

# D.10 Periodically updated description of the DSI efforts to support and facilitate the coordination of academic research

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Project number:	SMART 2019/1087
Project Acronym:	EDMO
Project title:	European Digital Media Observatory
Start date of the project:	01/06/2020
Duration of the project:	30
Period covered by the interim report:	from 06/11/2020 to 30/11/2022
Date of submission of the periodic description:	
Project website address:	<a href="https://edmo.eu/">https://edmo.eu/</a>
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## 1.0 Introduction

This D.10-report is the last of five descriptions of the DSI efforts to support and coordinate academic research in Europe related to Task IV in EDMO. Throughout the project period, these updated descriptions have been delivered every six months. This last report distinguishes itself from the others, in that, given the advanced stage of the project period, it is now possible to describe how each of the four subtasks have been implemented and completed (Section 2). The section describes the identification of academic activities studying digital disinformation in the EU (IV.D.A), the mapping of relevant institutions and organizations (MS1, IV.D.B), the establishment of a final repository of relevant scientific papers (MS2, IV.D.C), as well as the participation in the EDMO Task Force on Disinformation and the War in Ukraine and preparation of a paper that addresses a research question raised in the Task Force (IV.D.D). Finally, this report provides an overview of trends in recent academic work (Section 3), this time with an emphasis on academic research on disinformation in Russia and the Baltics related to the ongoing Russian/Ukrainian war.

## 2.0 Completion of Task IV.D subtasks

The long-term aim of Task IV is to support and fertilize academic inquiries into digital disinformation in the EU, as fostering collaborations on digital disinformation is beneficial for the research community (Walter et al., 2020). Thus, this has been the common theme through the different subtasks in Task IV.D. In a first step, a preliminary repository was established to identify relevant academic research and institutions. In the second step, the identified institutions were asked to provide input to the final repository. Combined, this work in Task IV.D has led to the identification of additional challenges to research on digital disinformation in times of crisis, described in the IV.D.D report.

### 2.1 IV.D.A: *Identifying academic activities studying disinformation in the EU*

Subtask IV.D.A involved the identification of academic research activities studying digital disinformation at scale in the EU. Here, *at scale* refers to studies that use large data samples and, hereby, allow to infer the findings to general patterns of digital disinformation in the EU. The subtask was operationalized as a systematic literature

review starting with a carefully defined literature search. The process has been described in detail in previous reports (see Bak et al., 2021) and the following is a summarization of the procedure.

In January 2021 a literature search was conducted based on keywords related to disinformation (e.g., conspiracy, misinformation, and fake news), as well as keywords referring to previous and current member states with relevant abbreviations (see Bak et al., 2021, for complete list). The timeframe was set to research published from 2015 onward, as this includes important events used as case studies in academic research, e.g., the US Presidential and the UK Referendum Campaigns (see e.g., Greene et al., 2021; Mair et al., 2017; Sipitanos, 2021). The search returned 2.296 results that were reduced to 93 after manual filtering and removal of duplicates. The preliminary repository was published on the EDMO website, and later updated to a final version (IV.D.C).

#### *2.1.1. Manuscript published in New Media & Society*

Based on the preliminary repository, the researchers at DATALAB have crafted a systematic review paper titled: “Digital false information at scale in the EU: Current state of research in various disciplines, and future directions” (Bak et al., 2022). The manuscript was published in *New Media & Society*, a top-ranked journal within Communication studies, in September 2022. The review focuses on five key aspects relevant to estimating the state of research on digital disinformation in the EU, that is: the development of studies on digital disinformation at scale in the EU, regional affiliation of researchers, academic field, regional focus of the research, and theme (e.g., health, and detection).

