

Democratic Values in the Digital Age (DVDA)

Series Report

December 21, 2022

Partners University College Dublin Centre for Digital Policy, GLOBSEC, and Central European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO)

Media Partner Euractiv

With the support of Microsoft

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Introduction

Democracy is under pressure globally. Recent events in Europe have confirmed this in the most brutal manner possible. Meanwhile, technology is widely perceived as having both positive and negative impacts on democracy. The time is ripe to build democratic resilience and ensure that technology helps protect and promote democratic institutions and values rather than undermine them.

The European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) has been put forward by the European Commission to tackle threats to democratic processes and norms within Europe. Technology companies must do their part, including by engaging with the Commission and member state governments in developing and implementing the legislative workstreams that are resulting from the EDAP. But industry must also proactively reflect on its roles and obligations to democratic societies above and beyond the letter of the law. Thus, engagement between all actors is essential, be they from industry, government, European institution, NGO, or civil society. With this in mind, the *Democratic Values in the Digital Age* workshops sought to bring together such actors and to further discourse surrounding these important issues. This report is an overview of the series, as well as a collection of key observations and outcomes.

What is the DVDA Workshop Series?

The *Democratic Values in the Digital Age* initiative is a cross-European series of discussions bringing together civil society, NGO, academic, think tank, legislative and technology actors to reflect on the direction of European democracy and the role for tech and the private sector in preserving and advancing democratic norms, using the 2020 EDAP as a structural thematic guide for conversation.

Series Overview

The DVDA series consisted of 5 events. First, an opening discussion (10 October 2022) featured several high-level panellists which set the scene concerning democracy in Europe. Next, three workshops were held. Each workshop was organized, both logistically and substantively by one media partner.

Workshop	Partner	Date	Themes Discussed
Strengthening Media Freedom and Pluralism	University College Dublin Centre for Digital Policy	28 September, 2022	Media freedom and media pluralism are essential to our democracies and are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) provides guidance for strengthening these freedoms in key areas. However, our ability and ambition to manage and promote these freedoms must consider challenges created by the management of social life through industry media monopolies. What new obligations should exist as a result of the EDAP and what state regulatory frameworks, and what must industry do to achieve EDAP aims?
Countering disinformation: Role of Global Tech companies	GLOBSEC	8 November, 2022	During this workshop, GLOBSEC leads conversations on questions including: what is the role of Global Tech as set up in DSA? Is this role sufficient?

to achieve goals set in EDAP			What would need Global Tech companies to do more to achieve goals envisaged in EDAP?
Democracy and resilience in the era of European crises	Central European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO)	22 November, 2022	This workshop brings together a series of renowned experts who will tackle these issues and the key enabling platforms – public as well as private. The key issues that will be addressed include fighting disinformation, the role of regulation, education/health/resilience nexus, and the significance of democratic cornerstones such as elections.

Finally, a closing ceremony was held on December 14th, where observations and conclusions were presented to a high-level panel.

The workshop series' substantive direction was determined by the coalition of the three key partners in cooperation with Euractiv, the media partner. Microsoft participated as a sponsor for the event series.

Background: European Approaches to Democracy and Technology

As in other aspects of technological change, the EU is looking at ways of regulating the technology space as it affects democratic norms and processes in Europe. The EU has made commitments to address these under the broad framework of the December 2020 European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), as well as hinting at an upcoming "Defense of Democracy" package during the September 2022 State of the Union address.

The European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP)

Released in December 2020, the EDAP responds to concerns surrounding European democracy.¹ Of particular focus is news and media, as well as digital platforms and technologies. The EDAP contains several calls for action for the EU throughout the coming years, including calls for new legislation, revisions to existing legislation, and new public consultations.

