

EAVI'S RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY ACTION PLAN

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FEEDBACK

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EAVI's response to the European Democracy Action Plan – Protecting European democracy from interference and manipulation

Celebrating 15 years addressing issues of media literacy and citizenship, the European Association for Viewers Interests is the non-profit organisation that has worked the longest on media literacy and fully informed and engaged citizenship at EU level. EAVI is active in research, policy and practice.

EAVI welcomes the efforts of the European Commission intended to contribute to shape a context more apt to protect our democracies. EAVI's logo quotes 'media literacy *for* citizenship' stressing the need for people to acquire adequate media-related skills as a precondition for freely and actively participating in civic and political life. First among them is the need to develop awareness of this precondition for fully informed and engaged citizenship.

Context

Upon revision of the current EC process, EAVI's understanding is that it is unnecessary here to reinforce further the need for urgently implementing measures in that direction. Indeed, it is already quite late. Prominent authors and the public debate already talk about living in a post- truth or post-democracy era. We therefore take this opportunity to underline only a few specific points.

On Disinformation

EAVI was involved in various discussions regarding disinformation and also Covid-19. Please refer to our previous opinions on the matter¹. Briefly, we recall that increased media literacy can make a substantial contribution toward solving the problem of disinformation, but in order to have a significant impact it cannot just be considered an important part of an overall strategy, it is and must be fundamental to it. Failing to recognise evidence-based research and support this work fully disregards how to address the issue properly, including in the long term. Furthermore, attempting to solve current problems, policy recommendations are slow in keeping pace. With technology, business models, commercial and political interests in a constant state of flux we recommend keeping in mind the future scenario we will soon have to deal with.

¹ Some EAVI Studies and Opinions <https://eavi.eu/research/>

On Election integrity, media freedom and media pluralism

Overall the ability of people to form a coherent understanding of the world and consequently in making their participation in public life is becoming an impossible task. How can citizens participate responsibly in a democratic society if they cannot navigate news and make informed decisions? How is democracy to survive under these conditions? Even well before Covid-19 it was increasingly difficult for people to distinguish facts from opinions, information from blaring propaganda.

Concretely, we suggest discussions should be underpinned by the right of people to be correctly informed: Everyone should be able to access authoritative quality information, regularly and easily. In other words, it is a right to transparency. It is not rhetorical. It may very well be a right that exists already, a human right which has often been overlooked.

Back in 1948, the United Nations defined a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations setting out in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’.

This is often referred to as the right to express our opinions freely, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The declaration has contributed to a new path for peace and it certainly represents an essential human right. Seventy years of advances in technology and communication have changed the world. The advent of artificial intelligence promises even more dramatic changes to take place in the next decade, specifically in the way people will communicate and receive information.

Measures to be deployed should therefore be inspired by an enlarged scope of the interpretation of Article 19 to emphasise what is, in fact, already contained therein: the right of people to receive correct information and to be exposed to a plurality of sources, not just to a mainstream flow of polluted information in the interest of a few.

This human right pertains not just to the freedom of the messenger to speak up but also that of the recipient not to be overwhelmed by distracting empty information. This surely must also have been the intention behind the drafting of Article-19 at the time. In any case we think that if it would be drafted nowadays, it would take the capacity of properly receiving information into a clearer consideration.

Again, it is a very concrete strategic step. For the EC to follow this guiding principle would allow subsequent specific measures implemented to become much clearer. Placing recipients and citizens’ interests back into the debate would shift perspectives and represent a strategic opportunity for the EU to regain their citizens’ trust.

We recommend

- 1- to invite reflections about the right of people to receive information as per Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- 2- to emphasise the word transparency not be limited to sponsored content but encompassing stakeholders' accountability and opportunities for research;
- 3- to keep ordinary people's needs and interests in mind as a guiding principle.

On Media literacy

We resoundingly welcome the principle expressed in many parts of the document to promote media literacy actions and their funding, whether through direct funding of projects or support for civil society organisations. Having said this, concrete budget allocations will necessarily reveal the genuine intention of the EC to support its citizens and their competences. Is there a better investment the EC can make when we talk about democracy?

While the Plan acknowledges a role for media literacy, it does not go far enough, prioritising mainly defensive and reactive measures. On the subject of democracy, concerning its integrity and vitality, it downplays the primary importance of each citizen's capacity to foster a resilient info-ecosystem that is both respectful of freedom of expression and the role of the respective citizens who are the inhabitants of this environment (see previous point) who, with adequate media literacy, are perfectly capable, for instance, of detecting interferences in elections.

A robust media literate society is fundamental to this coordinated approach and lays the groundwork for enabling Member States and international partners to cooperate more effectively using information sharing networks and strategic communications campaigns.

We recommend

- 1- an ample concept of media literacy to apply. This includes the many topics at stake (surveillance, privacy, micro targeting, profiling, etc.), the competences to be acquired (access, use, evaluating, participation) and moreover the values, attitudes and knowledge related to those competences;
- 2- to refer to existing experience, research and recommendations to inform further steps.

On financially supporting civil society

In EAVI's experience civil society has so far tried its level best to contribute to the debate. But this generosity should not be used as an alibi for institutions. Citizens interests are very much understated in media related debates. EAVI has often found itself punching above its weight against strong well-organised economic interests.

We recommend

- 1- for reinstituting operating grants as a crucial measure to ensure non- fragmented and uninterrupted activity. Failing to do so, fundraising activity would absorb the majority of energies of non-profit organisations, hence watering down any significant impact;
- 2- allocate significant financial resources and EC budget to civil society organisations to permit them to operate meaningfully toward the EC's stated mission.

For more information please contact us at eavi@eavi.eu