PRESS RELEASE

July 2025

ATHENA EXPERTS WARN OF DISINFORMATION EXPLOSION FUELED BY EMERGING TECH

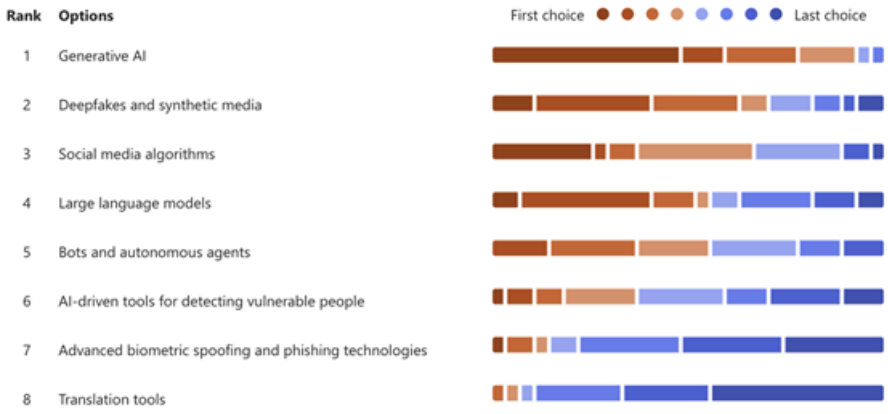
ATHENA's mini-Delphi : The future of foreign influence in a rapidly evolving technological landscape

A panel of 27 European experts from academia, civil society and the private sector has sounded the alarm : within the next three to five years, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) will grow not just incrementally — but exponentially.
The EU-funded ATHENA project conducted a mini-Delphi survey exploring how emerging technologies are reshaping the disinformation battlefield.

The conclusion is clear : we are facing an era where disinformation is automated, targeted and scaled.

Disinformation goes high tech

Experts highlighted the significant influence that technologies will likely have on the spread of disinformation over the next three to five years. When asked to rank technologies according to their expected impact on disinformation, they attributed a prominent role to the use of AI in various forms. Other technologies and techniques covered – such as social media algorithms, closed messenger apps and microtargeting – indicate that impacts will be felt not only on how disinformation content is produced, but also on how and where it is disseminated, and to whom.



Technologies ranked by expected impact on disinformation (next 3–5 years). Ranking reflects both frequency of selection and average position in respondents' individual rankings.

The experts warned that the impacts caused by foreign influence campaigns go way beyond spreading confusion. They aim to destabilise countries, undermine scientific consensus and incite real-world discord. They also warned of hyper-targeted harassment aimed at specific communities and the possibility of manipulating financial markets through disinformation.
Eighty-eight per cent of experts surveyed foresee an explosion in disinformation in the next three to five years, with nearly half predicting an up-to-1000% increase during that period.

Respondents' assessments of the impact's scale new technologies are likely to have on disinformation in the next three to five years.

When asked about recent stories involving foreign influence operations fueled by these technologies, respondents overwhelmingly identified Russia as the most active country in this domain, featuring 19 stories involving Russia. In comparison, China had five mentions in recent stories cited by experts.

Countering FIMI

Experts pointed to the need to implement a successful campaign against disinformation with effective and multi-faceted countermeasures. They said governments must step up with bold and coordinated actions, by developing and enforcing regulations and legislation, holding digital platforms accountable, increasing investments in technological solutions, and enhancing media and digital literacy across societies. There is also a call for greater algorithmic transparency.
Every citizen is also a frontline defender. Respondents mapped out an extensive list of measures individuals can take to guard themselves against disinformation. By developing digital literacy and critical thinking skills, and by incorporating habits of verification and fact-checking into their media consumption, people can build resilience to manipulation. Social trust and engaging in trusted offline conversations are key elements of a bottom-up defense strategy.

ATHENA calls for bold, coordinated action

The ATHENA project is contributing to detecting, analysing and countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) campaigns in Europe.
This mini-Delphi study is part of a larger ATHENA work package on horizon scanning and policymaking against FIMI. For the more detailed conclusions and recommendations from the mini-Delphi, see the Consensus Report, which can be accessed through the ATHENA website, where you can also learn more about the project.

Consortium

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Funded by the European Union (grant number 101132686). UK participants in Horizon Europe Project ATHENA are supported by UKRI grant number 10107667 (Trilateral Research). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA) or UKRI. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority nor UKRI can be held responsible for them. HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01.