The EDAP has three pillars of focus:

EDAP Pillar 1	EDAP Pillar 2	EDAP Pillar 3
Protecting Election Integrity and Promoting Democratic Participation	Strengthening Media Freedom and Pluralism	Countering Disinformation
Includes calls for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency of political advertising and communication, 	Includes calls for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety of journalists, • Fighting abusive use of strategic lawsuits against public participation, 	Includes calls for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving EU and Member state capacity to counter disinformation,

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer rules on the financing of European political parties, • Strengthened cooperation in the EU to ensure free and fair elections, • Promoting democratic engagement and active participation beyond elections. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closer cooperation to develop and implement professional standards, • Additional measures to support media pluralism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More obligations and accountability for online platforms, • Empowering citizens to make informed decisions.
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Table 1: EDAP Pillars

Though it has been only two years since the EDAP was released, numerous specific actions have already been put into action under its rubric. As the European Partnership for Democracy wrote in Jan. 2022, "...out of the 30 action points it set out for itself, the Commission has completed 13 and made progress on 11."² Furthermore, one of the basic strengths of the EDAP is the streamlined and concise organization of issues affecting European democracy into the three definitive pillars. Moreover, 2023 promises still more emphasis on the EDAP, as the Commission has committed to reviewing its implementation in preparation for the 2024 elections.

Defense against Democracy Package

During the 2022 State of the European Union speech, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a "Defence of Democracy Package", which will counter foreign interference in the EU. The 'pact' would aim to "shield our democracy from malign interference", and "bring covert foreign influence and shady funding to light".³

Workshop 1: Strengthening Media Freedom and Pluralism

Organized and hosted by University College Dublin - Centre for Digital Policy

September 28, 2022

Media freedom and media pluralism are essential to our democracies and are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The 2020 European Democracy Action Plan provides guidance for strengthening these freedoms in key areas. However, our ability and ambition to manage and promote these freedoms must consider challenges created by the management of social life through industry media monopolies. The UCD Centre for Digital Policy led participants in considering what new obligations should exist as a result of the EDAP and what state regulatory frameworks and industry must do to achieve EDAP aims.

UCD Centre FOR Digital Policy Co-Director for Digital Policy Elizabeth Farries opened the 28 Sept workshop, discussing why Media Freedoms and Pluralism are important. She observed EDAP's following points:

"Free and pluralistic media are key to hold power to account and to help people make informed decisions. By providing the public with reliable information, independent media play an important role in the fight against disinformation and the manipulation of democratic debate."

² <https://epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/edap-assessment-of-implementation-epd-january-2022.pdf#:~:text=Reviewing%20progress%20on%20the%20EDAP%20Assessing%20one%20year,has%20completed%2013%20and%20made%20progress%20on%2011.>

³ https://state-of-the-union.ec.europa.eu/state-union-2022_en

Assistant Professor Farries observed per EDAP that the digital age has challenged these freedoms in emergent, novel, and ongoing ways and it sometimes feels like there can be more challenges than solutions.

“Attacks, abuses of defamation laws and other forms of intimidation and pressure, which, are damaging the environment in which journalists work. The media sector also faces the challenges of digital transformation and their new role of platforms as gatekeepers for online news distribution. There have been new violations of media freedom, sometimes in the name of fighting online disinformation.”

In opening the workshop, Elizabeth applauded the many experts working on solutions from diverse backgrounds including law, computer science, social science, human rights, industry, and civil service and civil society organisations.

Opening Session - Fireside Chat on EDAP Principles

Speakers

- **Celene Craig**, Chief Executive, Broadcasting Authority Ireland (BAI).
- **Brendan Howlin**, Irish Labour Party Politician and former *Teachta Dála*.
- **Hon. Barry Andrews**, Member of European Parliament.

Actions and Gaps

This opening session gave an introduction to the media space, both in Ireland and abroad. Impartiality and objectivity were noted to be important principles that underpin media plurality. Barry Andrews (MEP) noted what he described as a democratic recession: democratic backsliding across the globe including within the EU puts the issue of media freedoms and pluralism at front and centre. Today, many see a lack of checks and balances, allowing the erosion of democracy in a gradual and imperceptible way.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- **Observation:** Traditionally, plurality has looked to market regulation; however, multipronged approaches in digital spaces are required.
- **Observation:** The European Commission adopted in September a *European Media Freedom Act*, a novel set of rules to protect media plurality and independence in the EU. The proposal falls under the EDAP. It will be an important piece of legislation, developing areas that will be essential for the forthcoming work of the Media Commission in Ireland.
- **Observation:** The EDAP recommendation to protect journalists and civil society against SLAPPs is welcome. The EDAP and the subsequent and forthcoming Media freedom Act is a regulation that will have direct effect in managing these issues.

