

## Tough luck if you're in BELUX? Platform responses to disinformation in Belgium and Luxembourg

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This brief article reviews how platforms have taken action to counter online disinformation in Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (from here out referred to as "Luxembourg"). We analysed the reports published by signatory social media platforms to the [EU Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), including Meta (Facebook & Instagram), Google (including YouTube), Twitter, and TikTok from August 2020 until April 2022, and identified platforms' initiatives that were aimed at these countries. We find that platforms focus their efforts on prioritising and amplifying content. These initiatives are low-cost efforts to inform the public. Most platforms' country-specific response(s) were also only taken at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, with Twitter distinguishing itself positively as the exception. We conclude that platforms make few efforts for country-specific responses when these countries constitute small markets.

Since August 2020, signatory social media platforms to the Code of Practice on Disinformation report their initiatives and progress on countering (COVID-19) online disinformation to the European Commission on a bimonthly basis. These reports are published online and can be found [here](#).

The coronavirus pandemic called upon big tech to debunk false claims and provide their users with third-party reliable information specific to their location, such as the nearest vaccination point. However, as we will argue in this article, COVID-19 disinformation is not the only content that could benefit from a local-specific response.

For instance, elections are increasingly polarising events that trigger surges in disinformation aimed at sowing doubt in democratic decision-making. Political disinformation can vary widely from election, country, or even region. Platform responses to disinformation in the U.S. elections might not apply to cases in Europe or elsewhere. Yet, [as we have previously pointed out](#), the platforms' worldwide reach and freedom to self-regulate makes them overemphasise big markets while underperforming in smaller ones.

Within the context of the [EDMO BELUX](#) project, we looked at what Meta, Google, Twitter, and TikTok undertook to counter disinformation in Belgium and Luxembourg during the COVID-19 health crisis.

When looking at the data concerning Belgium and Luxembourg, we conclude that platforms' country-level responses (in this case, Belgium and Luxembourg) focus on prioritising and amplifying credible content. In fact, Twitter is the only social media platform that self-reports initiatives responding to online disinformation other than boosting content in Belgium and Luxembourg.

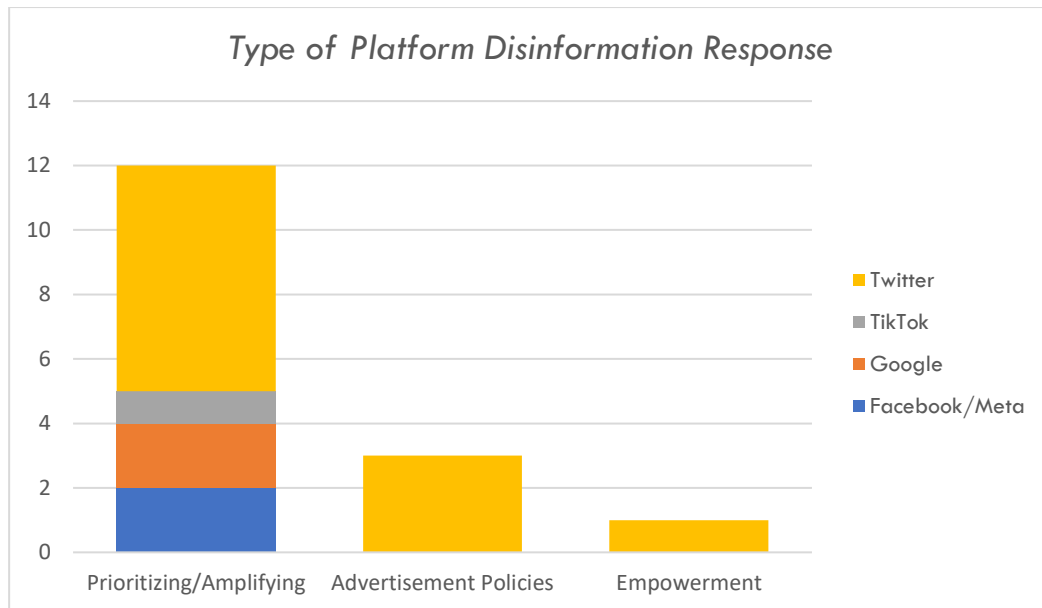


Figure 1: Types of disinformation responses per studied platform in Belgium and Luxembourg – overview

PLATFORM	INITIATIVE	TYPE	CATEGORY	DATE
Twitter	Search Prompt Feature to ensure that users are met with credible authoritative content	Prioritising	COVID-19	September 2020
Twitter	Twitter events pages	Prioritising	COVID-19	September 2020
Twitter	Ads for Good to support non-profit organisations working to counter the pandemic, promote mental health, fight domestic and gender-based violence, and debunk fake news	Advertisement policies	COVID-19	September 2020
TikTok	Working with government ministries to provide information to users	Prioritising	COVID-19	September 2020
Google	COVID-19 section in Google News for authoritative sources	Prioritising	COVID-19	September 2020
Meta	Live displays tailored to different regions and countries	Prioritising	COVID-19	September 2020
Twitter	Workshop w/ 20 Belgian women covering Twitter's policies on abuse, harassment and others	Empowerment	Other	October 2020
Meta	Alert at the top of users' feeds to remind people to wear masks	Prioritising	COVID-19	October 2020
Twitter	Prompts are now bilingual in Belgium	Prioritising	COVID-19	November 2020
Twitter	Introduction of a vaccination prompt	Prioritising	COVID-19	November 2020
Twitter	Search prompt to help women who experience domestic violence now also available in Belgium	Prioritising	Other	December 2020
Google	Comprehensive experience for COVID-19 that provides easy access to information from health authorities alongside new data and visualisations	Prioritising	COVID-19	January 2021
Twitter	Search Prompt to fight gender-based violence	Prioritising	Other	February 2021
Twitter	Ads for good initiative on "Safer Internet Day"	Advertisement policies	Other	March 2021
Twitter	Updated bilingual COVID-19 (& vaccination) prompt	Prioritising	COVID-19	September-October 2021
Twitter	Suicide Prevention Campaign & fundraising	Advertisement policies	Other	September-October 2021

Table 1: Types of disinformation responses per studied platform in Belgium and Luxembourg - detail

Of the nine identified platform responses to disinformation concerning the pandemic, we found that eight initiatives were aimed at prioritising or amplifying content. We also identified only one action related to advertising (by Twitter). Other disinformation (e.g., political) is also mostly countered by accelerating authoritative content. Flagging the locations of interest points (e.g., information centres, vaccination centres, polling stations) is among the cheapest options available for platforms., Location-related features can be easily incorporating into navigation applications such as Google Maps.

In addition, amplifying content from authoritative sources only requires the platforms to display these messages on users' feeds, while it is the authoritative sources themselves (governments, non-profits, expert groups, etc.) that write the message and conduct the research or other activities preceding it. A simple cost-benefit calculation points to prioritising and amplifying content as an efficient solution while saving costs at the same time. In comparison, initiatives such as online workshops, categorised as "empowerment", would require more effort on behalf of the platforms (i.e., hiring hosts, finding experts, gathering local expertise, ...).

We are somewhat surprised at the low use of free advertising credits to promote trustworthy content in Belgium and Luxembourg, since they provide a relatively low-cost option to the platforms. Based on our (broader) forthcoming report on platform initiatives to counter disinformation, it is clear that platforms make extensive use of free advertising credits and changes in advertisement policies to counter disinformation, but they do not focus on specific regions or countries. Most platforms prefer applicable initiatives worldwide, and do not require locally tailored solutions.

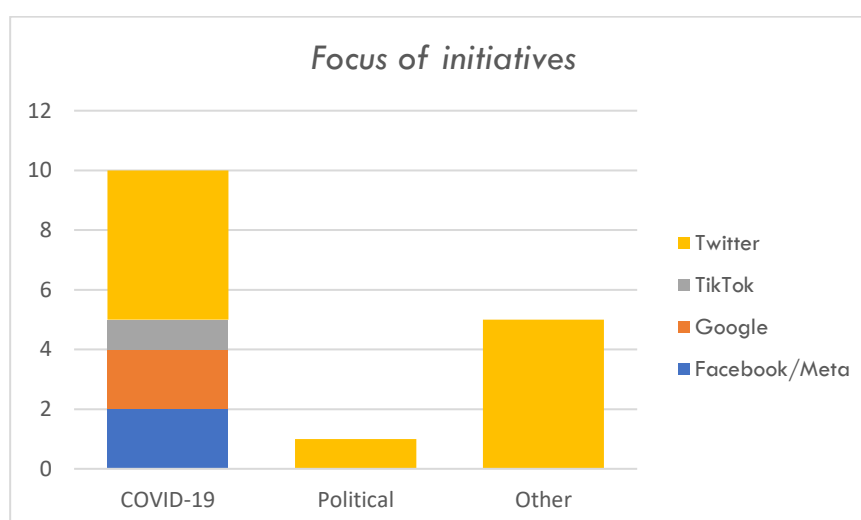


Figure 2: Substantive focus of platform responses to disinformation in Belgium and Luxembourg

Overall, the number of initiatives aimed at Belgium and Luxembourg or initiatives covering multiple specified regions, including those two countries, is low. Indeed, there is not even one initiative aimed at Luxembourg exclusively. And over time, platforms seem to have paid less attention to Belgium and Luxembourg than before. While most of these initiatives tackled COVID-19, with the pandemic fading into the background, there is not an equal effort towards other events that might trigger waves of disinformation. As the elections are one (Luxembourg in 2023) or two years (Belgium in 2024) away, platforms are privileging different, more significant markets such as France, where elections took place in April 2022. Twitter is the only platform that self-reported initiatives they took against other kinds of disinformation, such as political disinformation. "Other" responses mostly focused on women's rights and suicide awareness in Belgium.

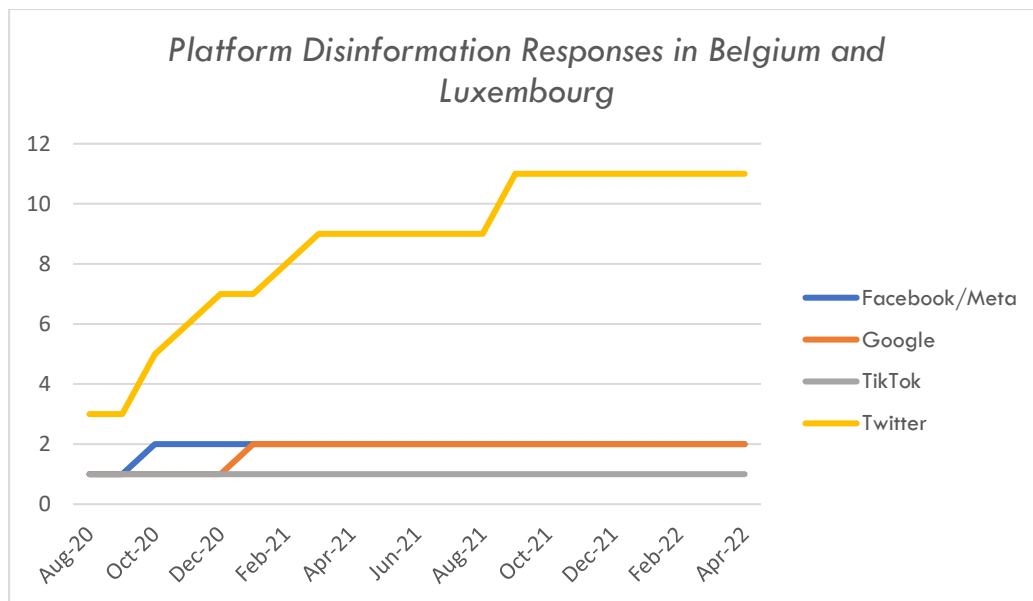


Figure 3: Total initiatives per platform over time

## Conclusion

- [Previous observations](#) seem to have held up: platforms make few efforts for country-specific responses when these countries constitute small markets, and platforms focus their efforts on prioritising and amplifying content, including informing users of the location of their nearest vaccination or information centres. These initiatives constitute low-cost efforts to inform the public.
- Most platforms' country-specific response(s) were taken at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. No social media platform has launched an initiative aimed at Belgium or Luxembourg in 2021 or later, aside from Twitter.
- Twitter is clearly best in class with eleven observed initiatives (more than five times the number of runners-up Facebook/Meta and Google). It is the only social media platform that covered disinformation using different response types aimed at Belgium or Luxembourg as part of more extensive initiatives or on their own after 2020.

## Recommendations

- The self-regulating platforms would benefit from a nudge to avoid neglecting smaller countries such as Belgium or Luxembourg. These countries constitute unique social constellations and political realities that require specific as well as specialised attention, especially with national and European elections coming up in the next two years. Although with different degrees of efficiency, we have seen platforms acting on elections in France, Italy, Germany, the U.S., and Brazil, amongst others. Smaller countries tend to make do with the policies outlined in the Community Guidelines and Terms of Service, supplemented by initiatives aimed at working on a global scale. While most platforms pay attention to any nation's election, there are considerable discrepancies between the amount, scope, and depth of initiatives aimed at the elections in the U.S. compared to smaller countries, such as Luxembourg and Belgium. In fact, more counter-disinformation activities were found concerning U.S. elections than aimed at

Belgium and Luxembourg together throughout the study. With the additional disclaimer that these cover a variety of events from COVID-19 disinformation to suicide prevention campaigns and women's rights initiatives and workshops.

- The battle against the infodemic benefited from the available technologies offered by social media platforms, such as location services and the amplification of official and authoritative information. In other scenarios like elections, a baseline, objective narrative is far harder to determine or even impossible. The value of local experts, journalists, and fact-checkers cannot be underestimated, and we highly recommend both governments and social media platforms keep involving these actors as context-specific experts in large and small countries. The updated [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) (2022) takes a step in the right direction by providing a place at the table for these stakeholders. There is however still reason for concern, as the self-regulatory aspect of the Code of Practice leaves room for the social media platforms to implement local assets in various ways, allowing the inconsistencies between platforms and countries to continue. On the contrary, it is important that different local realities are treated as equally relevant, weighting the same, and awarded the same importance in the eyes of the platforms when it comes to counter-disinformation initiatives.



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