

REPORT ON A SURVEY FOR FACT CHECKERS ON COVID-19 VACCINES AND DISINFORMATION

European Digital Media Observatory

School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute¹

Introduction

Hand in hand with the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented level of disinformation about the virus has been spreading rapidly over social media platforms. This 'infodemic' has created a number of challenges, including the serious risk that disinformation-fuelled confusion and distrust can undermine an effective public health response in Europe.² Similarly disinformation around COVID-19 vaccines could risk undermining governments' vaccination plans and more generally public preparedness for vaccines distribution.

In light of the urgent nature of these risks, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) conducted a survey³ among fact-checkers in Europe with a specific focus on disinformation and the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaigns. The survey was addressed at fact-checking organizations and players and enquired about a number of aspects, including their work and strategies to fight disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines and the disinformation narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine and the vaccination campaign they were witnessing in their respective countries. The survey was sent to fact-checking organisations, fact-checking teams within media organisation and other players dealing with fact-checking in the EU and UK and was kept open for seven days⁴. The results of the survey are published in the present report.

The survey confirmed that disinformation around the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaigns is spreading throughout Europe in a variety of forms and under a number of more or less far-fetched

¹ The survey at the basis of this report was drafted by the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute and Pagella Politica.

The survey report was written by Lisa Ginsborg and Paula Gori. Publishing date: 8 March 2021.

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf

³ Survey attached as Annex 1

⁴ The survey was open between 15 and 21 January 2021.



narratives. In this context, it should be noted that EDMO defines disinformation in line with the Report of the High-Level Expert Group on Online Disinformation,⁵ as all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. Therefore, it is important to understand the narratives around COVID-19 vaccines presented in the report in conjunction with the actors and vectors that are responsible for deliberately spreading those narratives to cause harm or gain profit. Further attention is required to better understanding the actors and patterns of dissemination of disinformation around the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaigns, and fact-checkers in Europe may also play a key role in this respect.

Survey Results

This report is based on the replies to the mentioned survey from 17 respondents covering 17 Member States (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain) plus the United Kingdom and non-EU Balkan countries.

The majority of the respondents were either fact-checking organisations or fact-checking teams within media organisations, complemented by a tech company using both AI and human analysts for fact-checking and a platform publishing fact-checks commissioned to a science communications agency.

The impact of disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine on the work of fact-checkers

Almost half of the respondents affirmed that they produce between 0 and 5 articles (or videos or items devoted to a single claim/hoax) every week, while the other half between 5 and 10 articles. For one respondent the figure is more than 25.