Especially noteworthy is the fact that even when the literature search is optimized for EU results, the US and the UK were the second and third most frequently appearing case studies after Italy. Further, Twitter is by far the most studied social media platform which emphasizes the need to explore new ways to gain access to data from other platforms and hereby, get insights into digital disinformation across platforms. Based on the review, the authors call for a better trade-of between country-specific, regional, and global studies to unravel regional and event-specific differences in disinformation

characteristics, as well as a wider representation of social media platforms, other than Twitter, and even stronger collaboration across academic fields (Bak et al., 2022).

## *2.2 IV.D.B: Identifying Relevant Academic Institutions and Organizations*

To identify relevant academic institutions and organizations, author details were extracted for all authors listed as contributing to the papers included in the first released repository. Via this method we obtained a list of 212 authors who had engaged in research on digital disinformation at scale in the EU with contact information, region, and institutional affiliation.

### *2.2.1. Survey for Identified Authors*

The authors of the papers identified in the initial literature search were reached out to via a survey created in the EU Survey-system. The motivation behind the survey was fourfold: to engage with the research community, extend the awareness of EDMO, expand the research community of EDMO, and finally, to understand how EDMO can better meet researchers needs.

The survey was circulated in January 2022 to the 212 identified authors. Of the invited authors, we received 44 replies pointing us in the direction of 251 academic institutions and organizations, whereof 177 are placed in the EU. The work in IV.D.B has resulted in an [online map and table](#), established in collaboration with Athens Technology Center (ATC). Through this resource, users can find the following information on the identified institutions: country and regional location, URL-address to the institution website, source for identification (survey and repository, respectively), discipline, and, finally, the number of appearances in the survey and repository. The overview of organizations actively studying digital disinformation in the context of the EU will make interdisciplinary collaborations more attainable.

## *2.3 IV.D.C: Establish a Repository of Relevant Academic Research Activities*

The objective with the repository of relevant academic research focused on digital disinformation at scale, is to make available a tool that can be used for searching, creating an overview, and establishing collaborations across the EU. The first release of the repository was expanded to include more academic work on digital

disinformation with a broader scope than the original search, i.e., by also including non-English papers, and papers with smaller data samples opening the repository for qualitative research. The initial aim of 200 papers was exceeded after inviting the EDMO research community to provide input (see Walter et al., 2022, for a full description of the process), i.e., EDMO Hubs, advisory board members and researchers at EUI. To secure that all contributions lived up to the criteria for relevance defined prior to the literature search, a codebook was crafted. This complimentary approach resulted in the identification of 152 new entries to the repository, resulting in a final repository of 245 academic papers that can be accessed [here](#).

Overall, the final repository shows a good coverage of EU member states, both by researcher affiliation and regional interest of the studies. The repository also shows that disinformation is a question that interests researchers across academic fields, however, with a special emphasis on Communication and Media studies, Computer Science, Information Studies, and Social Science (see Walter et al., 2022, for a description of the results).

#### *2.4 IV.D.D: EDMO Task Force on Ukraine and Preparation of a Research Paper*

It is vital to study the influence of disinformation during crisis such as the current war in Ukraine, as disinformation can alter the perception of events, and confuse audiences (Lemke & Habegger, 2022). Thus, in response to the Russian/Ukrainian war, Task IV.D.D changed from the establishment of an additional repository of articles focused on policy and other content, to instead address remaining challenges to academic research in times of crisis. Specifically, the deliverable specifications were changed to include active participation in the EDMO Task Force on Disinformation and the War in Ukraine, and preparation of an academic paper that addresses a research question raised in the Task Force.

##### *2.4.1. Task Force on disinformation and the war in Ukraine*

Anja Bechmann, Professor at Aarhus University, and director of DATALAB participated in the Task Force on disinformation and the war in Ukraine. The Task Force was established on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, in response to the Russian/Ukrainian war with 18 members from 10 countries. In June, the Task Force published ten recommendations for stakeholders such as policy makers, technology companies,

newsrooms, and civil society based on discussions and research. The recommendations are available [here](#).

