

# A New Governance Regime for Social Media

*Saul Newman (Goldsmiths University of London); Maximilian Conrad (University of Iceland); Nikola Schmidt (Institute for International Relations, Czech Republic)*

## Key Takeaways

- Disinformation campaigns on social media are aimed at disrupting liberal democracies, creating distrust amongst citizens in their democratic institutions and intensifying political/affective polarisation.
- The spread of disinformation and ‘fake news’ – particularly on social media – undermines the public sphere and severely inhibits the ability of citizens to communicate and to engage in genuine democratic debate and deliberation.
- Some degree of social media regulation – including stipulating algorithmic transparency and community driven fact-checking large-language models (LLMs) – as well as creating alternative digital public forums and democratic accountability bodies, will be needed to strengthen the public sphere and re-engage citizens in democratic dialogue.

## RECLAIM summary

RECLAIM is a three-year research project (2022-2025) funded by the European Union’s Horizon Europe program. Consisting of a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities around Europe, the RECLAIM project addresses the implications of the challenge of post-truth politics for the future of liberal democracy in Europe, in order to (a) produce theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) to reflect on the meaning of liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe and, (c) to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives and methodologies to reinstate the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies.

## Analysis and findings

The RECLAIM project has investigated key dimensions of the ‘post-factual’ age, which it defined as a transformation of liberal democratic culture characterized by (1) the symbiotic relationship between ‘post-truth’ discourse and (right-wing) populism, particularly in the European context; 2) the decline of European public spheres as a shared space of citizen communication and political deliberation; and (3) the role of technology in the generation, as well as proliferation, of disinformation, but also in providing solutions to this problem. (See Conrad and Newman 2024; and Newman and Conrad 2024).

Our research explored different aspects of what we refer to as ‘post-truth populism’ in various national contexts, including Spain, Germany, Iceland, Slovenia, and Sweden. We also considered the impact of post-truth populism in terms of polarization and the fragmentation of the public sphere into online echo chambers, and distrust in journalism and official sources of information. Specifically, we analyzed patterns of social media consumption; hostility towards journalists and the mainstream media; populist styles of political communication, aimed at delegitimizing traditional media and scientific authority; the degree of political polarization; and the impact on liberal democratic norms and institutions.

Our empirical studies have yielded highlighted (1) the intimate and necessary relationship between ‘post-truth’ and right-wing populism: disinformation, ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, conspiracy theories and efforts to undermine citizens’ trust in official sources of information (state institutions, the mainstream media, scientific bodies) are part and parcel of the populist project. Populist politicians use disinformation strategically to heighten this distrust and intensify political/affective polarization. Post-truth populists attack journalists and attempt to discredit the mainstream media as ‘fake news’ or as having a liberal ‘woke’ bias; they develop alternative ‘counter-narratives’ – particularly online – to create distrust and deligitimise ‘established’ knowledge (on issues such as climate change, migration); and they weaponize conspiracy theories for strategic ends.

2) Our case studies have shown that these strategies undermine public sphere communication and the general ability of citizens to engage in reasoned democratic debate and deliberation. The combined effects of post-truth and populism lead to a situation in which the political field is ideologically polarized (between left and right) and fragmented into different echo-chambers or ‘semi-publics’ (see Habermas 2022) between which shared dialogue becomes increasingly difficult. The online space in which much citizen interaction takes place today plays a key role in this context. Social media algorithms amplify controversial and misleading content, thereby intensifying affective polarization and resulting in the breakdown of dialogue.

3) This deterioration of the public sphere presents a danger to liberal democracy, which depends on effective and relatively undistorted political communication between citizens, typically channeled through the media. Furthermore, post-truth populism works against the idea of ‘mediating bodies’ that filter the popular will through representative institutions (see Urbinati 2019) and is hostile to liberal democratic norms such as judicial independence and the respect for the rights of minorities.

4) Existing regulatory responses to these challenges, including those outlined in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), are insufficient to cope with the problem of disinformation. The current governance regime for social media at the EU level does not address the structural impetus of online disinformation, i.e., the commercial business model of social media companies (SMCs). In fact, the “light-touch” regulatory regime based on public-private partnerships with SMCs undermines the EU’s ambitions for “digital sovereignty” in this area (see Oleari and Rone 2025).