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>



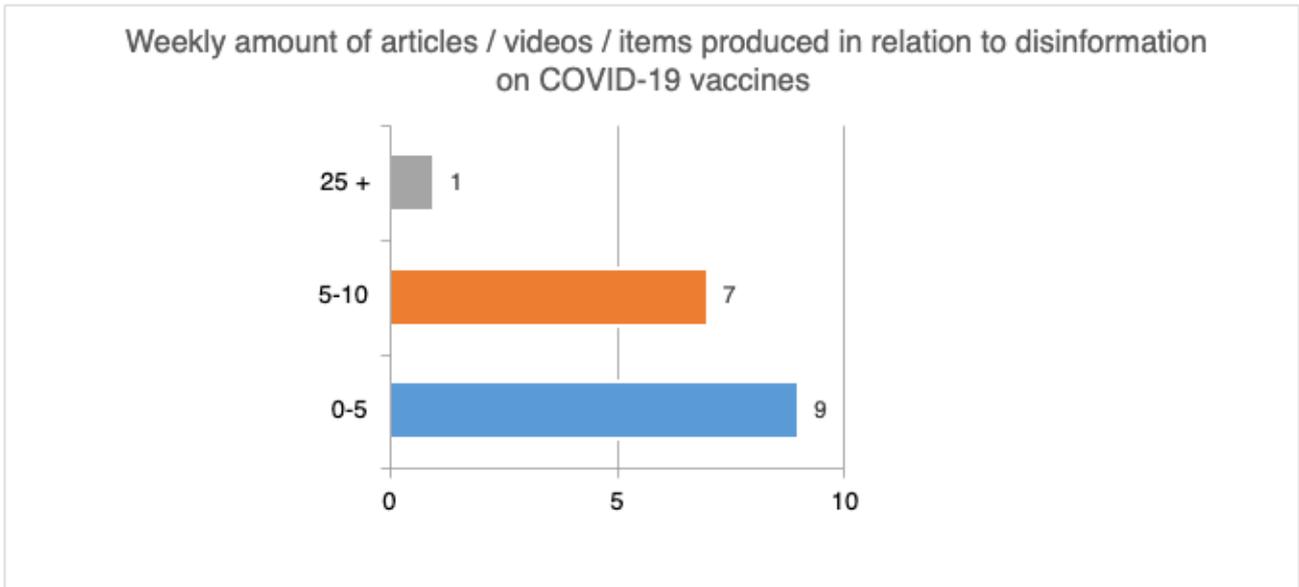


Figure 1: Weekly amount of articles/videos/items produced in relation to disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine

Based on a rough estimate by the respondents, within their activities the production (articles, videos, etc.) devoted to disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccines is between 0 and 20%, in 4 cases, between 20 and 40% in 5, it is between 40 and 60% in 6 cases and in respectively one case it is between 60 and 80% and above 80%.

70% of the respondents have increased the production of dedicated fact-checking/debunking articles since the vaccination campaign started and 52% have launched new projects specifically dedicated to vaccines/disinformation on the vaccines, while one respondent affirmed that they are planning to do so.

These new projects include:

- deep dive investigative reporting into the origins, networks, influencers and reach of actors spreading disinformation about the vaccine and reporting and presentations given to public authorities and NGOs, through dedicating more resources to prioritize debunking vaccine disinformation;
- creation of a specific section dedicated to COVID-19 vaccines on their website in order to collect fact-checking articles and track related disinformation phenomena;
- planned publication of an e-book about COVID-19 vaccine disinformation later this year and production of educational videos based on their scientific fact-checking work, including a focus on COVID-19 vaccines. Overall, increase of the video production in order to reach a bigger audience with a focus on the anti-vax movement;



- new section in weekly podcast dedicated to scientific fact-checking articles written during the week, including episodes on COVID-19 vaccines;
- publication of articles about why the vaccines could be released so quickly, possible side effects of the vaccines, RNA vaccines, the pre-clinical work, risks and opportunities of RNA vaccines, and debunking the myth that RNA vaccines can alter our DNA;
- project explaining the different types of COVID-19 vaccines, how we know they are safe and how we calculate their efficiency, using animation graphics to make the material simple and easy to follow and to share on social media;
- strengthening collaboration with other fact-checking organisations with a focus on the COVID-19 vaccine and monitoring of disinformation on COVID-19.

