., Charquero Ballester, Marina & Bechmann, Anja (under review ) "Enhancing transparency in fact-checking databases: A methodology applied to COVID-19 misinformation"
- Osmundsen, M., Bor, A, Vahlstrup, P.B., Bechmann, A & Petersen, M.B (2021, accepted). Partisan Polarization is the primary psychological motivation behind "fake news" sharing on Twitter, *American Political Science Review*.
- Bechmann, A. 2020. Tackling Disinformation and Infodemics Demands Media Policy Changes, *Digital journalism*, 1-13.
- Pavleska, T, Školkay, A, Zankova, B, Ribeiro, N & Bechmann, A. 2020. Performance analysis of fact-checking organization and initiatives in Europe: a critical overview of online platforms fighting fake news IN: *Disinformation and Digital Media as a Challenge for Democracy*. ed. / Georgios Terzis; Dariusz Kloza; Elzbieta Kuzelewska; Daniel Trottier. Cambridge : Intersentia. (European Integration and Democracy Series, Vol. 6), 217-246. Daniel Trottier. Cambridge : Intersentia. (European Integration and Democracy Series, Vol. 6), 217-246.
- Bechmann, A. & Kim, J.Y. 2020. Big Data: A Focus on Social Media Research Dilemmas, *Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity*, 427-444
- Guarino, S., Trino, N., Chessa, A., & Riotta, G. (2019, December). Beyond Fact-Checking: Network Analysis Tools for Monitoring Disinformation in Social Media. In *International Conference on Complex Networks and Their Applications* (pp. 436-447). Springer, Cham.
- Guarino, S., Trino, N., Celestini, N., Chessa, A., & Riotta, G. (submitted 2020, February). Characterizing Networks of Propaganda on Twitter: a Case Study. Submitted to *Applied Network Science*. Springer, Cham.
- SOMA PROJECT: ESTABLISHING THE EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY AGAINST DISINFORMATION / Klitsi, M., De Rosa, S., Tacchetti, L., Cavasola, S., Asbjørn, L., Møller and Sarris, N.

SOMA published 2 articles:

- Fantasma Usa, dove il Falso genera il Vero (Huffington Post, 07/07/2020);
- L'ombra cinese sul futuro del big tech (La Stampa, 31/07/2020).

Also 8 interviews on SOMA have been released:

- Wafana (German Fact-checker)

- NTV (Bulgaria)
- Huffington Post (Greece)
- EP European Science Media Lab about the fight against disinformation
- News Agency of Portugal (LUSA)
- EU Protects' campaign
- 26th November 2020: SOMA'S Project Coordinator, Dr. Nikos Sarris was invited to present SOMA and its tools for detecting disinformation, at the podcast '[The misinformation researchers](#)', hosted by Asimina Michailidou at ARENA Center for European Studies in the University of Oslo.
- 30th June 2020: Prof. Dr. Anja Bechmann was invited to speak on the event "Infodemiology" organized by the WHO about "Social Media & Collective behavior: a media science perspective".
- 18th January 2021: Prof. Dr. Anja Bechmann gave an interview about the freedom of opinion and the Twitter policy to lock down users for MEDIAWATCH represented by Louise Wendt Jensen; <https://finans.dk/erhverv/ECE12696352/twitterforbud-det-handler-ikke-om-ytringsfrihed/?ctxref=ext>; Twitterforbud: "Det handler ikke om ytringsfrihed" (policywatch.dk); This interview was also brought in Finans, Policywatch.dk and ITwatch.dk.

Looking at the topics discussed and debunked, it is possible to note that health, Covid, 5G were the most investigated topics. Those, indeed, were explored by PP under the collaborative investigations (as reported in paragraph 2.3) but also by T6 ECO.

In this latter case, SOMA published two papers on its channels and disseminated to the EC. The papers focused on i) the effects of Covid 19 pandemic on behaviors and perception and ii) on the relations between BOT and 5G on social media:

- The role of information in the emergency COVID 19 impacts and consequences on people behaviors;
- An initial analysis of BOT presence in the debate of 5G on Social Media by SOMA and TOFFEE projects.

### 3.1.4.2 Events and knowledge sharing

It is worth mentioning that, apart from scientific production, the project disseminated a significant amount of information through articles, podcast, participation to conferences and events. Here after is reported a list of activities carried out by the SOMA partners.

Summarizing all the events organized by the project or where the partners participated on behalf of SOMA, it is possible to list 42 events<sup>9</sup>:

### 8 workshops:

- SOMA 1<sup>st</sup> High Level Workshop, 20/3/2019, Milan
- High Level Policy Dialogue "Online disinformation ahead if the European Parliament elections: towards societal resilience", 11/2/2019, Florence
- "Tools for Collaboration Among Fact-Checkers", IFCN's Global Fact 6 (Cape Town, South Africa, 19 June 2019);
- Workshop Media Literacy Week 19/3/2019, Brussels, Belgium

<sup>9</sup> More information on the events are reported in D6.2 and D6.4

- ‘Online disinformation: An Integrated View’ /EUREMID
- Media Literacy Workshop, “Inaugural Ceremony of the Aletheia center of excellence studies”, LUISS, 9 Sept 2019;
- What technology can do for fact-checking: practical examples from Europe”, International Journalism Festival (Perugia, Italy, 3 April 2019).

#### 4 seminars:

- Training on TrulyMedia - EU week of Media Literacy
- NEM Summit. Trusting media: joint reflections from media industry and fact checkers 23/5/2019, Zagreb, Slovenia
- SOMA roundtable: LUISS school of Journalism Inauguration Cerimony
- EU seminar on social platforms in electoral processes , 4-6/2/2019, Brussels, Belgium

#### 5 webinars:

- Webinar “Collaboration platform”
- Webinar “Fact-checking collaboration”
- Together against disinformation – Where public sector meets private
- Webinar "SOMA Townhall: What is SOMA and what can it do for you", on 8/7/2020 and 10/7/2020.
- Webinar “The Italian infodemic: lessons from fact-checking on COVID-19” (PP/SOMA/IRI), 4 June 2020;
- “Truth is the first vaccination: e-literacy against disinformation about COVID-19 in Europe”, 21 May 2020
- Online conference “A Conversation with Fact-Checkers” that the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) is hosting, on Friday October 9th, 2020

#### 2 public events:

- First public event: “Disinformation across borders and how to fight it”.  
The first SOMA public event on disinformation took place at the National Science Museum in Milan, Italy, on 20 March 2019.
- Final SOMA event “Countering disinformation: strategies, policies, research”. The final event took place online on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021.

#### 14 meetings:

- Inauguration of the Class of 2019-2021 of the master's program in Journalism and Multimedia Communication;
- LUISS School of Journalism Inauguration Ceremony, 27/3/2019, Rome
- Building bridges among the ecosystem / SMART project, 10/12/2018 Rome
- Scienza e media, tra populismo e torri d’avorio Per un approccio critico al giornalismo scientifico, 16/3/2019, Naples
- Kick off TOFFeE, 17/4/2019, Lucca
- Presentation of the project to EP conference on fact-checking, 27-28/9/2018, Brussels, Belgium
- Countering online disinformation towards a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable digital media ecosystem, 29/1/2019
- Presentation of the project to Media Convergence and Social Media Concertation Meeting, 6/2/2019, Brussels, Belgium
- Representation of the project in the Inter-Institutional Advisory Board (IIAB) meeting, 6/3/2019 Brussels,
- Consultation with DG CNECT and Social Science One, 17/6/2019