#### *2.4.2. Preparation of academic paper on war-relevant topic*

As with the infodemic in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian/Ukrainian war has prompted questionable information and strategic disinformation which can influence public opinion. To shed light on digital disinformation during the war, the research team at DATALAB is working on an academic paper based on a question raised in the Task Force. The paper is an empirical case study across several European member states.

#### *2.5. Additional work*

Besides the tasks described in the Task IV work package, DATALAB at Aarhus University has also carried out additional work: hosting a post-conference to the ECREA conference in Aarhus, and supporting the establishment of research access to the Truly Media platform.

##### *2.5.1. Post-Conference on Digital Media and Information Disorder*

In connection to the 9<sup>th</sup> ECREA conference that was held in Aarhus, DATALAB arranged a post-conference on: "Digital media and information disorders: Theorizing and investigating influence operations, impact and contextual factors", funded by EDMO, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 2022. The post-conference included speakers from around the world who presented theories and empirical studies on topics related to information disorder, for instance, fact-checking disinformation during the Russian/Ukrainian war. In this way, the post-conference offered an opportunity for researchers to meet, share ideas, and plan future collaborations. First results of the work in progress at DATALAB were also presented at this post-conference to integrate feedback as early as possible.

##### *2.5.2. Support the establishment of research access to Truly Media*

Finally, DATALAB has provided additional help with the establishment of a research platform on TrulyMedia, that will bring closer the EDMO research community. To adjust the platform to meet researchers' needs, DATALAB has provided ATC with



feedback on the current platform, for instance the need for a download option in a csv-format, and technical documentation for the algorithmic analysis. As a first step to secure the integrity and authenticity of the research community, DATALAB has formulated a set of admission criteria covering, e.g., the authenticity of the research institution, expertise in digital disinformation in the EU, and conflicting interests. Secondly, eligible academic experts in the field of digital disinformation studies in the EU context have been identified and encouraged to function as evaluators of incoming applications. A similar process was undertaken prior to launching the Truly Media platform for fact-checkers. DATALAB has hosted an online meeting for the expert evaluation committee to introduce the task and collect inputs to the admission criteria. The research platform will open by the end of the first project period of EDMO to be developed further in the next project phase.

### **3.0 Relevant academic research**

This section aims to offer a brief overview of recent research on digital disinformation in the EU. With the current war between Russia and Ukraine, a body of articles published in 2022 focuses on various aspects of disinformation crossing Russian borders, especially in the Baltics and Ukraine. Given that academic publications require time for data collection, analysis, and peer-review, it is expectable that we have not yet seen the peak in research on the topic. The method behind the search corresponds to the one used to establish the initial repository of scientific literature, described in subsection 2.1, and adding the keywords 'Russia', 'Baltics', and 'Ukraine'.

#### *3.1 Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltics*

According to Lemke & Habegger (2022) strategic digital disinformation interferes with existing communication communities on digital media. Here, disinformation is understood as: “the strategic blending of true and false information to influence the perception of a target audience” (p. 4). With the war in Ukraine, a topic of discussion has been the influence of persisting disinformation on public opinion. To understand how states use social media platforms to disrupt domestic politics in foreign states, Lemke & Habegger (2022) have developed a theoretical framework based on social network theory. The authors argue that social media has changed how Russia and other governments disrupt domestic policies in foreign states: “armies of sympathetic

social media users, human trolls, and automated and fake accounts target the existing network cliques to disseminate disinformation worldwide” (Lemke & Habegger, 2022, p. 2). State-sponsored media outlets such as RT and Sputnik play a key role in this process by mimicking the national language, culture, and conversational style of the targeted state. This strategic ‘tool’ may be amplified in times of crisis and global events. Further, disinformation exploits social problems in the targeted foreign states (Yablokov, 2022), this is also the case in Morkūnas (2022) study of Russian disinformation in the Baltics.