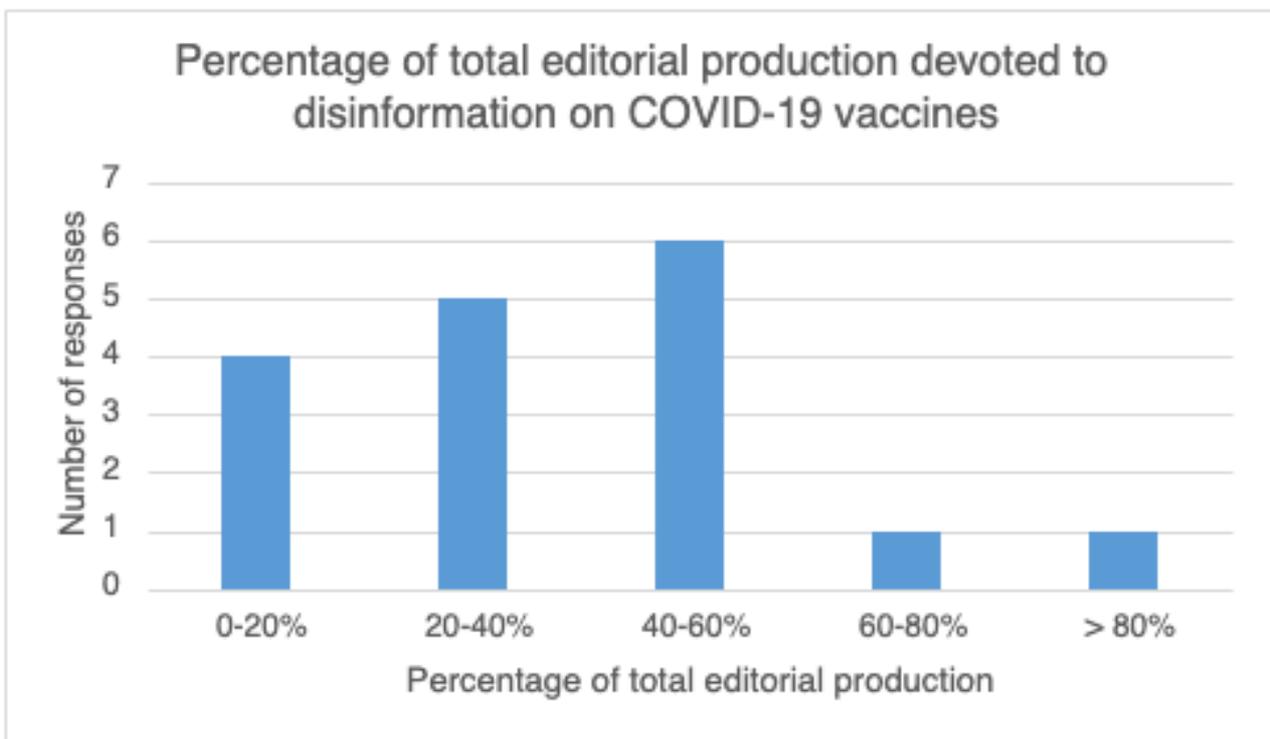


Figure 2: Percentage of total editorial production devoted to disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines.



