

National Counter Disinformation Strategy – Citizens Information Board Response October 2023

Principle 1: Counter Disinformation and protect freedom of speech using a rights-based approach.

What are your general views in relation to this principle?

Freedom of expression must remain a central concept in drawing up parameters to the sharing of information while at the same time ensuring that both the Internet generally and specific digital and social media platforms are safe places for all.

Some groups, including, children, people with an intellectual disability, people experiencing mental health challenges and older people with reduced decision-making capacity and ethnic minorities may be especially vulnerable to exploitation as a result of misinformation, disinformation or information that is ambivalent or lacking in transparency.

Of particular importance is the need to provide for people expressing genuinely held beliefs (including religious beliefs) and opinions and to prevent harmful negative stereotyping of people and social stigma because of their beliefs or values. Respect for individual beliefs is a key tenet of social justice.

It is critically important that all media platforms adopt as a core underlying principle their duty to protect human and legal rights to privacy, the right not to be subjected to harm and degrading treatment, i.e., treatment that is humiliating and undignified. Private written communications and telephone conversations should not be unjustifiably interfered with or shared.

It is important that people's right to express dissenting views from those in the mainstream is fully respected provided that these are genuinely held.

Principle 2: Counter Disinformation by building resilience and trust – at individual and societal levels.

What are your general views in relation to this principle?

In considering the potential effects of misinformation and disinformation, it is important to consider the purpose of the information posted. On the positive side, factors that are likely to be present are a desire to inform others, express opinion, warn others, or create a context for entertainment. On the negative side, the intent may be to deliberately mislead, exploit people, embezzle their money, or cause them harm. The latter is the most important aspect that needs to be considered and the Strategy will need to provide for fit-for-purpose mechanisms to deal with this.

The Citizens Information Board (CIB), a statutory body responsible for the provision of information, advice and advocacy on public services through www.citizensinformation.ie, Citizens Information Services (CIS), the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) and through its social media sites plays an important role in ensuring that the public have access to accurate and integrated information about public services, people's employment and consumer rights and people's legal and human rights generally.

CIB plays a pivotal role in providing independent information and thereby is in a unique position to counter disinformation and misinformation. It is trusted source of information and acts as a formal intermediary in disseminating and interpreting information from various sources – public services, financial institutions, utility providers and information on legal rights and consumer rights.

What recommendations do you think could be considered in the strategy in relation to this principle?

As a starting point, the Strategy needs to take a proactive approach to developing mechanisms to ensure that information on all public service websites is clear, timely, accurate, fully transparent and accessible. It is acknowledged that public services are committed to this approach, but it may be that it is not always reflected in actual practice due to resource factors. It is suggested that such an approach would help to enhance an ethos of ensuring that all public information is accurate and transparent.

CIB shares information on social media sites to keep people informed of and up to date on developments in public and social services. This includes retweets and shared posts from other relevant users, particularly those from our services and other Government bodies. This facility is regarded as an important counterbalance to inaccurate information being posted on social media as CIB, and its services, are viewed as being a trusted source.

The role of CIB services and platforms is considered centrally important in combatting misinformation and disinformation and in ensuring that all public information is transparent and accessible. It is suggested that the CIB model provides a useful and important prototype mechanism for monitoring public information and acting as a counterbalance to misinformation and disinformation.

Principle 3: Counter Disinformation through increased cooperation, collaboration, and coordination

What are your general views in relation to this principle?

The starting point here is that compliance with online safety codes cannot be optional and must be binding. There needs to be accountability as well as transparency.

The implementation of legislation and related regulations, in particular, the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Data Protection Acts needs to be prioritised in the Strategy and adequate resources for this purpose made available.

The Digital Services Commissioner in Coimisiún na Meán will obviously play a central role in enforcing digital regulation and in monitoring the implementation of DSA legislation. The DSA seeks to establish a strong transparency ethos and a clear accountability framework for online platforms. It sets out rules on how digital platforms deal with harmful and illegal content.

The current CIB Strategy is committed to developing a management approach to misinformation and disinformation and to developing systems and collaborative approaches (including with other statutory bodies) in countering misinformation and disinformation. To this end, CIB is committed to working closely with the Department, Coimisiún na Meán and the Data Protection Commission in scoping out and implementing an integrated approach to sharing best practice and aligning Irish policy and regulatory approaches with those of the EU.

What recommendations do you think could be considered in the strategy in relation to this principle?

While exposure to misinformation or disinformation does not necessarily mean that it has a negative effect on people, there are clearly instances where people are inappropriately influenced or where they experience stress or abuse when the information posted relates to them personally, to their family or to their social identity group.

Strong collaboration between the Digital Services Commissioner and the Online Safety Commissioner will be centrally important in developing a new regulatory regime for online safety in Ireland. This will be crucial for

the creation of a safer digital space for all and one within which inappropriate content is more likely to be identified and removed. Ireland has a particularly important role in enforcing digital regulation because of the strong presence in the country of a range of social media digital platforms.

Since the Irish population has traditionally recorded a high level of trust in mainstream news sources to provide it with accurate information, it is critically important that quality and fact-based journalistic reporting remains a central tenet of mainstream news sources.