Session I - Operationalising goals for media freedoms and pluralism

Speakers

- **Stephanie Costello**, PhD Candidate, School of Media TU Dublin (Moderator)
- **Chiara Sighele**, Projects Director for Osservatorio Balcani & Caucaso.
- **Lois Kapilla**, Editor in Chief and general assignment reporter, the Dublin Inquirer.
- **Professor Colin Scott**, Vice President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, UCD.

Actions and Gaps

This session introduced discrete issues identified in EDAP in relation to media pluralism and freedoms: journalist safety, fighting abusive SLAPPS, cooperative professional standards development, and measures to support pluralism. Lois Kapila's perspective at a local independent newspaper helped contextualize many of the challenges faced by journalists in today's environment. The session finished with an examination of the current regulatory approaches in the EU in this area.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- **Observation:** Journalists are constantly under threat. We need to address surveillance and media capture in an approach that prioritises privacy by design, strong end-to-end encryption, and personal data protections.
- **Observation:** While the EDAP's finding was that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to major advertising losses, hitting in particular small and local media, this didn't impact the Dublin Inquirer (which survived off a vibrant paid subscription model). But subscriber models don't provide the budget necessary for small independent press, especially when it comes to threats like SLAPPS. Thus, barring interventions outlined in EDAP and elsewhere, SLAPPS will represent a significant impediment to journalistic content in independent media. These can often be "existential threats" to independent news.
- **Observation.** There will be a need for regulatory coherence given the number of forthcoming domestic and EU regulations, the Media Freedom Act, the AI act, the DSA amongst them. Professor Scott spots at least 12 regulatory actions in EU proposals.
- **Recommendation.** Within many EU legislative files, the terms of "media pluralism" and "pluralism" are commonplace. We need to clarify the meaning of pluralism when seeking regulatory interventions. Pluralism has many meanings in media spaces, including diversity of ownership; of content, impartiality and programming.

Session II - Platforming social life: The implications of commercialized media for freedoms and power

Speakers

- **Professor Eugenia Siapera**, Professor of Information and Communication Studies and head of the ICS School at University College Dublin (Moderator).
- **Dr. Tanya Lokot**, Associate Professor in Digital Media and Society at the School of Communications, Dublin City University.
- **Mark Little**, CEO and co-founder of Kinzen.
- **Dr. Harry Browne**, Senior Lecturer School of Media, TU Dublin.

Actions and Gaps

In this final session, Professor Eugenia Siapera proposed that the panel unpack the symbiotic relationship between journalism, news and platforms, probing tensions and contradictions so that we can identify how platforms can best support media freedom. This discussion was complemented by a wide variety of practical experiences with the subject matter, from newsrooms to the classroom.

Key takeaways and recommendations

- **Observation:** We see trends where threats to online expression move beyond the level of individuals to systems. Media systems that are heavily dependent on platforms and their business models become easily subverted and manipulated.

- **Observation:** We can see three waves of digital transformation in digital media and democracy. 1st wave: Hashtag activism sparked uprisings in a new chapter for democracy. The 2nd wave saw algorithmic content interventions. The 3rd wave stoked panic about establishment tech interventions.
- **Observation.** Optimisms that new online media structures would overturn old power structures have waned but not disappeared. However, mis-directions like countering disinformation, distracts from the central concern: the business models of platforms, which have inherent incentives leading to phenomena like polarization.

Workshop 2: Countering disinformation: Role of Global Tech companies to achieve goals set in EDAP

Organized and hosted by GLOBSEC

November 8, 2022

Democracies are targets of influence operations and foreign malign interferences. These erode trust in democratic processes and institutions, including media, put elections at risk, prevent citizens from making informed decisions and impair the freedom of expression.

The workshop organised by GLOBSEC focused on the third pillar of EDAP, i.e. countering disinformation and the role of big social media platforms with a special focus on the war in Ukraine. It was a closed-door workshop and the discussion during the workshop took place under Chatham House rules.