- High-level conference of the European Media Literacy Week, Bruxelles 19/03/2019
- South by Southwest® (SXSW®) Conference AI: The Silver Bullet Against Disinformation? 09/03/2019;
- “Disinformation Across Borders and How to Fight It”, Milan, 20 March 2019.
- Presentation of the project to ICT 2018 4-6/12/2018, Vienna, Austria.
- Presentation of the project to JOLT training event in Pamplona, 2-5/7/2019, Pamplona
- Presentation of the project to The Digital Age of Journalism: Data, New Tools and Copyrights’, 14/9/2019
- Presentation of the project to REMOVING BARRIERS TO DIGITAL PLATFORM TRANSPARENCY ACROSS EUROPE, 18/10/2019, Brussels, Belgium
- Presentation of the project to Accelerating European Media Innovation event, 8/10/2019 Brussels, Belgium
- Presentation of the project to Disinformation in Cyberspace: Media literacy meets Artificial Intelligence, 15/11/2019, Athens, Greece
- Presentation of the project to ‘Tackling the DISinfo Phenomenon: From Understanding Its Causes to Implementing Strategies to Cope with and Prevent It’ 9/12/2019, Varese, Italy
- CYBERSEC GLOBAL 2020, Together against disinformation – Where public sector meets private, 29th September 2020
- INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL SECURITY FORUM (IDSF), 2-3/12/2020

#### 3.1.4.3 Events evaluation results

A feedback survey was drafted to collect inputs from the participants to the SOMA events. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, it was possible to distribute the survey only in four events organised by SOMA, in particular in two media literacy sessions and two webinars:

- SOMA Townhall: What is SOMA and what can it do for you", Online, July, 8-10<sup>th</sup> 2020;
- Truth is the first vaccination! Workshop of media literacy against disinformation about Covid-19 in Europe, Online, May 21st 2020;
- Webinar “Truth is the first vaccination” ;
- Webinar “Collaboration platform”.

Out of 198 participants only 38 filled the entire survey. The responses are reported hereafter. Most of the participants were between 26 and 50 years old (Figure 6).

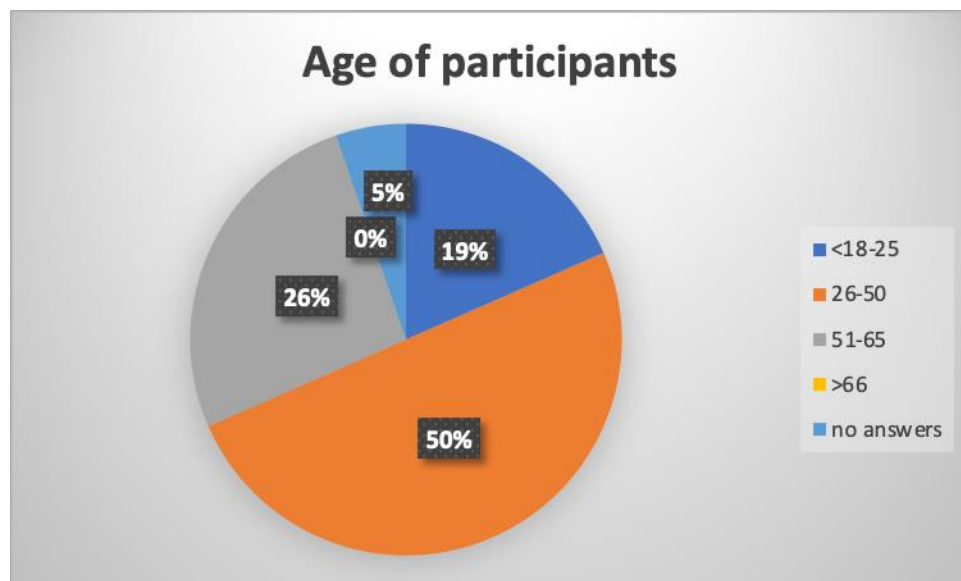


Figure 6. Age of participants

First of all, it was asked to the participants if the workshop was considered a positive experience. Most of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (Figure 7).

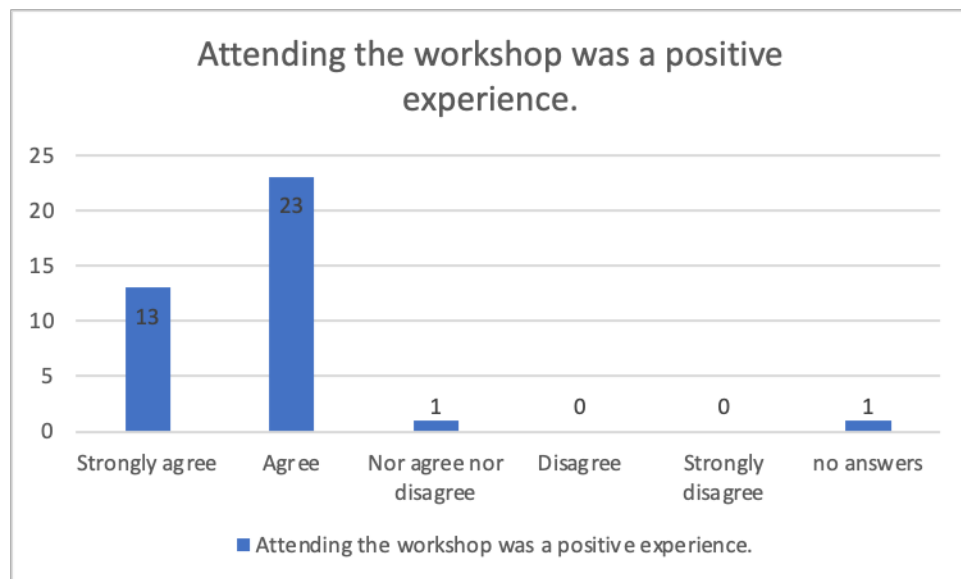
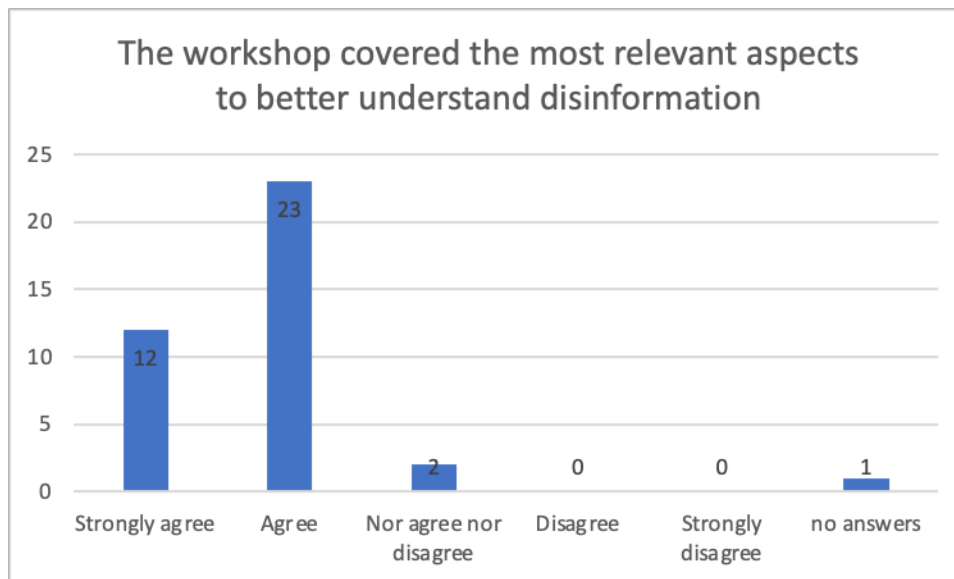
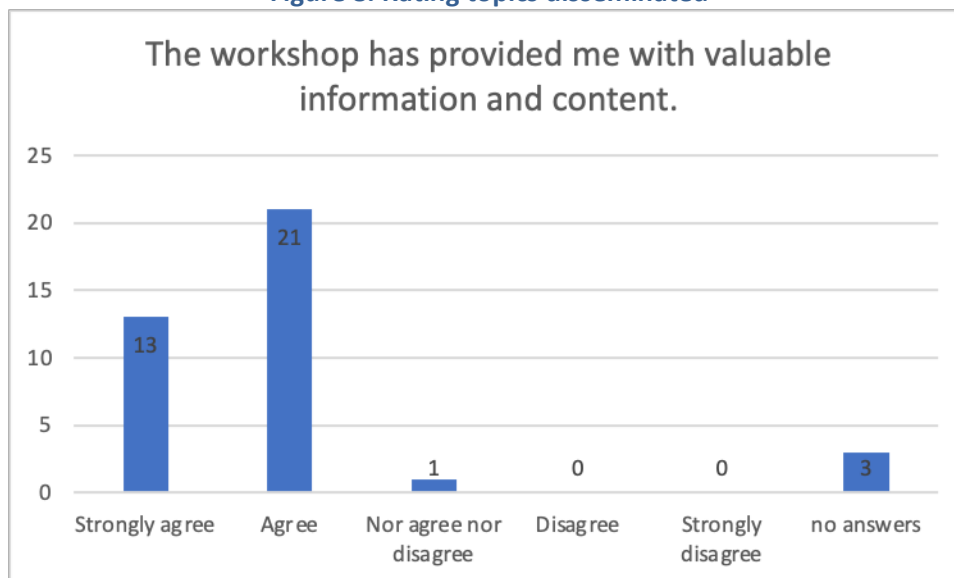