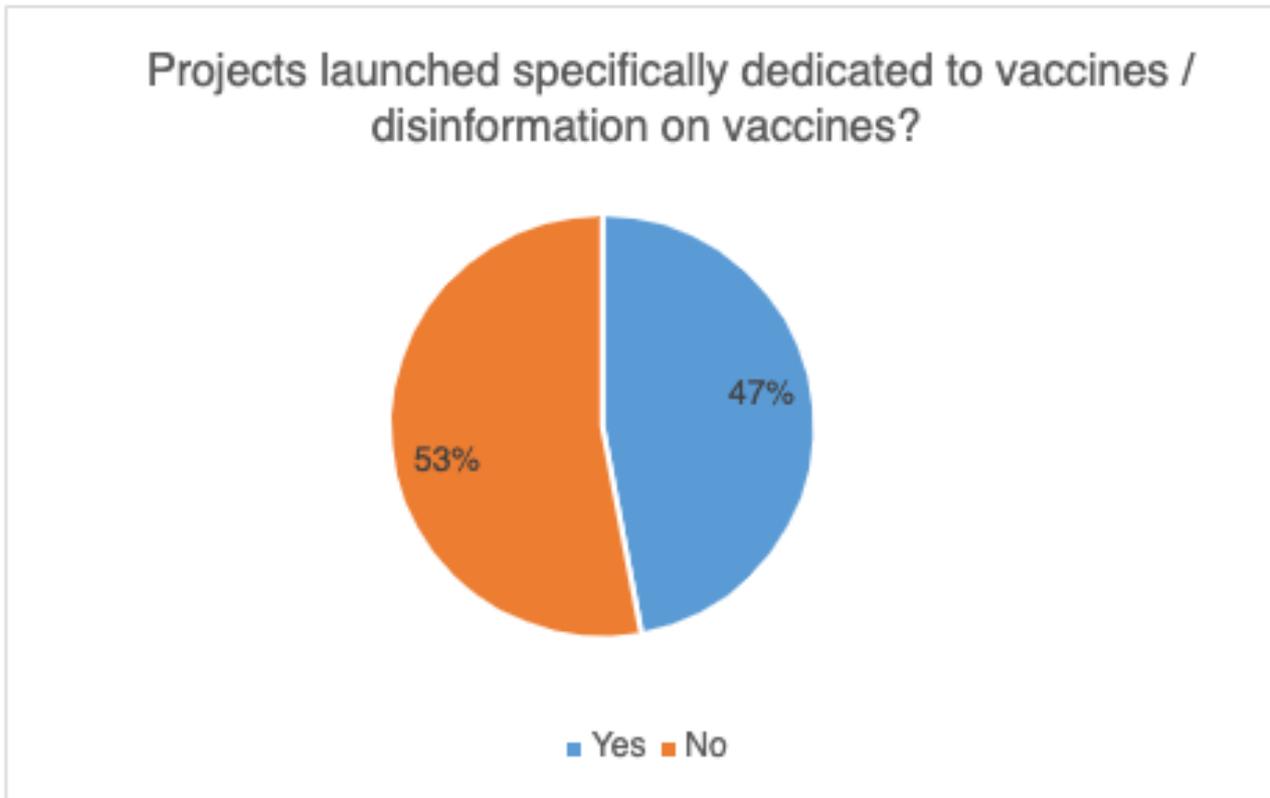


Figure 3: Percentage of organisations that launched new projects specifically dedicated to vaccines/disinformation on vaccines.

17% of the respondents have tried new strategies to increase their audience since the vaccination campaign started, including:

- generating more fact checks and original content, e.g. reports which are shared widely on their own channels;
- contributing to media stories to help raise awareness of disinformation and who is spreading it;
- conducting a non-representative survey to ask readers how likely it is that they would get vaccinated and what topics around the vaccine they would like to see covered;
- increasing presence on social media platforms like Instagram and producing article recap videos;
- planning to employ a series of animated clips about the COVID-19 vaccination;
- using live blogs to make it easier for readers to have an overview on what was fact-checked in relation to the pandemic;
- developing new ways to engage with the audience - primarily focusing on answering questions or demands for fact checks with articles.



When asked about any additional relevant action, the main activities mentioned by respondents were monitoring, collaborating and exchanging best practices within the national and international fact-checking and journalists network, also by increasing the amount of time invested in cross-border reporting/fact-checking. Co-operation with public administration bodies and parallel COVID-19-information literacy activities building on fact-checks have also been put in place by some respondents.

Public authorities tackling disinformation on the Covid-19 vaccine

71% of the respondents affirmed that the government and/or public health institutions in the country/ies they are covering is implementing a strategy specifically aimed at fighting disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines. 47% affirmed that online platforms are involved in those strategies and 24% that fact-checkers are also involved.

In particular, the following strategies were reported:

- public information campaigns, including on social media;
- specific webpages dedicated to disinformation on COVID-19 vaccines on the website of the Ministry of Health and/or other public authorities (in Spain, the Ministry of Health is also planning to operate two chatbots on disinformation on vaccines),
- multi-stakeholder forums convened by the government to look at how to tackle disinformation at scale and regular reporting about online disinformation related to COVID-19 at government level (UK);
- regular research review focusing on COVID-19 compiled by the office of the Prime Minister (Finland);
- daily updates about how many people have been vaccinated shared by the government via Viber (Greece).

The main disinformation narratives on the COVID-19 vaccine

When asked about specific disinformation narratives about the Covid-19 vaccine and the vaccination campaign present in their country, respondents confirmed that the following narratives (mentioned in the survey with a yes and no answer) were detected in the countries they are active in:

- “vaccines haven’t been tested enough (they have been approved too fast)”;
- disinformation about people dying after the vaccine and because of it;
- disinformation about people having severe consequences after the vaccine (e.g. sterility, Bell’s palsy etc.)
- “mRNA vaccines can modify the human DNA”



In this context, it should be recalled that EDMO defines disinformation in line with the Report of the High-Level Expert Group on Online Disinformation, as all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. Therefore, it is important to note that the narratives around COVID-19 vaccines presented in this report, should always be seen in conjunction with the actors and vectors that are responsible for deliberately spreading those narratives to cause harm or gain profit.

Other major disinformation narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine and the vaccination campaign detected by fact-checkers who conducted the survey can be grouped around the following main narratives: ineffectiveness of the vaccines; conspiracy theories linked to Bill Gates and others on their intention to depopulate the planet, or injecting 5G-microchips and nanorobots as well as vaccines as a mass surveillance tool; cancer and infertility as direct effects of vaccines; politicians pretending they are getting vaccinated, but in reality they are not.