## Policy Recommendations

Our findings suggest that there is a need for a new kind of democratic governance regime for social media at the EU level. This includes measures taken to insist on greater transparency and accountability for social media platforms for the content they host and for the algorithms they use to amplify certain content. This also includes fostering a more pluralistic media landscape through the creation of an ecosystem of alternative, publicly owned platforms designed to facilitate genuine democratic debate. A balance has to be struck between protecting democracies against the threat of disinformation, and not overly restricting the very rights and freedoms that democracies are supposed to protect, in particular free speech (see Article 19, 2021). Our recommendations protect freedom of speech while at the same time help to make democracies more resilient to the threat of disinformation. Their focus is on greater transparency and accountability, and pluralizing the social media landscape, rather than on the censorship of content.

1) *Greater algorithmic transparency:* we propose the introduction of legislation requiring social media companies to be transparent about how their algorithms operate. As we have shown, algorithms are a key part of the problem when it comes to amplifying extreme positions and disseminating mis/disinformation, thus leading to more polarized debates on social media and disrupting public sphere communication. Making citizens more aware of how these algorithms operate, and the extent to which their engagement on social media can be manipulated, would improve public trust and lead to greater accountability and public scrutiny over social media companies. This would include: providing **easily accessible** information

about the algorithm’s purpose. Already governments are adopting such measures for their own public sector agencies. For instance, the UK government has adopted the Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard (ATRS) guidance for its public sector bodies. The EU’s Digital Services Act (DSA) has also been oriented towards greater algorithmic transparency. We are recommending a uniform set of legally enforceable standards be applied to SMCs operating within the EU’s jurisdiction. The European Commission is in the best position to play a key role in drafting legislation to achieve these goals. No doubt these policies would be controversial, particularly for social media companies themselves which vigorously resist any attempts by governments to regulate their content. However, we also believe that greater algorithmic transparency would be popular with the public who are increasingly concerned about the negative impacts of and manipulation by social media.

2) *A public-service fact-checking LLM curated by the public:* Wikipedia proved that a publicly curated encyclopedia as an accessible public good is an achievable goal, capable of withstanding content vandalism. Large Language Models (LLMs) can be used for realtime fact-checking of social media, as demonstrated by X’s Grok. But while Grok evidently promotes the political preferences of private individual owners, an LLM can also be curated by the public. Its training data can be open and the feasibility of developing it does not need to be prohibitively expensive. Meta recently published the Llama model as an “open weight”, which means that the core of the LLM is already trained, available to everyone, and ready to be trained on a specific topic useful for a specific application. The European Commission should consider developing its own publicly available open-weight model that could be trained for various publicly beneficial applications, including obligatory real-time fact-checking on social network platforms, real-time fact-checking during TV broadcasts with interviews with political representatives etc.

3) *Fostering an alternative social media ecosystem:* As disenchantment and concern about private tech/social media platforms grows, there is an urgent need to pluralise the social media landscape. Specifically, we recommend the development of alternative, publicly owned and grassroots managed social media platforms, as well as alternative citizen-managed governance bodies. The latter are what are referred to as Social Media Councils (see Article 19, 2021), that is: bodies composed of citizens, industry and other stakeholders which would review individual content moderation by social media platforms and provide general guidance on content moderation. Such councils would be designed to provide greater regulatory oversight and accountability, while at the same time preserving freedom of speech and expression and representing a diversity of different viewpoints. They would

be independent from government, commercial and special interests, providing instead a forum for public debate and deliberation on social media content. In this sense, they could fulfil the function of a digital public sphere. In 2020 the creation of a Social Media Council was proposed in the Republic of Ireland (see Article 19). We maintain that a similar framework should be developed at the EU level, with the aim of providing *democratic* regulatory oversight over the content of social media platforms operating within the EU jurisdiction.

### Target audience and feasibility

These policy initiatives emphasise citizen engagement and the cooperation of civil society rather than top-down governance. To ensure their effectiveness, the European Commission should play a coordinating role by providing the technological infrastructure (eg for LLMs) and provide financial resources as well as a general legal framework for their operation. The EU is in an exceptional position to ensure that social media governance applies throughout the EU (and, indeed, the entire internal market). This should be achieved through a consistent set of legislative acts (ideally in the form of regulations), norms, codes of conduct, and legal sanctions. The costs should not be prohibitive. Finally, as a proposed timeline, recommendations 1 and 2 could be rolled out relatively quickly, while recommendation 3 - which involves fostering a plural, diverse and democratic social media ecosystem - is a longer term ambition.

We believe these recommendations - aimed at developing a new governance regime for social media companies - provide greater democratic oversight over their operation within EU jurisdiction, and better protect the public sphere and liberal democratic culture from threat of mis/disinformation.

### References and further reading

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