Figure 7. Rating workshops' participation

It was also asked to judge if the workshop covered the most relevant aspects to better understand disinformation and if the workshop provided valuable information and content (Figure 8). In both cases most of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statements.

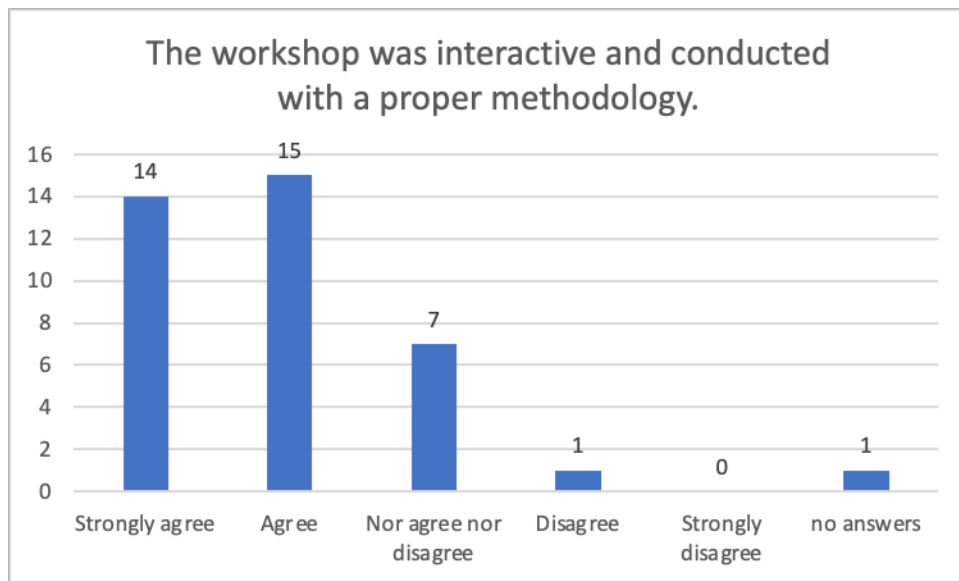


**Figure 8. Rating topics disseminated**



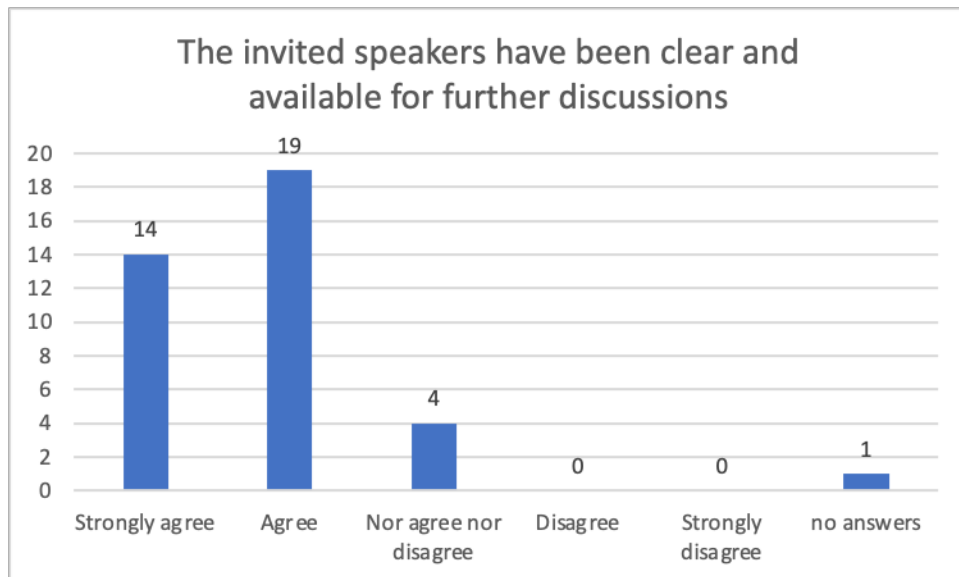
**Figure 9. Rating information and contents provided**

It was asked to rate the organization workshop judging if the workshop was conducted with a proper methodology (Figure 10). Most of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. However, 7 participants rated the organization as neither positive or negative.



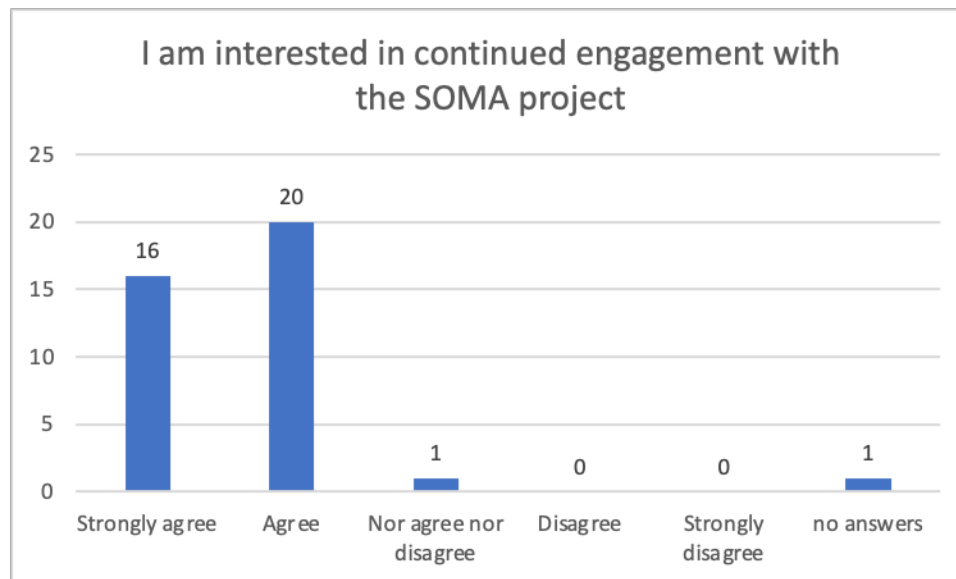
**Figure 10. Rating the methodology for workshop**

It was also asked if the invited speakers had been clear and available for further discussions. The positive rate was high with 33 out of 38 sharing appreciation on the speakers (Figure 11).



**Figure 11. Rating speakers invited**

Finally, it was asked if participants intended to follow the SOMA work being engaged with the project. Almost all the participants responded positively (Figure 12).



