



**Report on the second expert roundtable:
Disinformation and media self-regulation**

25 June 2021

Opening speeches

Teresa Ribeiro
OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM)

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to our second expert meeting in the series of roundtables on disinformation, with today's session dedicated to disinformation and media self-regulation.

At our previous meeting just over a month ago, we examined how to tackle the issue of disinformation through the implementation of effective intergovernmental policies and international standards in line with media freedom commitments. This included discussions on defining disinformation, as well as examining the efforts of other international organizations on this issue.

I have gathered you here today to build on these discussions by looking in some detail at one aspect in particular: that of media self-regulation mechanisms. This is especially important when it comes to addressing modern-day disinformation, as it remains a difficult phenomenon to tackle. In particular, we will look at practical efforts by journalists' associations and self-regulation bodies, in the hope of producing concrete recommendations for the OSCE participating States and media entities. While there are many facets and layers to self-regulation, the one we are concerned with and will look at today is on the level of truthfulness of information in the media.

Perhaps a key question that will guide us today is: How and in what ways should the media be self-regulated to keep the trust of the audience that seeks factual and fair information?

With the speed at which disinformation can spread in the internet ecosystem, deciding if and how to regulate it can pose serious challenges – both to media companies and governments alike. In this regard, the digital era has not only

changed the way people communicate and receive and impart information, rather it has fundamentally and irreversibly transformed the nature of journalism. If it has also transformed media ethics itself, this remains to be seen.

At one end of the spectrum, governments have resorted to adopting regulations that enable them to directly interfere with, and have control over, content offline and increasingly online, removing and blocking content that they deem actual or potentially “illegal” or “false news”, and punishing social media companies with exorbitant fines if they fail to comply. However, in my view, media self-regulation cannot succeed in a repressive environment. On the contrary, it has been shown that, where media freedom and pluralism are guaranteed, self-regulation can help preserve the integrity of the media and protect it from government interference. Also important in this regard is to ensure the protection of human rights, namely our right to freedom of expression and opinion as well as other rights.

At the other end of the spectrum, governments delegate the responsibility and processes entirely or in part to media companies themselves. There are several voluntary self-regulation mechanisms, from press councils – or to use their modern name media councils – to media ombudsmen and codes of practice. However, we must not forget the risks associated with handing over *all power* to media companies or social media companies. After all, at the end of the day, they are still private entities whose priority is rather to make profits and stay in business, not necessarily to protect human rights such as freedom of expression. As a result, they do and will often err. As such, transparency of their content labelling and removal decisions, and access to appeals mechanisms are critical to enable concerned users to challenge any decision that affects content online.

As we will probably see from the forthcoming discussion, self-regulatory initiatives are underway across the OSCE region; our attention to them is therefore more important now more than ever, and I will continue to seek your views, as well as policy ideas, closely with other international organizations, academia and media NGOs working on this issue, to develop good practices and recommendations that can be implemented by participating States.

Alongside self-regulation, fact-checking by journalists and media literacy also play an important factor in challenging disinformation threats, namely through the use of critical thinking. By providing everyone with the tools to question and evaluate the information they receive and, increasingly crucially, the sources of that information, we can help make societies more enlightened and resilient to the effects of disinformation. One could call it a form of “rational censorship” or media self-regulation at the individual level. That is why the promotion of media and internet literacy must be a key priority in countering the harms of disinformation, and as such should be promoted at all levels of society, from the education system through to journalists’ organizations.

I cannot but mention in this regard the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and the impact it has on online content removal, which also poses new

challenges that we cannot ignore. That is why my Office continues to address this issue through the [#SAIFE](#) project to put a spotlight on AI and freedom of expression.

This roundtable will examine all these issues in greater detail and I am pleased that we are joined today by renowned international experts on the topic. As with the previous meeting, my Office has developed another [Policy Brief](#), which can be found on our [event webpage](#). The paper examines professional codes as well as approaches of regional bodies to media accountability, along with the practice of media councils and the importance of media literacy. As the largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization with a comprehensive approach to security, the OSCE is well placed to tackle this issue, by working with journalists, media organizations, civil society, NGOs, governments, and other international organizations.