17% of the respondents affirmed that there are disinformation narratives specific to the country/ies they are active in and not diffused elsewhere. In particular:

- the well-being sector in Finland may be more active in spreading misinformation or disinformation narratives from the perspective of individual rights and self-determination;
- the conspiracy theories about the pandemic in Greece involve a racist element. Many people believe that the prevention measures employed by the government was a cover to mask the movement of migrants in the country;
- in the UK, there are localised narratives that gesture towards the NHS's role in vaccine rollout. This includes that the NHS is being strongarmed into vaccine rollout by big-pharma, or that they are implicit in a wider conspiracy surrounding the pandemic

One respondent also mentioned that they did not notice completely new narratives, rather that many narratives are localized to help seed and/or amplify them.

Initiatives by online platforms to tackle disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine

When asked if there are specific measures in place by the main online platforms in their countries to tackle disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaign, not all respondents had the knowledge to reply to the question. 30% of the respondents said that this was not the case in the countries they are covering and 24% on the contrary affirmed that online platforms were indeed implementing specific measures to tackle disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine. In particular:



- one respondent was approached by Facebook to cooperate on COVID-19 vaccine disinformation with ad-credits as compensation;
- one respondent shared that online platforms prioritize authoritative vaccine information and are taking increasing measures on anti-vaxxers accounts;
- one respondent partners with TikTok to review medical disinformation in videos in various languages;
- the same respondent also affirmed that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube affirm they take action to remove vaccine disinformation, but clear information on how this is enforced was not available and to the date of the survey the most well-known groups spreading disinformation appeared to not be affected by it;
- one respondent said that all the major platforms have set out clear policies indicating what content about COVID-19 disinformation violates their policies and will be removed, and that many platforms have recently strengthened such measures.

Finally, when asked if there was any other information they wished to share regarding COVID-19 related disinformation in their countries and their strategies in tackling it, the following replies were shared:

- One respondent in Lithuania mentioned that often when they publish a fact-check on certain topics, even though at the time most disinformation disappears as a result of being either blocked by social networks, or deleted by the users, in 1-3 month time the same posts or topics reappear. This pattern became frequent when the pandemic started. With this knowledge, they are now able to expect when the same disinformation will be repeated again and block the efforts to revive the same topics before they cause any harm.
- In Croatia, one fact-checking organisation reported that after a series of serious earthquakes it faced particular challenges in dealing with two major events that provided a fertile ground for conspiracy theories at the same time. In some cases, the narratives even converged (i.e. people are being forcefully vaccinated in areas hit by the earthquake).
- In Finland, a fact-checking organisation has advocated for more cooperation between media actors to build a sustainably financed and independent fact-checking organisation. One of the functions of this organisation would be increasing media and information literacy.
- One respondent reported a number of challenges in Luxembourg including fatigue about COVID-19 reporting, the need for more balanced communication which is not always available in mainstream media, as well as the risk of oversaturating people with information.
- One respondent whose work covers a number of countries, including Czech Republic, Slovakia, Balkans, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Romania, Poland reported that



international authorities, e.g. World Health Organisation, do not always have information in local languages (which means for fact-checkers to link to English-language resources). They also mentioned that local authorities are not always proactive in speaking out against disinformation or providing public resources and that it would be useful if they could produce videos, video-graphics, graphics to address fears from the public.

Conclusion

The results of the survey for fact-checkers conducted by EDMO on disinformation and the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaigns, and presented in this report, show that most fact-checkers in Europe are devoting a significant portion of their work to tackling disinformation related to COVID-19 vaccines, indicating both the scale of the problem and the importance attached to it by the fact-checking community in Europe.

The survey found that almost all fact-checkers in Europe have been dedicating part of their work to fighting disinformation around the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaigns, and a number of them have started new projects specifically dedicated to disinformation on the vaccines, demonstrating both the scale of the problem and the importance attached to tackling it also among the fact-checking community. On one hand, disinformation around COVID-19 vaccines appears to be increasingly crossing borders as different countries start to roll out their vaccination campaigns, with a number of narratives recurring in different national contexts, and fact-checking organisations increasingly investing in cross-border reporting/fact-checking and sharing best practices within their networks. On the other, certain narratives appear to be adapted to specific national and local contexts, highlighting also to the importance of the availability of authoritative information in local languages to help support the work of fact-checkers.