**Figure 12. Engagement in SOMA future activities**

To conclude, even if only a partial number of participants to the SOMA events was interviewed, it is possible to affirm that the meetings were judged positively by the participants. Only in regard to the methodologies adopted to run the events we can observe a less positive reply suggesting that, for the future, different approaches should be considered.

Otherwise, participants were satisfied by the meeting and by the invited speakers declaring that the information collected was good and sufficient. Accordingly, all of them wished to be further engaged in SOMA activities.

### 3.1.5 SOMA evaluation overall

In addition to the evaluation of single events, the overall evaluation of SOMA Observatory was performed. A survey was submitted to the entire SOMA Network to grade the activities, tools and performances of the project.

Results are reported hereafter and are based on the 23 collected responses, out of 100 members.

Looking at the responses collected, main categories represented in the survey are the following: 52% are researchers, followed by 22% of fact-checkers.

Please select the category you belong to. If other, please specify.

23 responses

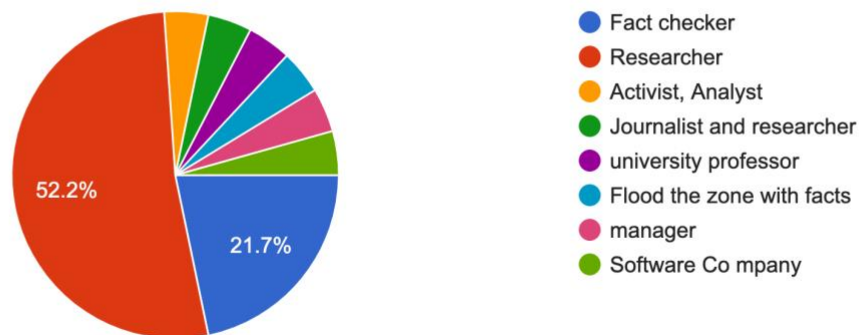


Figure 13. Survey's target

Among the 23 stakeholders participating to the surveys, 48% realised from 1 to 5 investigation using SOMA, 35% only one or zero and 17% more than 5.

It was asked to the respondents to rate the tools and networking opportunities provided by SOMA. As reported in Figure 14, 72% expressed a good appreciation of SOMA tool selecting good or very good. According to the figures related to the networking opportunities, Figure 15, shows that the same 72% also selected good or very good.

How do evaluate the tools provided by SOMA from 1 to 5 (1- is very bad and 5 very good)?

22 responses

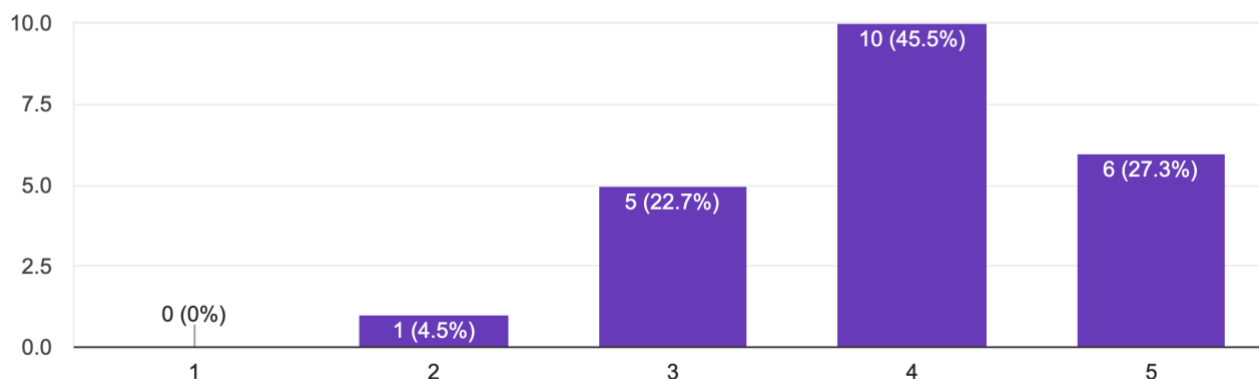


Figure 14. Evaluating SOMA tools

How do evaluate the networking made possible by SOMA from 1 to 5 (where 1 is very bad and 5 very good)?

22 responses

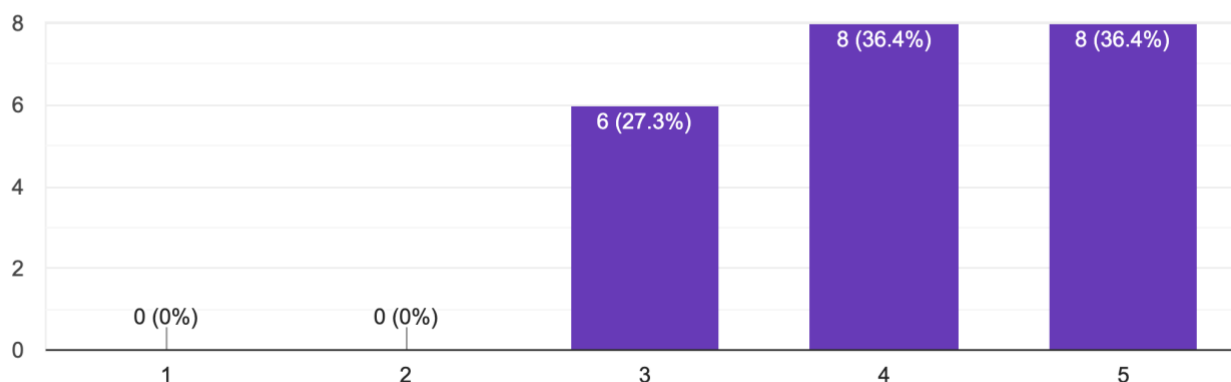
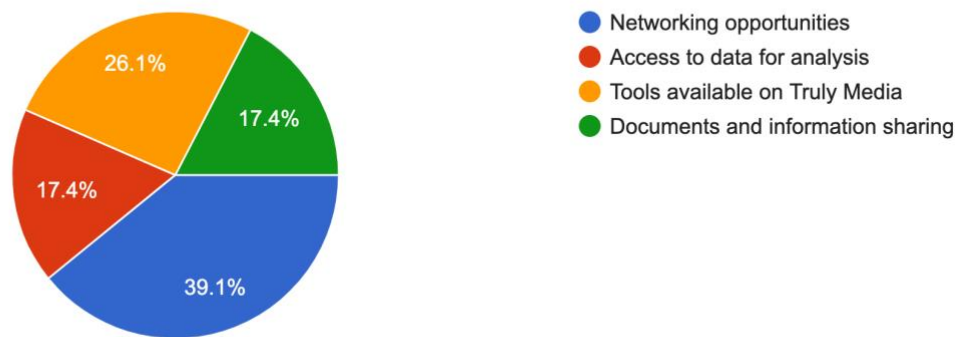


Figure 15. Evaluating SOMA networking

Figure 15 matches with what reported in Figure **Error! Reference source not found.**. Indeed, asking to rate all the SOMA services provided to the community, 39% agreed that the networking opportunities is the most relevant service offered by SOMA; 26% selected the tools available on Truly Media while 17% selected access too data for research and document sharing.

Which service provided by SOMA you enjoy the most?

