

## **Opening Statement**

Presented to the  
Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

Prepared by  
Dr Eileen Culloty

Institute of Future Media, Democracy, and Society  
Dublin City University

February 2022



Thank you Chair and Members for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion on online disinformation and media literacy.

As you know, disinformation is not identified as a category of harmful online content in the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill. However, as previous witnesses have noted, there are provisions at EU level to address online disinformation. It will be addressed indirectly through the general framework of the Digital Services Act and directly through the EU's voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation. Moreover, the European Commission recently established a European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) with the explicit aim of coordinating and facilitating actions to counteract disinformation. These actions include factchecking, media literacy, research, and policy analysis.

Ireland is home to one of the eight regional hubs that will develop this work. The Ireland EDMO Hub is comprised of the DCU FuJo Institute, the University of Sheffield, TheJournal.ie, and Newswhip. A key aim of the EDMO hubs is to build capacity among the various stakeholders who are responding to disinformation at national and EU levels. However, it is important to note that the funding provided is limited relative to the needs of stakeholders and the expected remit of the hubs.

In terms of media literacy, the Ireland EDMO Hub will work closely with Media Literacy Ireland and its members to assess needs and develop resources. Yet, I would caution against a narrow view of media literacy as a "solution" to the disinformation problem. Increasing media literacy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for building societal resilience to disinformation. That is, there are other contributing factors to the disinformation problem beyond a lack of media literacy, information literacy, and digital skills. Moreover, the importance and value of these skills extend far beyond addressing disinformation. They are fundamentally entwined with issues of citizenship and inequality insofar as they influence people's capacity to lead full lives.

The Ireland EDMO Hub will also play an oversight role in the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation. This Code has been in operation since 2018. Ireland is one of the few countries to systematically assess the implementation of the Code through research conducted by the DCU FuJo Institute and commissioned by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. Our research identified major shortcomings in the information provided by digital platforms, which make it difficult to understand the nature of online disinformation and the effectiveness or otherwise of platform responses. Currently, the Code is being revised with the promise of better reporting structures and, potentially, sanctions for non-compliance. As such, we expect to work closely with the new Media Commission in assessing the future implementation of the revised Code.

In conclusion, I note that online disinformation is a complex and evolving problem. It is essential that online platforms provide researchers, regulators, and policymakers with the necessary data to understand the nature of the problem and to assess the effectiveness of proposed countermeasures. To date, this has not been the case. At the societal level, the increased emphasis on media literacy is welcome, but a rounded understanding of the media environment is needed including the importance of independent investigative journalism; the need for evidence-based research to inform policy; the need to respect fundamental rights such as freedom of expression; and the need to support civil society

stakeholders, especially those representing the interests of groups that are targeted by harmful disinformation campaigns.