I hope our discussions today will provide some useful food-for-thought as we move forward and continue to explore the topic, as well as examples and lessons learned with regard to current media self-regulation efforts.

Thank you for your attention.

Ricardo Gutiérrez
General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists

The outlook is not bleak, I am confident. On 23 June, the [Reuters Institute at Oxford University](#) published its [annual digital news report](#), an important report, which analyses trends in news consumption worldwide. This year's report shows that the overall trust in the news has increased by six per cent during the pandemic, thereby reversing the previous decline, especially in Western Europe and for media outlets with a reputation of reliable reporting.

Another interesting trend in this report: in countries with strong and independent public service media, the researchers observed greater consumption of trusted news brands – which is good news for journalists.

On 22 June, in Belgium, a university study investigated the best strategies to convince the 30 per cent of the Belgian population who are not yet vaccinated against COVID-19 – the study showed that the best way to get them on board was to provide them with nuanced, reliable information that does not make them feel guilty and which promotes autonomy. On the contrary, more threatening or coercive information was much less likely to be accepted by people. The study showed that 60 per cent of people who were against vaccination at the beginning of the campaign have changed their minds. Again, this is good news for journalists who do their job well.

As noted in the OSCE RFoM Policy Brief, disinformation undermines public trust in quality journalism and its role in a democratic society. Disinformation is the worst enemy of journalists. However, I am optimistic and confident, as I represent an “army” mobilized to fight disinformation – I am not talking about a

few fact-checking organizations but about 300,000 professional journalists across Europe who are committed to serving the public and the truth. Three hundred thousand journalists who adhere to the International Federation of Journalists' global charter of ethics, and national codes of journalistic ethics. This is a "weapon of mass destruction" against disinformation. The main strategy to fight disinformation is to give this army the support it deserves. We must guarantee their protection in an increasingly hostile environment, they must be guaranteed decent working conditions in an increasingly precarious economic context. This is the role of the public authorities, if they really want to defend media pluralism and press freedom.

In spite of this deleterious context, journalists and their representative organizations have in recent years invested in intense efforts to promote professional ethics in order to gain the trust of citizens. My organization, with the financial support of UNESCO, is building the project "[Building trust in media in South East Europe and Turkey](#)" being implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey, as well as in Kosovo. Through this project, we managed to improve media accountability mechanisms, self-regulation bodies, media internal governance, and media literacy among citizens, to strengthen civil society support for the media and demand for quality media.

For the past two years, with the financial support of the European Commission, my organization has been managing the main project promoting journalistic self-regulation in the EU. The project, [Media Councils in the Digital Age](#), brings together European press councils, media councils and two universities to better respond to the challenges posed by online disinformation, artificial intelligence, including its use and misuse, and the hostilities that journalists face.

I am here to tell you that, when it comes to fighting disinformation, all professional journalists' organizations in Europe, without exception, favour the path of journalistic self-regulation and increased support for professional journalism. I am not going to oppose the initiatives taken by NGOs and tech companies, but you should know that national journalist organizations remain very reserved, if not hostile, to any media self- or media-certification or labelling scheme. We believe that such schemes could give a false sense of security to citizens and could be misused by governments hostile to press freedom, to blame independent media for not obtaining certification. As designed, these self-assessment schemes will not prevent propagandist media from obtaining a quality label, and may prevent some independent media from obtaining such a quality label.

We all know within the profession that professional ethics are judged based on a piece meal basis, article by article, report by report, and not globally. Even media with a reputation for quality publish stories that violate ethics and require corrections. Press councils and media councils are there to point out discrepancies wherever they come from.

As journalists, we can tell you that we do not need any new anti-fake news law, we do not need State regulation. We need professional and ethical journalism, accountable to the public. While I can understand the call for co-regulation regarding online platforms, we do not recommend any co-regulation over editorial content. We remain also cautious regarding self-assessment, certification or labelling initiatives (including the Journalism Trust Initiative).

