Policy briefing: digital responsibility and the COVID-19 pandemic

Background:

- **Around the world, health workers put their lives at risk** to battle the COVID-19 virus whilst governments urge citizens to stay home.
- **An "infodemic" has struck Europe**, adding urgency to governments' work with digital companies to fight back against online misinformation[1].
- **As schools are closed and learning shifts online,** child safety organisations fear spike in online abuse[2].
- **The Internet Commission's first reporting cycle is well underway**, focussed on the policies and practices of organisations for the management of online content, conduct and contact[3].

Key take-aways:

- **Tech giants have deleted misinformation about COVID-19** from their networks, showing they can police as well as promote online life.
- **But there remains a risk that sensational,** dangerous and false information about COVID-19 continues to circulate online.
- **The lessons learned from this crisis should inform future behaviour in all areas of digital responsibility.**
- **Leading companies are collaborating through the Internet Commission**, to promote digital responsibility[4] and tackle this complex set of strategic, technological, and political challenges.

Trust crisis intensifies

As COVID-19 drives life online and engenders fear, stress and social isolation, the strengthening of online governance is more important than ever.

Despite the good intentions of individual companies and the direct intervention of governments or regulators, misinformation, abuse, hate speech, electoral interference or bullying still exist online. Yet the pandemic demonstrates that action is possible: tech giants are finally showing willingness finally to do more to police their platforms.[5].

To protect people from misinformation, Google is using a combination of advanced technology and human moderators to remove content from YouTube, Google Maps and its development and advertising platforms: "…we've taken down thousands of videos related to dangerous or misleading coronavirus information, and we continue to remove videos that promote medically unproven methods to prevent coronavirus in place of seeking medical treatment.[6]"

Balancing safety with freedom of expression is challenging: COVID-19 is testing the limits of governance systems across the board.

A lesson for the future

We know the underlying problems: the tension between interference and free speech, the market dynamics which reward sensational content, the speed of online reactions. But the willingness of companies in the current crisis to focus on firefighting points the way to a change in future behaviour. An emergency like the present inevitably forces us all to work to the same end. We need to continue to do so in future.

Digital co-operation and accountability

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that companies are capable of acting to police their own platforms, deleting misinformation that is obviously contrary to public interest. Such moves, more than anything, are driven by their willingness to act.

The UN Under-Secretary-General Fabrizio Hochschild Drummond has recognised the key role of corporate accountability in effective online governance: "It is now clear that digital cooperation is critical to sustainable development, and we need to convene the right expertise and experience to respond to the challenges. Companies must come together to demonstrate progress…"

Internet technologies are pervasive, diverse, borderless, fast-changing and complex. New harms can appear with depressing frequency. Neither

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[1] FT, 17th March 2020: "EU warns of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign on coronavirus" https://on.ft.com/2xWjOPq
[2] IWF: "Children may be at greater risk of grooming during coronavirus pandemic as IWF braces for spike in public reports" bit.ly/3bpykOl
[3] http://inetco.org/framework

[4] See, for example, https://bit.ly/2UpmaPy regarding definition of digital responsibility (German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection).
[5] Politico, 17th March 2020: "Silicon Valley is going all out to fight coronavirus. That's a risky move." https://politi.co/3bgxB1G
[6] Google, 15th March 2020: https://bit.ly/2UAadpo

legislation nor individual business can be expected to keep up.

The Internet Commission therefore advocates for flexible, responsive framework to evaluate how internet companies are managing their social impact. This to support and drive ethical business practice and digital responsibility at corporate board level and throughout business operations.

Crossing policy silos

The Internet Commission's 2019 Brussels roundtable in November 2019 brought contributions from GeSI, Arcep[7], CIPL[8], and Carnegie UK Trust[9], to explore and align across adjacent policy silos: sustainability, ethics and artificial intelligence (AI), data protection and the regulation of online content.

Even though digitalization will be a central part of the transformation of society to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goals, there are negative externalities[10]. The Internet Commission's accountability process is focused on how organisations are tackling issues such as illegal content, hate speech, cyberbullying and misinformation.

The mechanisms employed can involve automated and AI-based decision-making, the processing of sensitive and personal data, and the promotion and removal of online content.

Evaluation framework

As a response to the trust crisis which long predates COVID-19, the Internet Commission has been working with experts to advance digital responsibility through independent evaluation.

Our view: Companies must act on the negative consequences of digitalisation, but their processes for doing so should be subject to meaningful and independently informed oversight.

The Internet Commission is advancing digital responsibility through independent evaluation. It is a start-up non-profit, supported by visionary private and public institutions including Arm, LSE, Oracle and Wayra. Since early 2018 it has engaged widely with Internet companies, content moderation practitioners, academic experts, NGOs and regulators. It has developed and refined an evaluation framework to enable the independent benchmarking of organisational processes, to help them to demonstrate progress in tackling problems such as illegal content, hate speech, cyberbullying and misinformation. The Internet Commission is grateful to its sponsors, for their visionary collaboration.

THE INTERNET COMMISSION

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[7] "Creating a French framework to make social media platforms more accountable" https://bit.ly/2HmflGK

[8] "Organisational Accountability – Past, Present and Future" http://bit.ly/31BPbbl

[9] "Whose duty is it anyway? Answering some questions about a duty of care" http://bit.ly/2p4f1Y3

[10] See GeSI's visionary report on "Digital with Purpose: delivering a SMARTer2030" http://bit.ly/2MAs1Oh