Speakers:

- **Tjade Stroband**, Director, European Government Affairs, Microsoft (in person)
- **Marcin Olender**, Public Policy and Government Relations Manager Central and Eastern Europe at Google (online)
- **Carme Colomina**, Research Fellow at Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) and associate professor at the College of Europe in Bruges (in person)
- **Tommaso Canetta**, Deputy Director, Pagella Politica (online)
- **Carlos Hernández-Echevarría**, Head of Public Policy & Institutional Development at Maldita.es (online)

Actions and Gaps

Shortly following the renewed invasion of Russia in Ukraine, both Microsoft and other large technology companies took steps to assist the Ukrainian government, including the transfer of Ukrainian government data to cloud servers, enabling the work of the government to continue while being under heavy attack, but virtually and physically. Several hours before the launch of military attacks on February 24, a new round of offensive and destructive cyberattacks directed against Ukraine's digital infrastructure was detected. Both, Microsoft and Google advised the Ukrainian government about the situation and provided technical advice on steps to prevent the malware's success. Subsequently, steps were taken to reduce the spread of the Kremlin's war propaganda in accordance with the EU's decision on the blocking of any state-sponsored RT and Sputnik content, including the removal of their respective applications from online stores. Besides blocking channels of RT and Sputnik, Google's YouTube removed content promoting Russian propaganda, deleting hundreds of channels and

thousands of videos that violated its misinformation policies. YouTube remains accessible in Russia for those who seek factual and independent information, i.e. information not from or filtered by the Russian government. Google's Jigsaw team also implemented a pre-bunking campaign raising awareness on disinformation and conspiratorial thinking directed at specific target groups in several countries of Central Europe and is exploring expanding those activities.

Gaps

- Representatives of civil society emphasized that removal of content should be the last resort. They also noted that it is neither possible nor desirable to fact-check an opinion. The work of fact-checkers starts when opinions are accompanied by false news, especially when they are amplified online.
- Furthermore, the effectiveness and potentially harmful effects of the actions that continue to be taken by platforms have to be weighed. For example, when there is a content removed from the internet without a stated reason for the removal, it may have an adverse effect on users looking for it.
- The role of AI is projected to be crucial in the future. However, now, the sole AI mechanisms tasked to review flagged content are not sufficient. Automatic review does not work sufficiently well, and there is a lot of flagged content undealt with especially in small countries and non-mainstream languages.
- Improvement has to be done when it comes to access to data sharing by platforms, which is one of the actions that platforms committed to by signing the 2022 Code on Practice of Disinformation.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- Global Tech companies play a crucial role during the war in Ukraine and information operations. Their actions at the outset of the invasion of Ukraine are recognised as indispensable.
- Global Tech should continue nourishing cooperation with different stakeholders, such as fact-checkers, civil society organisations and academia. The newly created Permanent Task Force within the Code of Practice on Disinformation is a first-of-its-kind platform of cooperation between these different stakeholders and should be utilised to the maximum extent.
- Global Tech companies should empower fact-checking organisations and civil society organisations by systematically providing machine-readable data with which these organisations can work, analyse the impact of steps taken and issue recommendations.
- Global Tech companies should use their resources to employ an adequate number of people for content moderation commensurate to the disinformation related risk that their services pose, and not rely only on AI in that matter, which is not ready for that just, yet. They should explain to users when taking the content down not to foster resentment over the justifiable takedowns.
- Enhanced cooperation is crucial on all levels among all stakeholders in protecting information spaces of countries against malign content, including the Kremlin's war propaganda or hate speech. In particular, there should be more sharing of information between EU member states. For example, fact-checkers have a national business model. At the moment, with the creation of EDMO, the national business models is slowly changing and there are first signs of benefits of new cooperation. There should be also better cooperation between the countries also outside of the EU, as well as cross-sectoral cooperation among fact-checkers, academics, and researchers.

Workshop 3: Democracy and resilience in the era of European crises

Organized and hosted by Central European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO)

November 22, 2022

Liberal democratic values have never been put under a more significant systemic series of tests. Domestic populism and destabilization campaigns, arbitrarily introduced and inconsistently legitimized emergency states, and rising revisionism of great powers all point to one thing – namely the need to cultivate academic discourse on democracy and resilience. That is all the more true within the European context, with the European Union trying to assert its significance, legitimacy, identity, and common future. Citizens should be able to make electoral choices in a public space where different views can be expressed freely. Free media, academia and civil society should be able to play their role in stimulating open debate, free from malign interference, either foreign or domestic.