The real antidote for disinformation is a global policy based on five pillars:

- 1) Promote and support professional journalism – this requires States to put into practice international recommendations or commitments, not only those of the Council of Europe, on the safety of journalists and their working conditions.
- 2) Promote professional ethics, as UNESCO and EFJ are doing, through ethical codes and independent press councils, which include journalists, media owners and civil society. It is essential to include civil society, as information does not belong to the media or journalists but to citizens.
- 3) Promote Media literacy for all so that citizens themselves are able to distinguish between reliable and verified information and information that is not.
- 4) Promote media pluralism and diversity of media content – this is a positive obligation of States which are therefore supposed to put in place an appropriate legislative and policy framework.
- 5) Increase transparency from those in power – disinformation feeds on the lack of transparency.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a lot to be done. But I remain confident. I know that the national journalist organizations that I represent will be at your side and the OSCE's to promote and defend professional journalism, ethical journalism, media literacy, media pluralism, and transparency.

Thank you for your attention.

Panel presentations

Kjersti Løken Stavrum

Managing Director of Tinus Trust and former General Secretary of the Norwegian Press Association

Ms. Stavrum focused on Ethics and the Norwegian system of code of ethics as it turns 100 years old. From one angle, one should believe what one reads, writes and hears, but at the same time be critical – this is can be difficult and makes today's information society a struggle for many. Digital news and information is a fairly new avenue for warfare with ever-new tools. How can professional media sustain and build this crucial trust without letting "fake news" lose them their position?

Journalism ethics is a unique selling proposition for the newsroom and the media. Uniqueness is rare; coming up with a continuous stream of products is extremely difficult in practice. At a time when propaganda, disinformation and so-called “fake news”, and not least an increasing distrust in established media in many countries, excluding Norway, professional journalists should not be hesitant in communicating what they represent, what makes them professional and trust-worthy.

Can we apply business and public relations theory with the need for a unique selling point (USP) in the newsroom? A USP for the media has to be accountability, and in practice that is a commitment to a code of ethics, to a system for complaints, and to a system that is transparent, fair and fast. There must be a public promise from the newsroom and the editor in advance that journalists are to be trusted, not because they say so but because their methods can be verified, including what they publish.

In Norway, the press complaints system and code of ethics is nearly 100 years old. It has been revised numerous times over the years and adjusted to the development of journalism and publishing, but the principles still stand.

Ms. Stavrum detailed the Norwegian code of ethics, which consists of four chapters in the code: the first one is the role of the press in society, which is quite normative. The second and increasingly important is the section on integrity and credibility – one point notes that the editor and individual editorial staff must protect their independence, integrity and credibility, that the journalist and editor have to avoid dual roles, positions, commissions or commitments that create conflict. One can complain if you think you are subject to a story from a journalist that you think has a conflict of interest. The next chapter is on journalistic conduct and the relationship with sources. The code states that one must be critical in the choice of sources and ensure that the information provided is correct. It is good press practice to aim for diversity and relevance in the choice of sources. It is primarily a demand on journalists, but it also tells the reader that they can complain if journalists fail in meeting these requirements and to ensure they have checked the facts.

The fourth and last part focuses on rules for publishing. In particular, point 4.14 – all journalists and editors know point 4.14, which is still the single point that sticks out when the statistics on the rulings of the press council are published every year. This point states that those who have been subject to strong accusations shall, if possible, have the opportunity to simultaneous reply as regard factual information (not opinion). This sole point separates journalism from “trolls”. All edited media in Norway are part of the press complaints system: the journalists’ union, the editor’s organization, as well as the publishers’ organization, commercial TV, public broadcasters, radios, the national right-wing and left-wing publications, radio stations and podcasts that are published and edited by edited media. Some outlets are not part of the system. The press council consists of seven people, two of whom are representatives of journalists, and two from the editors. Three are then

members of the public, who are nominated by an independent committee to the board of press association that administers the press council.

With social media, the edited media are rising up with more self-esteem than before. We see a crucial need for trustworthy content. However, you cannot insist on being trusted, you have to adhere to a common, professional and trustworthy system. This hurts and challenges journalists and editors, to be criticized and have their journalistic pieces scrutinized in public. But this is crucial and press ethics are much-needed. We need to work more systematically to develop those kinds of systems on a global level.

