

## Vodafone comments: OHCHR Report on Disinformation

[N.B Vodafone distinguishes between disinformation and misinformation. For the purposes of this response our comments relate primarily to misinformation:

- Disinformation = coordinated and malicious attempts to sow discord and cause uncertainty through the dissemination of false information, often attributable to state actors
- Misinformation = disparate and uncoordinated instances of content that is false or misleading, often attributable to individuals or interest groups]

### 1. What do you believe are the key challenges raised by disinformation? What measures would you recommend to address them?

The mobile industry has faced aggressive and coordinated misinformation campaigns around 5G (and previous generations of mobile technology) for of a number of years. This misinformation typically purports to expose the harmful effects of exposure to radiation from mobile masts and base stations. As has been comprehensively proven through scientific analysis, these claims have no basis in fact.

With their wide reach and highly engaged user base, content sharing platforms pose a particular problem in relation to the rapid and wide dissemination of these false narratives around 5G. Online platforms have acted as incubators for some of the most egregious, harmful and demonstrably false forms of misinformation on 5G.

We have established programs to push back against false narratives around 5G misinformation, and these efforts have been bolstered by the recently updated guidelines of the International Commission for Non-Ionising Radiation Protection putting beyond doubt claims that 5G radiation levels are in any way harmful to individuals.

However, the outbreak of the Coronavirus has opened a new front is this misinformation campaign. Unfortunately, a key element of the disinformation circulating online around the virus claims that it is in some way linked to the deployment of 5G technology. Such claims are manifestly false, but have generated significant traction online.

The consequences of this misinformation are real and severe: arson attacks on telecom base stations (not all of which are equipped with 5G infrastructure), harassment, intimidation and even acts of physical violence carried out against our field agendas and network engineers. This is why we are calling for concerted action from all stakeholders to swiftly irradiate 5G/Coronavirus misinformation. This misinformation is also in many cases illegal, inciting violence against property and people.

### 2.

#### a. What legislative, administrative, policy, regulatory or other measures have Governments taken to counter disinformation online and offline?

The reality remains that our current rules are too weak to tackle the very fundamental challenge posed by misinformation on social media platforms. Social media platforms currently work on a notice and take down basis: once they are notified of infringing content

that either breaches their terms of service or is illegal, they will act expeditiously to remove it.

Existing co-regulatory initiatives have helped somewhat, for example the [EU Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), creating an accountability mechanism and opportunities for social media companies to share information and best practice on measures to fight disinformation.

However, this system is insufficient to address the current crisis of misinformation. Platforms must be legally obliged to take greater responsibility for the content they host. This is particularly important in situations where social media platforms play an active role in disseminating such material to a wide audience, for example by tagging, organising, promoting, optimizing, presenting or otherwise curating content which perpetuates harmful 5G/Coronavirus links for profit making purposes.

In these situations active hosting service providers should be subject a binding legal obligation to take proactive steps, without losing liability safe harbours, to remove persistently reloaded and egregious content in relation to 5G coronavirus disinformation.

- b. What has been the impact of such measures on i) disinformation; ii) freedom of opinion and expression; and iii) other human rights?
- c. What measures have been taken to address any negative impact on human rights?

3.

- a. What policies, procedures or other measure have digital tech companies introduced to address the problem of disinformation?

Appropriate steps that could be taken by content sharing platforms to address the issue are as follows:

- Delisting/demotion of false or misleading claims and posting of correct information
- Increased use of fact checkers
- Removal of fake accounts
- Education and awareness raising and transparency reporting
- Education and awareness raising of scientific advice on 5G and coronavirus

- b. To what extent do you find these measures to be fair, transparent and effective in protecting human rights, particularly freedom of opinion and expression?

The threat posed by this material is serious and immediate, and we cannot wait for countries to legislate. Hence we are proactively engaged with social media platforms to address the problem as best we can within the current regulatory framework and through shared learning in collaborations such as the Global Network Initiative.

However this is insufficient. A new regulatory framework is required to place content sharing platforms under a binding legal obligation to prevent inflammatory, false and misleading content linking 5G to the Coronavirus from being shared.

Furthermore, platforms should be under increased pressure to prevent the sharing of harmful content, even where this is not strictly illegal. Clear regulatory guidance on determining what is harmful is important to ensure consistency across platforms and to prevent over- or under- removal. Further, platforms should be under increased transparency obligations to disclose how they rank, organise and promote such content, included by automated means.

If these steps are taken, we are confident that we can swiftly eliminate online disinformation campaigns linking 5G to the Coronavirus, and therefore avoid any further acts of violence taken against mobile operators and their staff, as well as any further setbacks to 5G deployment that will indeed be vital to our recovery.

- c. What procedures exist to address grievances and provide remedies for users, monitor the action of the companies, and how effective are they?
4. Please share information on measures that you believe have been especially effective to protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression while addressing disinformation on social media platforms.

The use of automated tools can be a practical solution to detect and address dissemination of harmful content online. However, deployment of automated tools for the detection of infringing material presents a risk of over-deletion and over-removal of content, in the event that the automated system identified false positives. There is also a risk of under-deletion in the event that the automated system returns false negatives, and fails to detect illegal material. In both cases, the risk stems from a lack of human oversight, and contextual understanding. For this reason Vodafone recommends that automated content detection systems are used in a transparent and accountable way, be subject to monitoring and adaptation on a systematic and constant basis, and include appeal and redress mechanisms. Automated content deletion tools should also be deployed in combination with adequately resourced and supported human content moderation teams.

5. Please share information on measures to address disinformation that you believe have aggravated or led to human rights violations, in particular the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
6. Please share any suggestions or recommendation you may have for the Special Rapporteur on how to protect and promote the right to freedom of opinion and expression while addressing disinformation.