Interview with Paula Gori
European Digital Media Observatory

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KENNEALLY: Across the European Union, fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and academic researchers are collaborating to fight online disinformation. Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

The European Digital Media Observatory, established in June 2020, hopes to counter fake news and other digital disinformation with facts and research. The EDMO plans to work with online platforms to gain access for researchers to relevant data. It will also provide materials to media literacy practitioners, teachers, and citizens to increase awareness about the dangers of disinformation and why it threatens the future of democratic societies.

Paula Gori is the secretary-general and project manager leader of EDMO. She joined the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute in 2017. She joins me now from Florence, Italy. *Ciao*, Paula. Welcome to the program.

GORI: Hi, Chris. Thank you very much for inviting me today.

KENNEALLY: Well, we are looking forward to learning about this new initiative, the European Digital Media Observatory, and we should learn a bit about the organizers, the sponsors for the EDMO. Who are they?

GORI: The EDMO, as you call it, the EDMO, as we call it, is composed of a consortium that is led by the European University Institute. You already mentioned the School of Transnational Governance. We also have the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom involved at the EUI. Other partners are the Athens Technology Center, Aarhus University, and Pagella Politica, which is an Italian fact-checker. We are an independent platform, and we are funded by the European Commission.

KENNEALLY: This is an ongoing project of the European Commission, because the commission has identified disinformation as one of the challenges in digital society.

GORI: Yes, indeed. And you may have heard about the strategy of the commission in the last years. For example, the whole discussion on disinformation was triggered in 2015 by the European Council that recognizes the threat of online disinformation campaigns. This is when the EU also established the East Strategic Communication Task Force.

Then, further action was taken, especially because in 2019, we had the EU elections and also a lot of presidential, national, and regional elections that were taking place in 2020. This is why the commission, for example, established a high-level group on fake news and online disinformation that issued a very important report based on five main pillars, which are transparency, media and information literacy, the need to empower users and journalists, diversity, and sustainability of the news ecosystem.

After that, the commission issued a communication on tackling online disinformation. Then, the self-regulatory tool, the famous Code of Practice on Disinformation, was actually signed by the private actors.

And by the end of 2018, the action plan on disinformation was published by the commission with, as you were saying, the aim of protecting the EU democratic system and combating disinformation, including, as I was mentioning, in the context of the upcoming elections at that time – the 2019 elections.

GORI: This action plan is really a coordinated response of the EU, and it is based on five main pillars, which are improving the capabilities of the EU institutions to detect, analyze, and expose disinformation, strengthening coordinated and joint responses, which is really key, mobilizing the private sector to tackle disinformation – you already mentioned some of those actions – and raising awareness and improving societal resilience. You mentioned media literacy before.

KENNEALLY: Well, Paula, if you call it EDMO, I'll call it EDMO, and we will call it that throughout this program. So it is now in its second phase, working towards creation of national and multinational digital media research hubs across Europe. What will these research hubs aim to do?

GORI: The national hubs are really key for EDMO. A number of projects will be selected right now in this second phase, and then in the coming years, the idea is to have national hubs or multinational hubs covering all member states in Europe. They have this role, if you want, to feed the EDMO central platform. In particular, they will detect, analyze, and disclose disinformation campaigns at national or multinational and EU level. They will analyze the disinformation campaigns, in fact, on society and democracy, especially in the countries they are active in. They will promote media literacy activities, which as you might know, are very often very related to the specific countries. And they will monitor online platform policy and the digital media ecosystem in cooperation with the national authorities.

KENNEALLY: Paula, how do you rate the information literacy levels across the European Union? Are some member states doing better than others? And with what kinds of approaches?

GORI: So as EDMO as such, we don't have this information so far, because we just started our work. Within the media and information literacy activities, our first step, actually, now consists of working on a report. The aim of this report is to clarify the problems that Europe faces in terms of media and information literacy in relation to combating this online disinformation, map what has been done so far, as many activities were done already, assert which are the policies and initiatives which are working and are not, and identify particular areas of concern. Once we have done that, then it will be actually easier to understand the best way to complement what is there, to add additional initiatives, and also to assess them.

We were talking about the national hubs before. They will help us in this work. And just to mention some questions, for example, our idea is to understand who is the target audience of the initiatives, what exactly they are informing them, which methodology is used, what is the impact that we want to have with these measures, and so on.

Once this work is done, we are aiming, actually, also at creating a repository that will actually collect the various initiatives at the member state level. And probably then we will be able to reply to your question.

KENNEALLY: In a way, it's what we call in the United States naming and shaming. You're going to try to identify who these sources are. Of course, disinformation doesn't just come out of the ground. It comes from very important sources. Those include social media. They include governments and political parties and politicians. Can you tell us about the situation as far as the dissemination – the distribution of disinformation in the EU?