Marina Tuneva

Executive Director of the Council of Media Ethics (North Macedonia)

I will talk about the role of our press council in tackling misinformation. The organization was established in 2014 and actively started working in January 2015. Since then, we have been quite active not only in processing press complaints and dealing with reactions of the public but also with public awareness activities, research, campaigns, publications etc., because we felt the need that the self-regulation system has to be promoted in the country, knowing the context and polarization among the media, and knowing the needs of the public for a system that is credible.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the [Council of Media Ethics in North Macedonia](#) had to adapt its work to the new circumstances. Misinformation and disinformation circulating as a result of the crisis have been considered very worrying phenomena, and our council had to start playing an important role in dealing with them. Our activities have been aimed at helping mainstream media to take appropriate steps to verify information before it is published, and to make immediate and complete corrections when necessary.

Promoting a public understanding of the difference between unregulated, irresponsible and often unfounded claims circulating on social media and responsible journalism was also a priority of the Council. In this regard, the organization continued to promote its Registry of Professional Online Media, established at the end of 2019.

Since the outbreak of the first coronavirus case in the country, the Council of Media Ethics has been reacting through press statements and media alerts requesting prudent and responsible reporting concerning the crisis. The council appealed to the media to act in a professional and ethical way, and to refrain from spreading untruths. There were frequent statements and reactions about various phenomena related to the threat of freedom of information and media freedom, as well as to negative media practices. The Council also alerted the media to avoid serving as platforms for creating division among people and warned that the coronavirus must become a “weapon” to be used by politicians, be they in power or in opposition. The Council of Media Ethics, individually but also in partnership with the Association of Journalists, the Independent Union of Journalists as well as

Media Workers, has repeatedly reacted to attempts aimed at pressuring journalists in the execution of their professional activities.

At the same time, the Council started working on encouraging media to play an important role in protecting human rights and in fostering their powering to serve as a forum for the inclusion of different voices in the public discourse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council has unfortunately witnessed how diversity has been increasingly used as a means of scapegoating, and spreading false accusations, conspiracy theories and hate speech against minorities.

With a view to upgrading the existing ethical framework in relation to journalistic reporting on minority groups, but also to raise awareness among journalists about their underrepresentation in the media, the "[Guidelines for inclusive media reporting on COVID-19](#)" was published with the support of UNESCO. The Council also continued with its tradition of rewarding professional stories on diversity inclusiveness. This year, the [OSCE Mission to Skopje](#) supported the process.

There were additional initiatives aimed at upgrading the ethical framework for media reporting. Guidelines for professional, responsible and ethical reporting on the coronavirus were prepared as part of efforts to help journalists distinguished between legitimate and reliable sources of information and speculation, half-truths and propaganda. The OSCE Mission to Skopje also supported the development of [Guidelines for online media reporting](#).

At a time when the authorities announced that they would monitor and punish people who publish misinformation on social media, i.e., untruths about the virus, as well as the media that cover this misinformation, the Council, as part of the professional media community, alerted institutions that they should ensure maximum transparency about the pandemic and the economic crisis, and not impose any restrictions on freedom of expression. It was clearly communicated to them that journalists must be provided with free access to information, to be able to look critically at the actions of the government and all political actors, and to scrutinize their response to the crisis.

Multi-sectoral co-operation among all stakeholders has been considered particularly important in combating the pandemic and "disinfodemia", as well as in addressing the problem of hate speech and discrimination. Initiatives were combined with media literacy as it could provide individuals with the critical thinking needed to tackle disinformation. Continuous education of the public is needed, and the active co-operation between civil society and high education institutions is considered to be very important in helping the public recognize and develop resistance to misinformation and disinformation. In this regard, active networking and co-operation among the press councils and the professional media community also continued.

We have been quite active in processes, discussions and debates with press councils in South East Europe and Turkey, discussing how to address disinformation, misinformation and hate speech, and coming up with initiatives

on how to jointly work on projects and future initiatives and involve all relevant stakeholders to appropriately address these problems in society.

