Workshop 'Countering Hybrid Threats While Protecting Digital Rights'

11 October 2024

Maastricht University, Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences,

Grote Gracht 90-92 D1.08 Meeting Room

Organisers: Mariëlle Wijermars and Valentina Golunova

Recent years have seen a drastic surge in foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Foreign adversaries increasingly target European states by disseminating false or misleading information and suppressing important facts and narratives. As key information intermediaries, online platforms play an important role in both facilitating and countering foreign interference.

The EU is taking active measures to combat FIMI. Many recently adopted legal acts (including the Digital Services Act, the European Media Freedom Act, and the AI Act) prescribe mechanisms for curbing the spread of disinformation and interference in democratic processes. Many initiatives aimed at countering FIMI have also been undertaken by Member States. The Netherlands is one of the frontrunners in this field as it has adopted an innovative government-wide strategy for effectively tackling disinformation. Despite the strong need to protect the European information space from foreign interference, the effectiveness, legitimacy and long-term impact of some of the measures remain uncertain. The EU's sanctions against Russian news outlets, the growing criminalisation of disinformation in Member States, and the persistent 'over-blocking' practices of online platforms all pose substantial challenges to fundamental rights and democratic values. Democratic backsliding in multiple Member States, furthermore, raises the risk of the misuse of regulatory mechanisms for political objectives.

The workshop aims to take stock of the existing approaches to countering FIMI, with an emphasis on platform governance, and examine whether they strike a fair balance between responding adequately to hybrid attacks and safeguarding media freedom and the free exchange of information online.

Programme

12:00 – 12:30

Walk-in & coffee

12:30 – 12:45

Welcome and objectives of the project

12:45 – 13:15

'The Kremlin's Foreign Propaganda Network: Five Spotlights on Findings from the RUSINFORM-Project'

Speaker: Florian Toepfl (Chair of Political Communication with a Focus on Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Region, University of Passau)

13:15 – 13:45

Lunch (at workshop venue)

13:45 – 15:00

Panel 1: 'Countering Hybrid Threats through Platform Governance Mechanisms'

Discussant: Betto van Waarden (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University)

Speakers:
Sophie Vériter (Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Leiden University): *The Collective Securitisation of Disinformation and the EU's Ban of RT and Sputnik*

Jerry Spanakis (Department of Advanced Computing Sciences (DACS) and Maastricht Law+Tech Lab, Maastricht Univsity): *Insights from the Digital Services Act Transparency Database: Understanding Content Moderation on Online Platforms*

Daria Dergacheva (Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research (ZeMKI), University of Bremen): *Governing Russian Disinformation: very large social media platforms policies in the context of Russian invasion and war in Ukraine*

15:00 – 15:15

Coffee break

15:15 – 16:30

Panel 2: 'Legal Approaches to Countering Hybrid Threats'

Discussant: Marijn ten Thij (Department of Advanced Computing Sciences (DACS), Faculty of Science and Engineering, Maastricht University)

Speakers:

Judit Bayer (University of Münster, Budapest Business University of A.S.): *The interpretation of media freedom in the age of epistemic uncertainty*

Sarah Eskens (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): *The role of the European Media Freedom Act and Political Advertising Regulation in the EU's battle against FIMI*

Max van Drunen (Institute for Information Law (IViR), University of Amsterdam): *How the Political Advertising Regulation enables scrutiny of online political communication*

16:30 –16:45

Break

16:45 –17:00

Closing words by Mariëlle Wijermars

17:30 – 20:00

Dinner at Brandweerkantine (Capucijnenstraat 21)