GORI: Yeah. So first, probably you should be reminded that disinformation, as it is also first defined in the report of the high-level group I was mentioning, includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. I wanted to underline that, because I know that the American audience sometimes uses a different definition for that. So just wanted to mention it.

Secondly, I think we should make a distinction between the various elements. For example, who created the content? Who produced the content? Who distributes the content? Which tools are used? Which is the target audience? How the target audience receives the message – and so on. In order to understand the actors, the vectors, the tools, and the trends, actually research based on data is really key. This is why EDMO is in

contact, as you were mentioning, with the online platforms with the aim of establishing a framework to access their data – in full respect, of course, of data protection for research purposes.

And research is really key to understand – to go back to the agents, who they are and how they act. What has been seen so far is that when official actors are involved, the impact is greater, of course, because it is backed with more funding and sophisticated tools. Thanks to online platforms, we all know we have access to a variety of news as well as to a larger number of views, but we also know that they have changed the way that our citizens access and engage with the news. This is also a place where disinformation can be spread at incredible scale, speed, and precision.

Let me say that as humans, we have a tendency of staying in an environment we know and that confirms our beliefs. And the filter bubbling and echo chambers created around us on social media make us use social media even more, if you want. So in a way, we actually enjoy the flow in information that is easily accessible and that confirms our beliefs. This, as you can imagine, is fertile soil for disseminating disinformation.

On top of that, let's not forget that emotions are the main driver for sharing. Think, for example, of fear in the case of disinformation about vaccines, or anger and frustration in the case of political extremism. So as it was really, I think, easily but powerfully said in a 2007 report by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, without amplification, disinformation goes nowhere. This is why EDMO is now acting, in the sense that this confirms the need of a multidisciplinary research approach that includes legal, political, economical, but also neuroscience, for example, studies. To go back to your question, again, the answer will come from the access to those data.

KENNEALLY: Tell us about the most common types of disinformation in the European Union. Is it political, medical, social, financial, or all of those?

GORI: It's probably all of those. Of course, as I was mentioning before, the whole action in Europe to fight against disinformation was triggered by the need to preserve the democratic process and trust in institutions. So of course, the political disinformation also coming from third countries had an impact.

But think of, for example, the infodemic nowadays with COVID-19. We've seen a lot of disinformation on that as well. The same happens, for example, with climate change. But also on products, and this is also an issue for consumers. This is why, for example, the high-level group at that time also included representatives from consumer associations.

Then, there is the for-profit disinformation. Sometimes, the for-profit disinformation – so the economical, let's say, financial motivation – can be combined with the political one. For example, you can address populist disinformation, which if you enter the right echo chambers is very probably clicked a lot, but you just do it for financial reasons, not actually to have a political influence. So yes, they are all included – all the types that you were mentioning – and at European level, you are trying to tackle them all.

KENNEALLY: So, Paula Gori, this is a project that's been underway for quite some time – obviously, before the coronavirus pandemic arrived. It arrived in Italy with dramatic force just a year ago. How has the pandemic affected the work of EDMO? Has it been simply another category to watch, or has it made the research and the project work more difficult to do?

GORI: Yeah, so the interesting thing is that when the call for EDMO was launched by the commission, the pandemic wasn't there yet. But even when we started, actually, we were in the middle of the pandemic, because we started in June 2020. So as you can imagine, it affected immediately our work both, let's say, from an organizational point of view, as it affected all of us, but also on the specific case of disinformation.

I think it really acknowledged that there are cases of disinformation that are really, really dangerous for our citizens. In relation to the infodemic, for example, there were conspiracy theories. There was disinformation on health care. Illegal hate speech – for example, the pandemic affiliated through minorities. Consumer fraud – for example, people selling products saying that they were miraculous. Cybercrime, interference also by foreign actors. This had an impact on EDMO, because it really underlined the importance of the project and the urgency of this project.

KENNEALLY: Indeed it does. It's in a category by itself – disinformation around the pandemic. It's been called an infodemic as well as a pandemic.

GORI: Indeed. Indeed. Absolutely. And I think that the problem of disinformation was absolutely evident before, but during the pandemic, people felt it even more, because it was really affecting their lives. So it was easy to spread, because a hashtag – for example, #COVID19 – was really searchable, and people were really relying on social media – actually, or media, but we know that we all consume media on social media – to access information. We were also more vulnerable, because we were afraid of what was happening. And we were all staying at home, so we were consuming, actually, social media even more than before.

KENNEALLY: Paula Gori, secretary-general and project manager leader of the European Digital Media Observatory, thanks so much for joining me today on the program. *Grazie*.

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GORI: Thank you very much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to this program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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