From our point of view, disinformation remains a widespread phenomenon and needs a collective effort to be addressed, by primarily involving the news industry, social media platforms, civil society, and citizens themselves. These are important messages that we repeatedly try to communicate to the general audience and to the relevant stakeholders because we want to signal that self-regulation cannot succeed if there is no co-ordination, if there is no active networking, and if institutions themselves and other relevant actors do not meet the roles that are expected of them from the public.

Olaf Steenfadt

Project Director of the Journalism Trust Initiative at Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

It will not come as a surprise that at [RSF](#) we look at this topic from a human rights angle. In addition to defending journalists and journalism on the ground and protecting these freedoms, we are forced to look at the economic equation and sustainability or lack thereof of journalism as a main threat to the independence and freedom of the press, as well as tech policies and platform regulation, and of course the interrelation between sustainability and digital policies.

As a first takeaway, at least internally at RSF, we begin to understand that failing markets do not correct themselves. We need regulation in this particular moment and dire situation. We believe that ethics alone will not help and correct the failure of business models.

When we make this point, the first question we receive is if regulation of the media and digital policies could actually limit the freedom of expression and human rights? We looked into it thoroughly, talking to a lot of human rights scholars, and we believe that this is not the case, that freedoms do need strong safeguards to be accessible to all. If you take the freedom of movement, for instance, we need traffic lights and signs to travel safely, and we also need the enforcement of these rules and safeguards to enjoy our freedom of movement. This analogy helps to look at our topic and domain, as we see the whole quest of disinformation not so much as about quality – I agree with Ricardo that it would be a terrible idea to try to rank and judge the quality of an individual article, it can only go wrong – so in our domain we do not talk about information quality, but about information safety. This is the main quest we are confronting. As the topic is around self-regulation and this is our starting point when we looked into solutions, comparing and accessing the different codes of practice and editorial guidelines that exist around the world, what we found is that there is not so much deviation between them. The essence of what journalism is, and what describes it, is pretty much consensual, which is good. But we discovered two main deficiencies: 1) Compliance: in other words, in the journalistic community do we really stick to

our own norms, and what happens if we do not? This relates to the enforcement part. 2) Algorithmic amplification: as we all know, algorithmic indexation of content usually amplifies the exact opposition of ethical journalism, but rather sensationalism, “click bait”, hate speech, and falsehoods.

The original purpose we started with in inventing the [Journalism Trust Initiative](#) (JTI) was to reverse this logic. We believe that three ingredients are needed to do this: 1) to have an agreed and universal list of criteria, very basic ones. We chose a very ancient instrument – International Standardization Organization (ISO) type standards. They are fully self-regulatory; they are the opposite of a law. But increasingly important, ISO standards as a whole are tested and scalable. We are not inventing something but tapping into a well-established logic and infrastructure. Almost all media outlets we talk to use ISO standards today, for example in technical domains. So, running an ISO standard is in the DNA of most companies already, and that is why we chose this instrument in the first place. We succeeded in publishing the JTI as an ISO-type international standard at the end of 2019.

The second, equally important, one is to provide the IT infrastructure to allow media outlets to not only self-evaluate and self-assess their compliance with this standard but to turn this result into a machine-readable signal that can feed into algorithmic indexation, not only of search engines or news feeds of social media, but maybe even more importantly into programmatic advertising. From that angle the whole domain is tagged and labelled “brand safety”, which means advertisers have a strong demand to identify safe environments online. Of course, this happens in real time by signals and datasets, which need to be provided to, in the end which we hope will be a gamechanger, re-align with compliance with ethical norms in journalism. We have learned in our conversations with advertisers that up to 50 billion dollars of advertisement spent per year is lost due to ad fraud and mistargeting. Imagine, we could manage to redirect only a fraction of this back to ethical journalism, and this is what I mean by a game changer.

The third ingredient, which is still forthcoming, is the aspect of legal obligations particularly for platforms. This brings me to a term which is sometimes a bit mystified: co-regulation. What it actually means is to have an inner core of self-regulatory criteria. We do not want governments, regulators, advertisers or platforms to tell us what is good or bad journalism. That is why the JTI has been developed and is governed by the journalistic community itself. But we need governments, regulators, advertisers and platforms to make it work. We believe this is where an outer shell of “hard law” is needed to create the respective obligations and an enabling environment.

The law references the technical standards; also because technology changes often, there is nevertheless a co-regulatory mechanism. As a manufacturer or service provider you can abide by a voluntary industry

standard and prove you are compliant with that standard, which limits your liability, but can also chose not to. In very broad strokes this is how the co-regulatory mechanism works. This is what we are suggesting in a number of current cases of regulatory processes going on at national and transnational levels.

In closing, let me address one misunderstanding that prevails around the JTI: it is not about content. It would be the wrong idea to stipulate criteria of the quality of individual articles, this can only go wrong. The JTI is only about process, it is about identity and transparency criteria for ownership for example, and it is about editorial management systems, complaints processes, and correction policies which we do believe are objectifiable.

Dr. Yuri Kazakov
Deputy Chair, Public Collegium on Press Complaints

Today, we are discussing disinformation, this is an oxymoron for me for two reasons: we live in very different worlds. We at the collegium have been addressing press complaints. We have just approached online mass media. Why is it so important? Why do we need to be careful here? Simply because we need to know and understand that we will not qualify any wrong/fake news as disinformation, as those are different things and they do not always coincide. Why are we concerned about this? True journalism is about integrity and that is the cornerstone of journalism. Disinformation is the infection which is spreading through our society. So this is part of the media content and disinformation is a means of deception for some “mercenary” goals. What matters for me is not whether a mistake was caused by some error, it is not an error that a journalist would have a right to commit, it is different, what we are talking about is anti-journalistic practices and activities. We are dealing with people being misled on the receiving end and creating deliberately false information, whereby the goal has nothing to do with journalism. This is about damaging the subject of manipulation and an attempt to control behaviour and manage moods/emotions. In military language, this could be described as defeating an opponent/adversary; disinformation is a means of information warfare.

The objective with disinformation is to pull a story out of its context. We cannot talk about journalism and ethics at the same time. Journalism is a profession, a trade, and self-regulation is something that provides integrity and independence, including to oversight of the State. So propaganda can easily be transformed into battle/information warfare. It is not a trade, but a specialization, a sort of skill.

On a separate note, we live in a non-traditional society; this society has very low critical thresholds. If education is about society’s conscience, societal conscience also needs to be affirmed, which takes time, so journalism in Russia is quite different from Western journalism. We are not quite ready to be professional and ethical in Russia. It has not gone through the road we expected it to go through. Our public collegium as a self-regulating body has

been around for 16 years. It is also part of the AFC, the Independent Alliance that includes Russia. There is also the self-regulation council SOMC in Russia, which operates mostly in the former Soviet countries.

In addition, there is an opinion expressed by an anti-propaganda commission, which includes the word disinformation. In a relatively short span of time, we adopted five decisions, but as far as the international consortium is concerned, it is not making decisions on complaints, it is only expressing opinions, and therefore it is quite a soft way of expressing itself.

I would like to mention some additional important aspects – when working with propaganda we do not work with misinformation for a number of reasons: There is no clear understanding of what disinformation is in ethical documents of journalism, which is the right way to go about it, because anything that features disinformation/misinformation is not journalist reporting. However, it is also important that we need criteria to understand the content that we deal with. There is the possibility of amendments being introduced that can stipulate that journalism is incompatible with involvement in warfare, with the manipulation of the reasoning of the audience, and that publication of the material that features elements of misinformation is incompatible with journalism norms and principles.

Pay attention that we do not use only elements of misinformation but also traits of disinformation, but traits are quite difficult to identify. We would be grateful to other colleagues in elaborating on eligibility criteria; it would help us distinguish between journalism and propaganda. When working with disinformation, another important thing is to work with journalists; we need to be able to substantiate judgments. Self-regulation bodies also need to be able to work to raise the literacy of the general public. The public, especially the Russian public, needs to be able to distinguish between journalist reporting and propaganda.

The moderator clarified that, for translation purposes, journalism is a profession and propaganda/disinformation is a craft.

Alex Grech

Executive Director of the 3CL Foundation and University of Malta

I want to talk about media technology and education within the context of post-truth society. This is quite a loaded term, post-truth can be defined as relating to, or denoting, circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Meanwhile, society can be defined as a large group of people in a defined territory, who live together in an organized way, and share a common culture. At the end of 2016, in reaction to the Brexit vote and the Presidential elections in the US, the Oxford Dictionary in fact chose “post-truth” as the word of the year.

We are accustomed to “post-truth society” being associated with a raft of terms that challenge the very notion of what should constitute a democratic and inclusive society. Some of these challenges include: the decline and fall of reason; disruption of the public square; the spread of misleading information; “fake news”; culture wars; the rise of subjectivity; filters, silos and tribes; attention deficits’ trolls, polarisation and hyper-partisanship; conversion of popularity into legitimacy; manipulation of “facts” by “populist” leaders, governments and fringe actors; algorithmic control, targeted messaging and native advertising; and surveillance capitalism.

I have a background in teaching media and working for tech companies, the question I began to ask was, regarding media, technology and education: are they making our lives better or worse? What I did over a period of time, using the 3CL foundation, with whatever funds we had, I levered on networks, and we got together as interdisciplinary a group as you could get, from technologists and academics to bloggers, philosophers, artists, all the way to a prosecutor, and journalists. The whole idea was we wanted to kick-start what an interdisciplinary global community of practice would look like, to determine if the three factors mentioned above are a problem or not, and if we can find a solution.

Then COVID-19 kicked in. What do you do when presented with such a mess? I reassembled some people and produced a book to be published on 8 July 2021. In my world, I advise the European Commission on infrastructure projects, including related to Blockchain, education and decentralization as a means of doing things differently.

I want to talk about two things: Old problems, which we all seem to know but what I want to focus on is how can we align incentives. Old media, new media and how they hybridize. The news often becomes a story on a mainstream online media outlet. By necessity all media outlets had to go online. Most online media outlets have commentary going on behind the scenes, which very soon becomes shared by the same mainstream media outlets onto social media pages, and eventually you have all these posts happening on social media platforms. When we talk about journalism, we often get obsessed with the ethical journalism idea, but what is happening in practice is what started as information very quickly becomes susceptible to filter bubbles and surveillance and comes back via social media in the form of disinformation, filter bubbles and echo chambers. If we look at the side of media self-regulation, inevitably we have to think of these feedback loops. What we used to consider being old media has become something else, because of the internet; this is an old discourse and has been discussed for the past 20 years.

What I have tried to do is I pulled away and went back to the drawing board, to look at these three variables of media outlets, technology and education.

If we have to look at old media, we do not need to talk about the problems, the fact that the former audience is engaged elsewhere and there is an end to privileged access to information due to new technology giving everyone

access to information, making everyone a citizen journalist, although citizen journalists do not have access to people in power. But this idea of a business model in trouble is something we would agree to. Being locked in the advertisement model which has been there since the Victorian times. And the inability to compete with what social media does really well: Clickbait. Then, when you are dealing with a situation where everyone considers themselves an expert, you have lost the monopoly of storification.

There is potential within this hybridization, where media outlets move up the value change, if you used to run a newspaper, you can run a TV station thanks to the technology now available. Another aspect is pilots: there are opportunities for old media to consider new partnerships and subscription models, that is the media side.

However, when looking at interconnections, what do we often blame? What we often blame is platform capitalism, where the user is a product and where the truth is not a priority. We heard today about big and small data, algorithmic governance, surveillance, and the whole notion of anonymity.

The business model, again, when looking at social media, is quite flawed; we have the Silicon Valley hegemony of emerging tech. We are still locked with this business model and advertisement, sometimes it is clickbait and sometimes it is not clear what is and is not content. In terms of solutions, there is regulation: is Facebook a platform or a media outlet? Should you regulate it as if it were a mainstream media outlet? However, on the other side, those of us who saw the advantages of the internet as a free space where information is free and where you can say what you want, that will be problematic to address in Western Europe for instance. Looking at the GDPR, which is drafted to protect the right of the individual, it completely does not work when you look at decentralized technologies. The EU is also trying to grapple with this idea of self-sovereign identity. If you start to think of who determines our identity – is it us or other people? We should take control of our own identity and identity records. There is a lot going on right now, especially with the EU building infrastructure, based on the Blockchain as a public good. These are things that people should be looking at right now.

