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European Commission's expert group tackling fake news misses the point

Monique Goyens, Director General of The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) and appointed expert to the Commission's fake news group, has voted against the final report which was presented in Brussels today. Monique Goyens deplores that the report does not tackle the root causes of fake news.

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, commented:

"Every day, consumers make decisions on the basis of information they find both online and offline. Sadly, these decisions are increasingly based on incorrect information. Biased restaurant ratings, fake product tests and false news reports and political advertising prevent consumers from making well-informed decisions. Fake news is a real problem for consumers.

"This report contains many useful recommendations but fails to touch upon one of the core causes of fake news. Disinformation is spreading too easily online. Evidence of the role of behavioural advertising in the dissemination of fake news is piling up. Platforms such as Google or Facebook massively benefit from users reading and sharing fake news articles which contain advertisements. But this expert group chose to ignore this business model. This is head-in-the-sand politics.

"Media literacy initiatives and transparency measures make sense but are no silver bullet. Experience from other sectors has shown that those people who are most prone to disinformation don't get access to such initiatives. The burden for de-bunking fake news should not rest on people."

- Consumer exposure to fake news needs to be addressed at its source. BEUC regrets that the report does not call for a sector inquiry to investigate the link between advertising revenue policies of platforms and dissemination of disinformation. Sector inquiries are carried out by the European Commission's competition department to investigate whether markets operate as they should. If the result is that anti-competitive behaviour is identified, then it can carry out company-specific investigations.
- The high-level group recommends the drafting of a business code of conduct to minimise the spreading of disinformation via online platforms. However, its recommendations are non-binding. The risk is that the code will be a non-starter.

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