The report provides an overview of fact-checking activities, strategies and how they relate to initiatives by government and/or public health institutions in their countries and by online platforms. It also provides a useful catalogue of the major disinformation narratives about the COVID-19 vaccine and the vaccination campaign that are present in Europe. Further attention should be devoted by future surveys to the topic of disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination campaigns to focus on the actors, vectors and patterns of dissemination of such disinformation on one hand, and to questions of impact and effectiveness of fact-checkers' work in this field on the other. In addition, a survey to map the initiatives of the public authorities to fight against disinformation on the COVID-19 vaccine and to have a comprehensive overview of their initiatives could also be run among the National Regulatory Authorities in collaboration with ERGA.





Fact-checkers remain central players at the national and European level to fight disinformation related to vaccination campaigns. In this context, the importance of cooperation, strengthening networks, sharing best practices and collaborative initiatives among European fact-checking organisations also emerged clearly from the survey, as disinformation around COVID-19 vaccines poses a number of risks for vaccination plans and public preparedness for vaccines distribution throughout Europe. For this purpose, EDMO will consider organising an online workshop to provide a platform for fact-checkers to exchange experiences, challenges and best practices as well as an avenue to develop possible opportunities for collaboration on the topic.

EDMO will also soon launch its Secure Online Collaborative Platform, that will act as virtual place where fact-checkers can cooperate, enhance their network, launch joint investigations, share best practices and information, communicate.



Covid-19 Vaccines and Disinformation



European Digital Media Observatory

Covid-19 Vaccines and Disinformation

1. In which country are you based?

2. Are you a fact-checking organization or a fact-checking team within a media organization?

3. Please help us understand the major strategies that your fact-checking organization is implementing to fight disinformation about Covid-19 vaccines.

3.1) How many articles (or videos or items devoted to a single claim/hoax) do you produce every week that are related to Covid-19 vaccines? Please specify the range:

at least 1 choice(s)

- 0-5
- 5-10
- 15-20
- 25+

3.2) Which percentage of your editorial production (articles, videos, etc.) is devoted to disinformation about the Covid-19 vaccines? Please specify a percentage (a rough estimate will be enough):

- 0-20%
- 20-40%
- 40-60%
- 60-80%
- +80%

3.3) Have you increased the production of dedicated fact-checking/debunking articles since the vaccination campaign started?

- Yes
- No

3.4) Have you launched new projects specifically dedicated to vaccines/disinformation on the vaccines?

- Yes
- No

If YES, please tell us more about them:

3.5) Have you tried new strategies to increase your audience since the vaccination campaign started

- Yes
- No

If YES, please specify which ones:

3.6) Please add any other relevant action:

4) Are the government and/or public health institutions in your country implementing any strategy specifically aimed at fighting disinformation about Covid-19 vaccines?

- Yes
- No

4.1) If YES: please briefly specify which ones:

4.2) Are the online platforms involved in those strategies?

- Yes
- No

4.3) Are the fact-checking projects involved in those strategies?

- Yes
- No

5) Please specify if you have detected the following categories of Covid-19 vaccine disinformation in your country

5.1) «Vaccines haven't been tested enough (they have been approved too fast)»

Yes

No

5.2) Disinformation about people dying after the vaccine and because of it

at least 1 choice(s)

Yes

No

5.3) Disinformation about people having severe consequences after the vaccine (e.g. sterility, Bell's palsy etc.)

Yes

No

5.4) «mRNA vaccines can modify the human DNA»

Yes

No

6) Please specify any other major disinformation narratives about the Covid-19 vaccine and the vaccination campaign that are present in your country:

7) Are there disinformation narratives that you think are specific to your country and not diffused elsewhere? If yes, please specify which ones:

8) Are there specific measures in place by the main online platforms in your country to tackle disinformation on the Covid-19 vaccine and vaccination campaign? If yes, which ones?

9) Is there any other information you wish to share regarding Covid-related disinformation in your country and your strategies in tackling it? Please do: