



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media**

Human Dimension Committee

Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Media: Addressing Disinformation and
Propaganda

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To be checked against delivery

Mr. Chairperson, dear Ambassador, Ivo Šrámek,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you for this opportunity to address the Human Dimension Committee and for your decision to dedicate one of your sessions to the important issue of disinformation and propaganda.

Disinformation and the manipulation of information undermine public trust in the media, in journalism, in institutions and among the people themselves.

The prevalence of online and offline disinformation can also have serious consequences on our common security in the OSCE region and on the security of our citizens.

The sources, the motives, and the mechanisms of information manipulation may vary.

They are also not all politically-motivated or part of a broader propaganda campaign. This is one of the difficulties ahead of us in tackling the extent of the phenomenon.

Some “fake news” are created and disseminated simply for the fun of it, although even this can mislead social media users and have dramatic consequences in the real world. Some “fake news” may also involve the amplification of old rumours, but with a very different impact.

To mention a recent case in France, a few weeks ago, in the northern suburbs of Paris, unidentified people posted a photo on social media of a white van, with a caption saying that Roma people were using it to kidnap children so as to steal their organs and sell them.

In the following days, there were several serious attacks against Roma people driving in similar white vans, and given that the rumour quickly spread on the Internet, such attacks occurred in large parts on the outskirts of the city.

The police denied the false information. But when journalists interviewed parents and others in the street, they said they still believed the rumour and that they were afraid.

In other cases, rumours can be started with a political purpose. This was the case in the famous “Pizza Gate” story during the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, when alt-right websites disseminated a conspiracy theory involving John Podesta, the campaign director of Hillary Clinton, in a case of child abuse and child trafficking in a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. This was aimed at damaging the reputation of a candidate but it led to a man going to said pizzeria and shooting at an employee to save children.

These are just a few among many other examples that show the power and the risks of information manipulation in the digital era.

Regardless of the origin, we can see how “fake news” can quickly become viral, especially when they fit with the ideological or political view of groups of people which would disseminate it massively. Crucially, the harsher and more extreme the content, the more clicks it receives and the wider it spreads. This, in turn, increases viewership; the longer people stay online to view it, the more advertisement revenue that is generated. The use of bots and fake accounts can create or amplify the phenomenon.

Although fake news has existed since the beginning of human kind, we are at the start of a new age of the manipulation of information.

Manipulating information will become more sophisticated and more difficult to identify, with new technology enabling better fake videos and more accurate voice imitation software.

This risks creating a state of permanent confusion, with people being constantly immersed in a virtual reality in which false news would become almost impossible to distinguish from real news, nourishing even more general scepticism and lack of trust in the news media and in traditional institutions.

In the past, there was a clear distinction, for all of us, between everyday gossip at the bar and fact-based news from the newspaper stand.

Now, in the new digital age, Facebook and other social media companies have muddied the waters between news and gossip, with all information arriving on the same screen. Everything from silly stories, insults, and hate speech, to accurate and factual news appears constantly on one’s newsfeed without any hierarchy or distinction. Algorithms may even give an edge to this more sensationalist gossip compared to fact-based news. This in turn creates a financial incentive to spread “fake news”.

It is clear that there can also be a temptation to manipulate information to achieve certain political goals, or as part of a broader strategic plan to change a political situation. If it comes

from another country it can be considered as a way of attempting to undermine its sovereignty and this goes beyond traditional notions of propaganda.

In propaganda, you know the messenger. It is more difficult to counter the message when you don't know where it is coming from.

All this can seriously affect democracy, international relations, and freedom of expression.

Democracy relies on free speech and on an open debate among informed citizens on the state of their society and options for the future. For discussions to be meaningful, they need to be based on access to relevant information and diverse opinions, which relate to a common understanding of the key issues affecting society.

That is why a free and independent media has always played a central role in building a democracy. The quality of democracy very much depends on the quality of information and the capacity of the media to provide reliable information as well as a public space for free discussion. This is also why, in the history of journalism, so much time has been spent in the adoption of charters, codes of ethics and press councils.

The new challenges we face in the information sphere are therefore also challenges to democracy and international security.

While there is a clear need to combat the spread of false news and manipulation of information, there is no simple or one-size-fits-all answer which will rid us of this phenomenon. Either in law, the adoption of blocking policies or the use of artificial intelligence. We must avoid adopting answers that are too simplistic.

One of the main risks we face now is of excessive measures that would affect freedom of expression and access to an open Internet.

We have seen in recent years a number of new legislations adopted, or under consideration, in many countries asking Internet providers and social media companies to regulate online content. Such texts generally aim to tackle terrorist propaganda and hate speech, but also, at times, to combat fake news and the manipulation of information, including sometimes by a foreign power.

But we also see many other pieces of legislation which include references to defamation, national security or disrespect towards public bodies.

I believe it is important, first, to establish a clear distinction between, on the one hand, legal restrictions against terrorist content, violent extremism, and violent hate speech and, on the other hand, restrictions aimed at countering false information.

In the first category, there can be recognised exceptions to freedom of expression, even if it is important to ensure that it is established by law, in conformity with international standards, and that for each decision the principles of necessity, proportionality and due process are respected. This is the base of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In the second category, regarding false information, even if there are sometimes references made to national security or public order as also foreseen in article 19, the legal ground is more fragile and any restriction or legislation on the matter must be considered very carefully: government bodies or tribunals should not become “ministries of truth” and such attempts would seriously put at risk the freedom of expression.

In the most severe cases of intentional manipulation of information that could significantly endanger the safety of the people or public order, it is more important to ensure the identification and attribution of the origin of the false information, and to debunk the manipulation in the eyes of the public, rather than to try to pre-emptively block any kind of false news from circulating on the Internet.

What I would insist on is that legislation on restriction of content can be legitimate in some cases directly linked to violent content, but is certainly not the most effective way of countering fake news and disinformation in general.

We should, instead, look for a holistic response. This would involve, at the first level, increasing public awareness around the existence and the risks of manipulation of information. There can be specific awareness campaigns before an election period for example, but it is also a matter of maintaining permanent vigilance so that people develop critical reading skills.

That’s why media literacy, as a second level response, should become a priority, especially in school curricula, from primary school through higher education.

The third level could be to support the development of quality information, provided by professional journalists and independent and diverse media, including independent public service media.

Among the many response tools which have emerged in recent years are fact-checking initiatives.

In Norway for instance, four of the biggest news organisations decided to pull resources together and create Faktisk, a non-profit organisation that fact-checks claims online and delivers badges informing the reader of the reliability level of any given piece of news. It does this through an established vetting process and examination of key criteria, such as a commitment to non-partisanship and fairness, transparency of sources, transparency of funding and organization, transparency of methodology, and a commitment to open and

honest corrections. They have joined the existing International Facts Checking Network (IFCN) and are verified to follow the "Fact-checkers code of principles".

There are many interesting examples in different countries, with different media involved, either independently or jointly, which is important for the credibility of the fact checking process itself.

In France, Liberation gives an important space to its Checknews edition, AFP has created Factual dedicated to cross checking information, and is currently developing data journalism and verification tools, particularly for news videos on social networks. Le Monde launched Les Décodeurs and the Décodex project which identified more than 600 websites, and assessed their credibility. France Televisions dedicate a part of its evening news to fact-checking information circulating on social media.

Reporters Without Borders has also launched the Journalism Trust Initiative, a project with AFP, the European Broadcasting Union EBU and the Global Editors Network, and with media from a lot of different countries, to give a certification to reliable media which could be recognised and identified on social platforms.

Of course, media councils, working on the basis of a code of conduct, are still very useful in promoting quality standards of information. There could be social media councils comprised of Internet platforms and civil society actors in the future.

A fourth level would be the involvement of the technology companies which bear special responsibilities. They must abide by the law, of course, and act to prevent the dissemination of terrorist content and violent hate speech.

But they must also be more transparent with regards to commercial contracts with political actors, and could act against the use of bots and fake accounts involved in the dissemination of false information, through for instance the removal of accounts and blocking of content.

Furthermore the role of artificial intelligence and its impact on newsfeeds, should also be discussed more transparently with the media, as it has an impact on their distribution and revenue.

We have developed our recommendations in our [Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and “Fake News”, Disinformation and Propaganda](#) with UN and other international special Rapporteurs, in 2017.

To all these levels of action I would add one in particular: the efforts by states and authorities to provide better access to information and to act as reliable sources of information.

In conclusion, as we have seen, the answer to the risk that disinformation and manipulation of information poses is complex. And the responses will have to be developed at different level and in such a way as to complement one another. There is no simple and unique response.

This situation reinforces the necessity for a clear commitment by all participating States to combat disinformation in their own country, but also to renounce any kind of international manipulation that would be aimed at interfering in the political and social situation in another country.

It is, therefore, needed to increase the cooperation and the discussion in the OSCE, to ensure that policies designed to counter disinformation do not contradict the Human Rights commitments of the OSCE participating States and the free flow of information in the OSCE area .

In developing new policies, states should ensure that any regulation is respectful of freedom of expression and avoid a blanket restriction of content for political reasons or a fragmentation of the Internet and of access to information.

Governments have also a responsibility to inform citizens on the risks of false and unverified information and to put in place media literacy programs.

Finally, they should enable free, independent and pluralistic media to develop and support media self-regulation efforts and fact checking.

Information, today more than ever, is a public good that is critical to the very survival of our democracies.

This is why I am looking forward for our discussions with the experts, and with you members of this committee.