The workshop organised by CEDMO put a spotlight on several challenges to democracies through distortion of the information environment. The first pillar of EDAP focuses on promoting free and fair elections. The necessary precondition for such elections is an informed electorate and information environment free from malign foreign interference, where politicians are given a fair chance to compete in a marketplace of ideas. A healthy information environment is also conducive to maintaining trust in institutions and the electoral process itself.

Speakers

- **Kateřina Anna Magnna**, Government Affairs Representative, Microsoft.
- **Alžběta Solarczyk Krausová**, legal scholar at the Institute of State and Law of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Head of Regulatory Unit at CEDMO.
- **Ivana Karásková**, China expert at China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe CHOICE and CEDMO.
- **Luboř Kukliř**, former Chair of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities and former Chair of the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services.
- **Michal Kormaňák**, Public Affairs Director, Ipsos Czech Republic.
- **Jakub Gregor**, Institute of Biostatistics and Analyses, Masaryk University.
- **Anzhelika Solovyeva**, Researcher at the Department of Security Studies, Charles University, and CEDMO (Moderator).

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- Despite bans on some Russian media, the Russian narrative about Ukraine has spread through channels used by China. China's "no limits partnership" with Russia includes convergence of narratives in state and social media.
- China is increasingly outsourcing content production and sharing to local influencers, media, and social media groups.
- Twitter has been flagging state-affiliated accounts. This should be adopted more widely across both traditional media and social media platforms.
- More regulation can lead to more distrust of the government on the part of the public. There must be more solutions than just laws, raising awareness about certain issues is also important.

- Rules for making disinformation less visible need to be carefully drafted in order to provide sufficient protection to the freedom of expression and not to become a tool for censorship.
- Any legal action aimed at removing certain (dis)information should be examined and properly justified within a sufficiently long time without losing efficiency.
- The system for taking down disinformation should contain checks and balances in order to minimise potential misuse of power. Authors of such disinformation should have the right to appeal.
- Disinformation regulation also needs to take into account the specific position of technological companies that have the power to efficiently enforce decisions and, thus, contribute to protecting democratic society.
- The proposed EU Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising needs to create an effective transparency framework, which would include dedicated repositories of political advertising for the largest platforms – parallel to general advertising repositories required now by the Digital Services Act.

Conclusions

To wrap up the workshop series, each partner has selected a key recommendation which will be highlighted. These recommendations will seek to inspire the debate surrounding digital technology and democratic values moving forward.

Recommendation 1

Presented by UCD Dublin.

- **Contemporary news media are locked in a symbiotic although at times antagonistic relationship with the state and digital platforms:** A healthy public sphere requires that states clarify and sharpen the meaning of media freedom and pluralism, demarcating its contours and offering protections from state over-reach; and that platforms support news media and journalism's important social and political functions, even if on occasion this may interfere with their business models and bottom lines.

Recommendation 2

Presented by GLOBSEC.

- **Global Tech companies should continue deepening cooperation on all levels:** Global Tech companies should continue developing a close working relationship with all stakeholders, especially with fact-checkers, researchers, and civil society organisations, and provide them with data. Global Tech companies need to communicate and cooperate with each other more efficiently regarding illegal and harmful false and/or misleading content that is being spread across various social media platforms. Once such content has been identified by trusted flaggers on one platform, corresponding actions should in principle be taken on other platforms. Global Tech companies should establish dedicated teams with native speakers serving as a point of contact for respective countries.

Recommendation 3

Presented by CEDMO.

- **The proposed EU Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising needs to create an effective transparency framework, which would**

include dedicated repositories of political advertising for the largest platforms – parallel to general advertising repositories required now by the Digital Services Act:

Act: With everything else, political communication, too, has moved to digital and eagerly embraced its affordability. EU institutions reacted to this by adopting the European Democracy Action Plan, which laid down, among other things, a strategy to limit the negative effects these changes brought. One of the first deliverables is the proposal for the Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising. It is essential that this Regulation creates an effective transparency framework, which would include dedicated repositories of political advertising for the largest platforms – parallel to general advertising repositories required now by the Digital Services Act. And equally important is to set up an effective accountability structure, which would require the strengthening of the sanctioning system currently present in the proposal.