23 responses

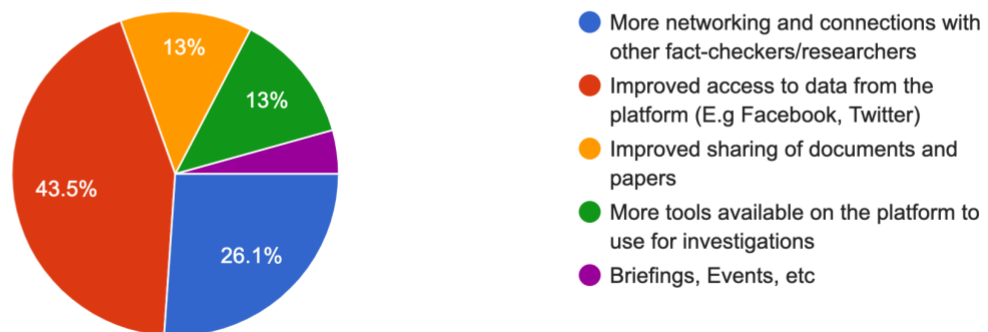


**Figure 16. Evaluating SOMA services**

Finally, it was asked what could be differently done to better match members' expectations (Figure 17). Almost the majority, 43% asked for an improved access to data for the platforms, while 26% agreed for more networking opportunities, 13% asked for improving sharing of materials, 13% for improved tools for investigation and 4% for more events.

What kind of support actions you expected to be differently performed or facilitated by SOMA to facilitate your work of research/debunk? if you select other, please specify

23 responses



**Figure 17. SOMA work and members' expectations**

Finally, which are the main barriers to fight disinformation was asked. 43% stated that the main issue is still related to data access. 26% opted for low digital literacy. All other options are only partial relevant for the members (Figure 18).

Which are the main obstacles or barriers that impede your work of debunking or analysing disinformation?

23 responses

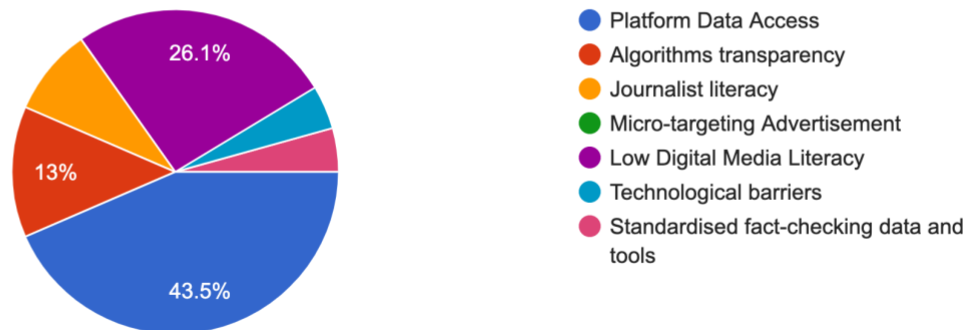


Figure 18. Main barriers to fight disinformation

### 3.1.6 Centers of Excellence

As reported in the DoW, two centers of excellence were planned to be established by the project. A third one was realised in Greece at ATC premises. SOMA ends its activity with three local hubs dedicated to tackle disinformation in three European countries: Denmark, Italy and Greece.

#### 3.1.6.1 EU REMID

During the first half of the project, AA established the EU Center of Excellence for Research in Social Media and Information Disorder (EU REMID) at the DATALAB. Main activities focus both on mapping and advancing research into information flows and disorder on social media and displaying academic research to support stakeholders (such as teachers, fact checkers, journalists and researchers) in their work against disinformation.

The Centre organized several conferences in collaboration with NORDIS network or participated to other events, in particular:

- “Online Disinformation: an Integrated View | #1 Defining and Measuring Disinformation; 6.-7.05.2019; NORDIS network venue at Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies (Aarhus University, Denmark)
- “Online disinformation: an integrated view | #2 Countering online disinformation”, 3.-4.06.2019; NORDIS network venue at Oslo Metropolitan University (P46, Athens)
- “Online disinformation: an integrated view | #3 An Integrated perspective”, Feb 11, 2021; NORDIS network online venue
- ROPH’20 Conference: The ROPH’20 Conference took place 23-24 January 2020 at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies (Aarhus University) and marked the launch of the five-year Research on Online Political Hostility (ROPH) project. The conference was a step on the way towards achieving the overall goal of developing a set of crucially needed tools in the process of decreasing online hostility. With a series of plenary talks, roundtable discussions and two poster sessions, the conference aimed to take stock of our current knowledge about online

political hostility, and accordingly identify the next big questions we need to solve. Anja Bechmann attended on behalf of EU REMID, where she discussed how to counter online disinformation in a roundtable at the conference

EU REMID takes part in several research projects related to online disinformation: ROPH (Research on Online Political Hostility), “AI in the Service of Truth” and “Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe”. Furthermore, different networks were established to improve the collaborations between both researchers (NOH-HS) and also collaborations between researchers and media practitioners (NORDIS).

A newsletter from DATALAB is frequently circulated with special emphasis on news from EU REMID activities while updating the website to report for new research and activities related to the field of disinformation.

### 3.1.6.2 ALETHEIA

In September 2019, Luiss, together with T6 ECO, launched the ALETHEIA Centre of Excellence to promote research and knowledge exchange on issues related to information, professional correctness, the fight against misinformation and polarization in the media, on and offline. The ultimate goal of the center of excellence is to introduce researchers to the production of scientific works that enable knowledge on the dynamics of disinformation, allowing citizens to access analysis and research that found and renew trust in institutions, on the basis of independent studies.

Among the studies performed by Aletheia it worth mentioning a *think tank* on data intelligence & prediction of Covid-19. Through the methodology and R&D tools the data-driven monitoring of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic made it possible to extract, from Twitter and Reddit, various information related to several issues associated with the Coronavirus pandemic. The main objectives at the beginning of the investigation were: identify the most popular themes, keywords, hashtags with which the international emergency is addressed; identify the spread of false news and disinformation phenomena; analyze the behavior of the Twitter and Reddit user communities, as well as the polarization of the topics.

Main conferences organized by Luiss in collaboration with Aletheia are:

- February, 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, Rome - Inauguration of the Class of 2020-2021 of the master's program in Journalism and Multimedia Communication "Rebuilding Trust" offered by the Luiss School of Journalism and Luiss Data Lab Speakers Paolo Gentiloni European Commissioner for Economy
- May, 21<sup>st</sup> 2020 “Truth is the first vaccination”. Workshop of media literacy against disinformation about Covid-19 in Europe –
- February, 21<sup>st</sup> 2020, Rome - Inauguration of the Class of 2019-2021 of the master's program in Journalism and Multimedia Communication, offered by the Luiss School of Journalism and Luiss Data Lab Speakers David Sassoli President of the European Parliament

### 3.1.6.3 ELLPAP

A third center of excellence, Ellpap, was launched by ATC in Greece.

Ellpap provides reliable information to the Greek public about disinformation and unreliable online content. The Centre offers specialized knowledge and support to communication professionals and journalists on the available technological tools and methods for detecting and verifying false news and misleading content. It promotes, also, Greek interdisciplinary research in the field of

disinformation, and provides data and resources on the latest developments in relevant scientific fields of interest (analysis of social networks, artificial intelligence, etc.). It also promotes media and information literacy in Greece, in order to strengthen critical thinking and the ability of Greek pupils, students, and other social groups to analyse and assess online news content.

Since its start, a webinar with training purposes on the use of image forensics for tackling disinformation was organised.

### **3.1.7 Media literacy sessions**

SOMA organized five media literacy sessions .

The SOMA Media Literacy Workshop held at the LUISS University, Rome, and led by Luiss Data Lab and T6 Ecosystems on September 9, 2019. The goal of the Media Literacy Workshop was to accompany participating students in a process to become aware of the various strategies for identifying and responding to fake news. The workshop began with an introduction to the objectives of the SOMA project by Giuseppe Abbamonte, Director of Media Policy Directorate, DG Connect, European Commission; Alberto Rabbachin, Scientific Project Officer, DG Connect, European Commission and Gianni Riotta, Director of Luiss Data Lab and member of the High-Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation appointed by the European Commission. 66 students participated, divided into two classes, 83% of which were freshmen or enrolled in an undergraduate program in law, management and computer science, political science, etc. The remaining 17% were high school students. The second media literacy sessions organized by LUISS was held online due to Covid-19 pandemic.

PP organized three sessions:

1. "What technology can do for fact-checking: practical examples from Europe", International Journalism Festival (Perugia, Italy, 3 April 2019) - around 100 participants
2. Webinar "The Italian infodemic: lessons from fact-checking on COVID-19" (PP/SOMA/IRI), 4 June 2020 - around 15 overall
3. Webinar "SOMA Townhall: What is SOMA and what can it do for you", on 8/7/2020 and 10/7/2020 - around 20 participants overall

According to the figures provided by the partners in charge of the activities, the total of participants to the media literacy sessions is 3700. Audience was mainly made by students and professionals such as fact checkers and journalists.

### **3.1.8 Impact assessment evaluation**

Among the different criteria considered to evaluate the project, a dimension linked to the methodology developed to map the impact of disinformation on people was envisaged.

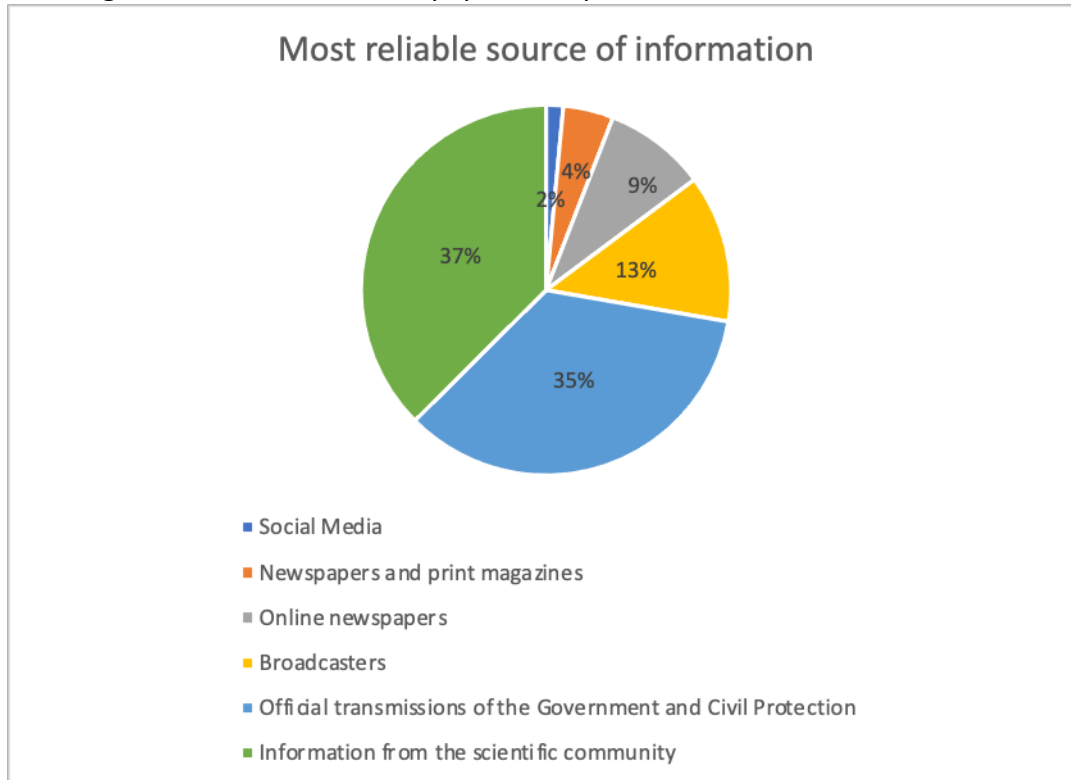
Starting from the qualitative analysis aimed at investigating the impacts of the pandemic on users' behaviors, described in D5.2, secondary data was extracted.

Accordingly, it was possible to state that SOMA allowed to map the following indicators linked to political impact:

- Percentage of trust in online journal
- Degree of trust in institutions

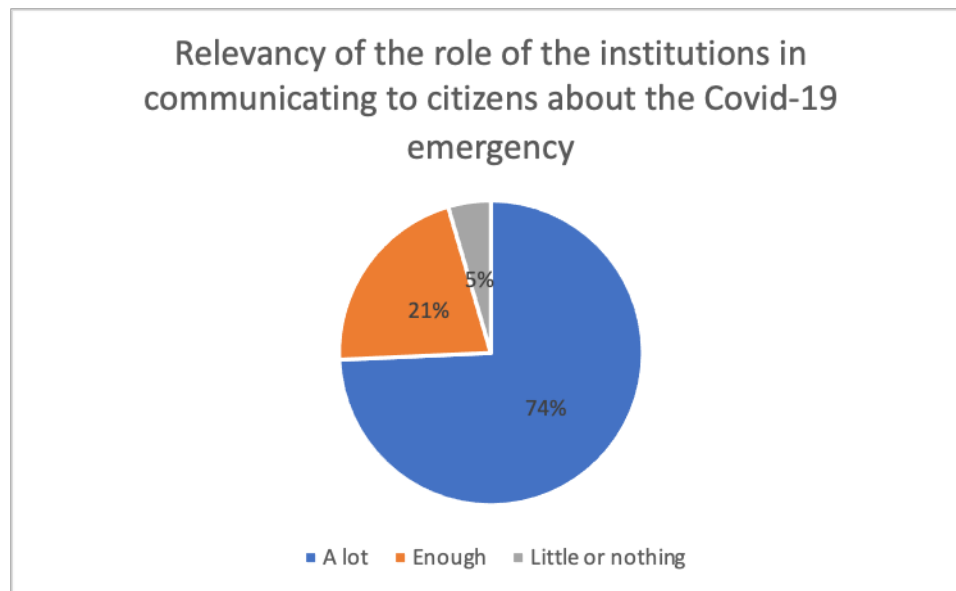
To map those indicators, we asked which are the most reliable information channels during the Covid-19 emergency (Figure 19).

Respondents could select one or multiple preferences, we got 3138 preferences in total. Aggregating the preference, 37% of the replies stated that the most reliable source of information is the one provided by the scientific community and 35% by the Institutions. Then 13% considered a reliable source of information the broadcasters. 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 19. 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 providing information on how to behave to deal with the Covid-19 emergency (Figure 20). 74% of respondents state that this is very important, 21% is important while 5% states that this is of little or no importance (Figure 20).



**Figure 20. Replies on importance of the institutional communication on Covid-19 emergency**

To conclude, Figure 19 and Figure 20 allow to say that, considering the 1600 respondents to our survey, percentage of trust in online journal is low (9%) 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.

### 3.2 Conclusive results

Giving the chosen approach and the selected indicators, it is possible to provide the impact of the SOMA project according to the four areas of impact and related sub-categories.

#### Social impact

This area of impact evaluated the changes introduced by SOMA activities in the specific aspects of social interaction at micro and meso level.

At micro level the methodology explores the changes that have occurred at the individual level of project partners. At meso level, it investigates social relations at group and organisational level, such as the impact on local communities and on specific social groups.

The social impact index is composed of the following sub-categories, illustrated in detail below:

- Impact on community building
- Impact on information
- Impact on education and human capital.

#### *Impact on community building*

SOMA project combined a community of 100 members among researchers and fact-checkers. The community is spread in 23 European countries and 13 countries outside Europe.

Considering only the small community of SOMA partners, this led the partners to open up collaboration, launching other two projects funded by H2020 related to disinformation.

#### *Impact on information*

Under this subcategory, the focus is on projects' capability to provide access to high-quality information, and positively reducing disinformation spreading. The results of 43 joint collaborations

and 7 individual collaborations have been published on the SOMA website. This means that in 43 cases two partners or more worked together while in 7 cases, one partner has worked individually using SOMA tools.

With a survey to understand the relation between Covid-19 and disinformation we collected 1600 replies which allowed us to write a paper on covid-19 during the most crucial period of the pandemic.

*Impact on education and human capital:*

5 media literacies sessions were organised with a total of 3700 participants with a very high rate of appreciation for the sessions.

### **Scientific impact**

Scientific impact is determined according to the project capability to impact on scientific production and knowledge sharing. The scientific index is composed by the following categories:

- impact on science and academia
- impact on knowledge production
- impact on knowledge sharing
- impact on data access for scientific purposes

*Impact on science and academia*

11 papers have been submitted in scientific journals.

*Impact on knowledge production*

The Observatory reached members from 23 European countries and 8 countries outside Europe. Thanks to the tools provided new knowledge has been produced benefiting society at large

*Impact on knowledge sharing*

Considering all events, inside and outside Europe, attended by SOMA partners, in 42 the project was presented. Three centers of excellence have been created to disseminate information and knowledge against disinformation.

*Impact on data access for scientific purposes*

In terms of data access for scientific purposes, SOMA achieved to gain data access to Facebook data through Crowd Tangle API for researchers and fact checkers.

### **Technological impact**

The technological impact is focused on two sub-categories:

- Impact on the use of technology
- Impact on technological tools

*Impact on the use of technology*

This sub-category is related to the technology offer to SOMA users to elaborate fact checking against disinformation. 110 active members used the platform adopted by SOMA and the improved the Truly Media platform adding tools and features directly accessible to users to fight disinformation.

*Impact on technological tools*

In relation to the second sub-category, SOMA deployed three new software tools and one algorithm. The tools are integrated into the Truly Media platform, while the algorithm was published in a

scientific journal<sup>10</sup> and also in Bitbucket, an Open-Source repository and its available for use at LUISS datalab website<sup>11</sup>.

### Political impact

The political impact index was developed looking at the capability of the project to have an impact on the users and on European citizen political participation overall. The political impact index is divided into the following sub-categories:

- Impact on policy and institutions
- Impact on civic and political participation

#### *Impact on policy and institutions*

The project created a bridge among the EC and the social media platform having an impact on terms of policies for data access. Indeed, as anticipated, SOMA had access to CrowdTangle to get data for scientific purposes. Moreover, papers based on SOMA research were disseminated to the EC to provide almost up-to-date information on covid 19 and 5G.

#### *Impact on civic and political participation*

In relation to the impact on civic and political participation, SOMA improve members capability to participate into the political debate through a more correct information.

Social impact	Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of people attended the media literacy sessions</li> <li>• Number of media literacy sessions</li> <li>• Degree of satisfaction for the media literacy session</li> <li>• Articles on disinformation on newspapers</li> <li>• Number of people engaged in qualitative data gathered on Covid-19</li> <li>• Number of analysis produced using SOMA tools on Truly Media</li> <li>• Number of new projects starting from SOMA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3700</li> <li>• 5</li> <li>• High</li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 1611</li> <li>• 20</li> <li>• 2</li> </ul>
Technological impact	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree of satisfaction of the SOMA tools</li> <li>• Number of new algorithms developed</li> <li>• Numbers of new features in Truly Media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 72%</li> <li>• 1</li> <li>• 3</li> </ul>
Political impact	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of communications with the social media platforms</li> <li>• Data access for SOMA researchers to the data collected by the platforms</li> <li>• Formal communication with the EC</li> <li>• Percentage of trust in online journal</li> <li>• Degree of trust in institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2</li> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 9%</li> <li>• 71%</li> </ul>
Scientific impact	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of scientific publications on SOMA</li> <li>• Number of collaborative investigations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10</li> <li>• 33</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Guarino S., Trino N., Chessa A., Riotta G. (2020) Beyond Fact-Checking: Network Analysis Tools for Monitoring Disinformation in Social Media. In: Cherifi H., Gaito S., Mendes J., Moro E., Rocha L. (eds) Complex Networks and Their Applications VIII. COMPLEX NETWORKS 2019. Studies in Computational Intelligence, vol 881. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36687-2\\_36](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36687-2_36)

<sup>11</sup> URL <http://193.204.157.124/>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Number of conferences or events attended</li><li>• Number of stakeholders in the SOMA network</li><li>• Number of active members of the SOMA Observatory</li><li>• Data access for SOMA researchers to the data collected by the platforms</li><li>• Centres of excellence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 42</li><li>• 100</li><li>• 110</li><li>• Yes</li><li>• 3</li></ul>
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**Table 5. SOMA figures at a glance**

## 4 SOMA policy recommendations

Nowadays, the widespread of digital services has highly impacted our lives. Among the others changes, it has affected the way in which we access, share and delivery information online. In such context, malicious act 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 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>12</sup> (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act <sup>13</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 users of digital services 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 for monitoring its implementation.

According to these latest policy advancements, SOMA project intends to share some reflections based on its findings to inform upcoming policy implementation.

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<sup>12</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>13</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)

First of all, findings from SOMA research<sup>14</sup> suggest that in emergency time, such as the period of covid-19 pandemic, trust in non-official sources of information decreases. In parallel, it increases the trust in official sources of information, in particular in information shared by Governments and in information shared by the scientific community. This result shows how relevant is for Institutions and governments to adopt a continuous and efficient communication strategy getting visualization on social media reducing access to misleading and false information.

In addition to the efforts to eliminate false news, another action could 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 suggested by the Article 7 of the Audiovisual Media Service directive suggesting “Member States may take measures to ensure the appropriate prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest”.

As reported by ERGA<sup>15</sup> “The typical company policy of distribution platforms is to highlight primarily those contents that are the most successful – e.g. those with the highest click-through rate – or are most likely to reach an audience based on users’ previous interaction with (similar) services. This content is not necessarily of general interest. Content of general interest needs to be easily findable and accessible so that it can contribute to the opinion forming of society. Formation and diversity of opinions, as cornerstones of any democracy, can only be guaranteed if the media landscape provides for reliable and diverse information”.

However, it is fair to say that sharing trustful information limiting false news does not solve the problem. The other issue, in fact, is related to the opportunity to get access to the amount of data from digital space 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.

This is another relevant issue emerged from SOMA work. Indeed, even if SOMA reached an agreement with Facebook to get elevated access to CrowdTangle API for researchers, this was not considered sufficient for the SOMA members.

Based on the aforementioned debate and on the research carried out by the SOMA project, the aim of the paragraph is to convey 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 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 incentivize to the platforms to privilege sharing of trustful information.

<sup>14</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/>

<sup>15</sup> Available at [https://erga-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ERGA\\_SG3\\_2020\\_Report\\_Art.7a\\_final.pdf](https://erga-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ERGA_SG3_2020_Report_Art.7a_final.pdf)

## **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. Some few examples of access for research activities, such as Social Science One (SSO) who could collect and give access to a dataset from Facebook covering 46 countries and 17 trillion values, as allowed around 100 researchers to analyse it, SSO has launched also a new research collaboration that enables social scientists access to new types of 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".

Accordingly, more and better access should be guaranteed to improve research opportunities. 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**

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.

## 5 Conclusion

After 30 months of work, SOMA project ends its activities with several results achieved.

As extensively reported in previous chapters, the project has aggregated a community of 100 stakeholders active in fighting disinformation, the community has worked collaboratively producing and sharing valuable information for researchers, fact-checkers and also for the public at large.

Above all, the project has operated during the hardest times of Covid-19 pandemic responding rapidly to the need of more information and addressing the risk of conspiracy theories and informing European Institutions with additional information. In this sense, a lot of investigation performed by SOMA partners and SOMA network addressed the covid-19 topic and a dedicated survey, based on 1600 replies, allowed us to produce up-to-date information for the European Commission.

Moreover, the SOMA project has reached very good results in terms of scientific production as well as in supporting European institution in improving the debate with the platform on data access for research purposes.

Nevertheless, still a lot needs to be done to achieve concrete results in reducing disinformation spreading. Unfortunately, it seems difficult to achieve solid results if data won't be accessible for researchers and if platform won't be obliged to respect higher standard of transparency and competitiveness.

In line with this, SOMA policy recommendations are aligned to the relevant issues emerged with researchers and fact-checkers and observing what they need most from the supporting project.

The direct contact with SOMA stakeholders made possible to clearly identify what should be done by European institutions in terms of policies to fight disinformation over the next months.

The result is that a more structured co-regulatory framework for the platforms and an increased access to data for the researchers are the basic requirements to make a step forward in fighting disinformation. SOMA achieved some results in this direction but an improved and coordinated effort is necessary to make the difference and improve the European media ecosystem.

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## **7 Annex 1. SOMA Whitepaper**

21/04/2021



# Policy recommendation report

Whitepaper from the SOMA project

Simona De Rosa, Andrea Nicolai  
T6 ECOSYSTEMS



The SOMA project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 825469.

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)

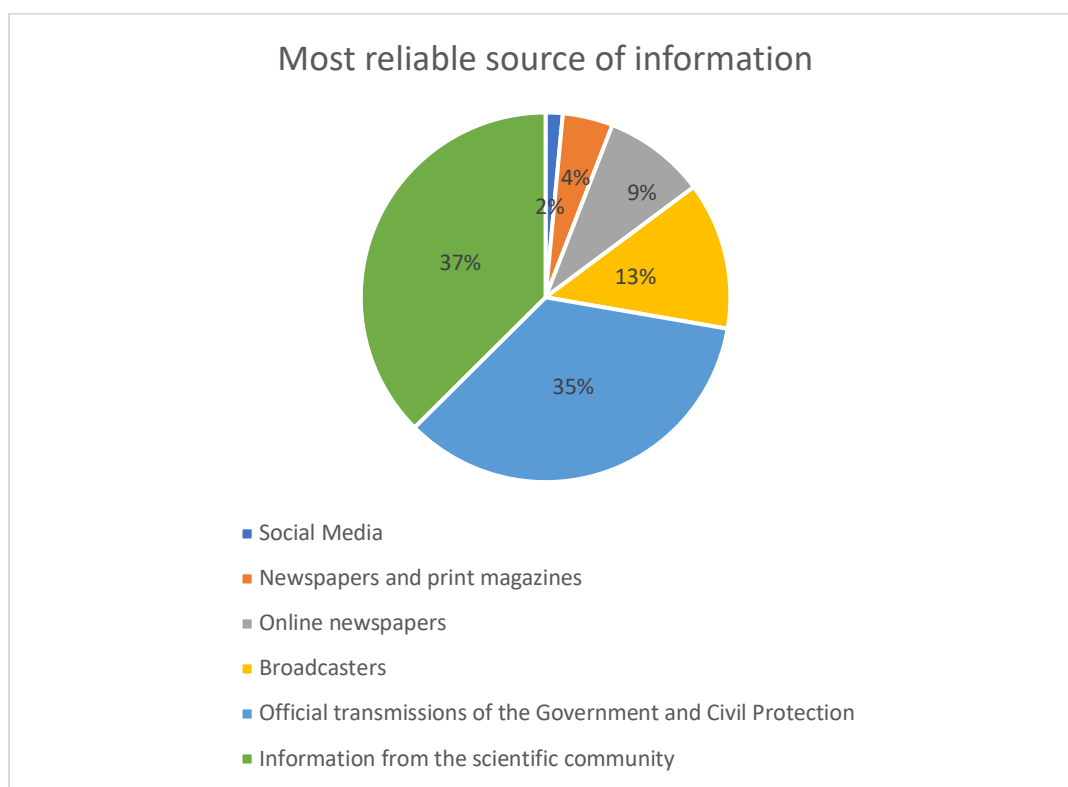
<sup>2</sup> More information is available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-markets-act-ensuring-fair-and-open-digital-markets\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-markets-act-ensuring-fair-and-open-digital-markets_en)

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.



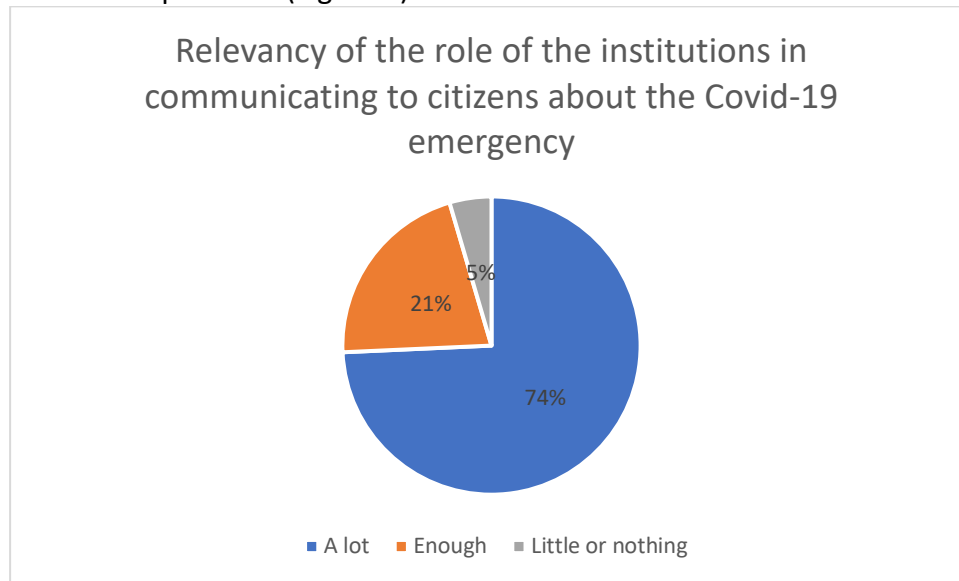
**Figure 1. Most reliable source of information during Covid-19 emergency chosen by the participants**

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

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<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.

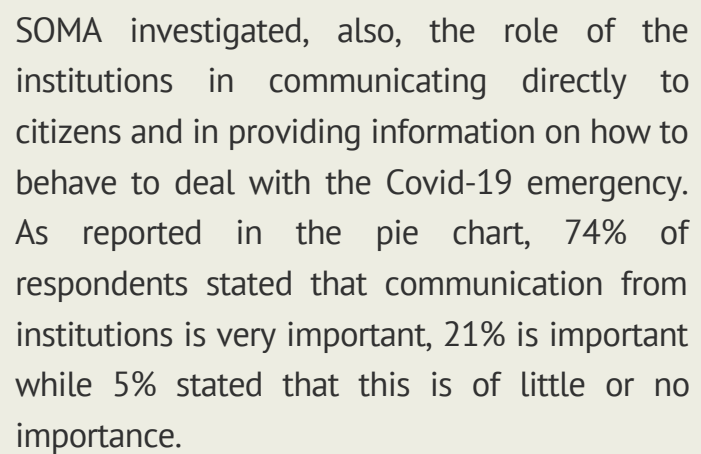
To achieve this last point more obligations for the platforms are needed in particular for what related to political advertisement on social media platforms. European institutions are asked to develop a co-regulatory framework to put in place strict obligations for the platforms for the public good.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

## Introduction

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.

## SOMA findings

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.



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.

## Policy recommendations

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.

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.





## 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.disinfobservatory.org/>

## SOMA partners

<b>ATC ATHENS TECHNOLOGY CENTER</b>	 ATHENS TECHNOLOGY CENTER
<b>AARHUS UNIVERSITET</b>	
<b>LUISS LIBERA UNIVERSITA INTERNAZIONALE DEGLI STUDI SOCIALI GUIDO CARLI</b>	
<b>Pagella Politica THE FACT-CHECKING FACTORY SRL</b>	
<b>T6 ECOSYSTEMS SRL</b>	

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