Especially the Baltics experience strategic disinformation campaigns from Russia (Morkūnas, 2022), targeted for instance at undermining the authority of national governments, threaten with military actions, and modulate nihilism. Thus, Morkūnas (2022) investigated whether Russian disinformation is effective in the Baltics. The author’s survey study with Lithuanian participants suggests that the influence of Russian disinformation harms economic growth, lowers trust in governments, and vaccination compliance (Morkūnas, 2022).

Similarly, Boucher et al. (2022) investigated the effect of Russian influence operations on Canadian social media discussions in a policy brief. The researchers identified two large Twitter communities that spread pro-Russian narratives in a sample of 6,2 million tweets; one community informed by sources in the US and one influenced by Russian sources. Common for these pro-Russian narratives are that the Russian invasion in Ukraine is justified by NATO’s expansionism, Ukrainian fascists, and that liberal democracies, media, and other institutions cannot be trusted. Even with our focus on the EU, Russian influence in Canada is an interesting case study, as Canada has also supported sanctions against Russia in response to Russian military aggression toward Ukraine. As the EU is also sanctioning Russia, it is possible that similar characteristics can be identified for Russian influence operations within the EU. However, this would of course have to be empirically tested.

Further, focusing on a French case study, Lemke & Habegger (2022) investigated the interference of the Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik in the Twitter discussion of #MacronLeaks, a hashtag that trended in the 48 hours up to the 2017 French Presidential election. The tweets using the hashtag claimed that information had been leaked allegedly revealing that Macron was involved in corruption. The study illustrates

how disinformation sources can infiltrate communication communities in a foreign country and escalate the influence in times of election and other important events. The data implies that RT and Sputnik either invented the #MacronLeaks-hashtag or considerably amplified its reach to undermine trust in democratic institutions in France. Further, in a German, English and French language dataset, the study found reoccurring main messages of Russian disinformation, that are characterized as right-wing populist, Islamophobic, and Eurosceptic.

This effort to create divides has also been noted in a recent cross-national study (Toepfl et al., 2022) of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in five countries targeted by Russia's foreign communication. Especially the Belarusian, German, and Russian contexts were exposed to conspiratorial content from Russian websites. The analysis showed that Russian conspiracy narratives aim at creating cross-national divide, by blaming agents outside the national context for plotting the pandemic, mainly China. Russian elites exclusively hinted at US plotters. Interestingly, the study showed that in all countries, coverage from mass media is often responsible for making conspiracy theories appear in search results on Google.

In another study focused on Russian interference with COVID-19 information, Mogoş et al. (2022) studied the framing of anti-COVID-19 vaccine narratives and news-values on the website ro.sputnik.md., a Romanian version of the Russian media outlet Sputnik, owned by the Russian government. In line with the previous studies, the researchers found pro-Russian framing of COVID-19 vaccine related news, such as stories highlighting the superiority of the Russian Sputnik V Vaccine, negative coverage of EU authorized vaccines, and claims that the EU and the Romanian governments are struggling.

Held together, these studies suggest that Russian disinformation is indeed influential both in- and outside the EU. Furthermore, the attempt to lower trust in local governments and other democratic institutions is recurrent. For the Baltics specifically, the persistent escalation of conflict in digital narratives seem to effectively influence the economy (Morkūnas, 2022), as people, for example, are more reluctant to spend money in times of crisis. Finally, an additional conclusion to draw from this overview of recent academic work, is that no studies were found on the topic of Ukrainian disinformation, which could be a focal point for future research.

## **4.0 Conclusion**

Throughout the first project period of EDMO, Task IV.D has aimed at providing support and coordination for academic research. The finalized work on this task has resulted in a repository of relevant scientific research where different stakeholders can gain an overview, a mapping of academic research institutions and organizations, as well as other activities aimed at strengthening the research community. While these efforts have resulted in publicly available resources for researchers, the current war in Ukraine highlights yet again the need to continue working on improving the conditions for academic research on digital disinformation. Research can help with countering disinformation, characterizing, and understanding the effect of the narratives, as well as informing policy makers, fact-checkers, news media, and other stakeholders.

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