It should be noted that, while disinformation online may be used intentionally to promote socially unacceptable activities and attitudes, it is not a category of harm under the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022. This is a matter that needs to be addressed.

Principle 4: Counter disinformation through corporate accountability and regulatory enforcement

What are your general views in relation to this principle?

There needs to be a strong focus on the need for all platforms to take greater responsibility for protecting users from harmful and illegal online content.

It is noted that the Santa Clara principles <https://santaclaraprinciples.org/> state that companies should ensure that human rights and due process considerations are integrated at all stages of the content moderation process, and should publish information outlining how this is being done. Companies should publish clear and precise rules and policies relating to when action will be taken with respect to users' content or accounts, in an easily accessible and central location. Information should also be provided on how the platform has considered human rights—particularly the rights to freedom of expression and non-discrimination—in the development of its rules and policies and how the company has considered the importance of due process when enforcing its rules and policies, and in particular how the process has integrity and is administered fairly.

It is suggested that the Santa Clara principles have much to offer in the development of the National Counter Disinformation Strategy with particular reference to what should be expected from digital media platforms in relation to protecting people's right both to express views and right to be protected from harmful content based on disinformation. This is an area that needs to have a whole of government approach and policy/guidelines in place.

What recommendations do you think could be considered in the strategy in relation to this principle?

Disinformation campaigns frequently target disadvantaged groups in order to influence their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, while also using disinformation in order to generate discontent and anger toward disadvantaged groups.

There will be an ongoing need to fully acknowledge the important role that free, independent, high-quality journalism plays in countering disinformation, and align this with efforts to protect the supply of public interest information at local and national levels.

It is important that good relationships and working structures between platforms and academic researchers are in place that facilitate access to data that would better inform interventions to prevent the spread of disinformation.

Principle 5: Counter Disinformation through evidence-based counter measures and interventions

What are your general views in relation to this principle?

Access to platform data by both researchers and other platforms is hugely important. A 2022 European Digital Media Observatory's (EDMO) Report (<https://www.eui.eu/news-hub?id=edmo-releases-report-on-researcher-access-to-platform-data>) outlined how platforms may provide access to data to independent researchers in a GDPR-compliant manner. However, such access appears to be limited. Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) and related rules and protocols that allow different software programs to talk to each other and share data or functionality remain under-developed. Also unclear is the extent to which the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation is being implemented. This refers to demonetising the dissemination of disinformation; guaranteeing transparency of political advertising; enhancing cooperation with fact-checkers; and facilitating researchers' access to data.

A Disinformation Strategy in Ireland will need to build in mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of these provisions and introducing legislation if necessary.

Academic research has a particularly important role to play in scoping out the context within which misinformation and disinformation flourishes, profiling the areas where it typically occurs, identifying and categorising problems and 'bad' content, evidence on the harm that is being perpetrated and the type of countermeasures that are required.

What recommendations do you think could be considered in the strategy in relation to this principle?

Evidence-based best-practice and fit-for-purpose media monitoring tools need to be put in place. This will require a focus on specific misinformation and disinformation issues in the Irish context. This should consider recent inappropriate use of social media to trigger negative sentiment in relation to those seeking international protection. It should also include monitoring of evolving threats/trends and investigations of significant breaches of people's legal and human rights, including, in particular, hate speech and threats of violence.

Media literacy initiatives, fact-checking initiatives and labelling guidelines are all important and need to be given strategic impetus. The ongoing need for independent high-quality journalism based on a value-critical perspective cannot be over-estimated.

The upskilling of citizens both to be resilient and to be able to critique information is an essential requirement for Irish society and needs to be addressed in the medium to longer-term. This will require significant changes to the educational curricula at all levels. On the one hand, empowering people to protect themselves from disinformation is hugely important. On the other hand, educating people on people's right to be respected, not to be abused, not to be exposed to risk or harm or have their good name sullied is a key component of civic engagement and citizenship. The latter is likely to have to be a longer-term endeavour.

What activities or interventions are you involved in, or know of, that could help to counter disinformation? Please give details.

CIB as a statutory body with a remit to provide or arrange for the provision of information on public and social services is a key 'go to' source of public information and acts as a reliable and trusted independent intermediary. It provides digital content/information directly through citizensinformation.ie and indirectly through funding trusted information networks, including Citizens Information Services and money advice and advocacy services (CISs, CIPS, MABS, NAS, SLIS). CIB has traditionally countered misinformation and disinformation by keeping accurate information up to date. This was strongly reflected in CIB information dissemination in relation to COVID-19.

CIB also has a legislative function to report on the experience of users of public services and gathers data on information trends and undertakes research on issues impacting on access to information and public services. CIB's track record in undertaking quality policy research points to its ability to analyse issues connected with disinformation, in particular its impact on marginalised groups.

There is a potentially important role for CIB to work in collaboration with other stakeholders. CIB is already engaged in collaboration with government departments/public bodies in the dissemination of public information – e.g., Returning to Ireland information and advice initiative; provision of information to Ukrainian refugees through government hubs.