In terms of education, if I were the OSCE, I might try to fund action research and to look at what works and what does not. From experience, some of the most innovative solutions are coming from small countries, such as Estonia and Malta.

Education has many problems: the first one is whatever is being served as an academic model is not necessarily aligned with the needs of 21st century citizens, the idea of one size fits all, the misalignment of the media market. We do not know what the education model will be like post-COVID-19, let alone in many countries where education is considered a public good, while in others it is not, such as in the US.

What I suggest we, and the OSCE, could look at is investing in media literacy, digital literacy; we need to invest in media literacy for journalists as opposed

to just citizens. But we also need digital literacy for all citizens and for the youth. Once you get away from the concept of education and start thinking of life-long learning and the fact that all of us, so-called experts in our own field, need to keep thinking of the bigger picture before we can drill down into solutions, it is something we all need to learn, as otherwise we risk being in silos. Sometimes these solutions can be very simple, they can be hackathons, and something the OSCE could do, as the EU has done in the past.

I would go back and consider pilots that demystify technologies, speak in a language that can be understood by common people. We need to address the elephant in the room. New media used to be something flippant, but new media kills, journalists – those working for a mainstream media outlet or for citizen media – get killed because of what they blog.

The OSCE should consider forging alliances with those who have been around for a long time, such as the Internet Society in the US. Not just with those, but also with activist networks who can be encouraged to come up with small solutions for big problems.

To conclude: my mind map is like an eye test, not as a definitive, prescriptive framework but as something that can be modified from one minute to the next. But we do need to consider the fact that media does not exist in its own echo chamber, that there is this relationship with technology, that we are facing a new media ecosystem, and that education itself, with its own problems, could come up with some solutions.

The important question we need to answer is whether emerging technologies can eventually contribute to an immediate future where a monopoly (of information) is impossible. Digital disruption can be found in the most mundane of applications. The alternative is not necessarily inferior. The alternative is increasingly likely to become mainstream once COVID-19 becomes history.

The moderator mentioned that it is important to look into the question of whether in the immediate future a monopoly of information is indeed impossible because of technology, or whether it is possible because of it.

Discussion and questions

1) Today, journalists are deprived of the opportunity they had for decades to rely on a source and not name them. If a journalist, even with a good reputation but does not reveal the source, the information is deemed less reliable. However, there are circumstances that can limit the indication of the source. How can we solve this dilemma?

Ricardo Gutiérrez

I do not fully agree with the statement/question. It is an important question for journalists dealing with sources, it is one of the most important parts of the

job, but I would say that the audience has the capacity to understand when a journalist needs to hide its sources, in some investigative stories it could put people at risk. What I believe, I insisted on the need for those in power to be more transparent, I believe that journalists also need to be more transparent on their internal procedures. In case a journalist needs to protect its source, they should explain why in that particular case it is needed to hide the identity of the source to protect the person. That is again a way to be in a relationship of trust with the audience, to be more transparent on internal procedures and decisions, and to explain why, in some cases, we need to protect sources and in other cases why it would be better to mention, when possible, the identity of any source. In some cases, it is also an ethical commitment to protect journalists' sources.

Moderator

That is why we talk of the protection of the *confidentiality* of sources, not all sources; journalism is not a secretive profession by nature.

Olaf Steenfadt

We looked at this when drafting and adopting the JTI standard document, which includes a clause on anonymity and dealing with sources. It sounds pretty technical but to have a policy in place as a publisher on how to deal with sources, and to make this policy public and explain to the public how you do it, and what reasons qualify to keep a source anonymous. This helps a lot to explain and establish and regain trust in this particular bracket.

Alex Grech

The issue here is trust, the challenge we have is that the affordances of new media mean you have to keep on proving your trust in journalists. On the other hand, you have an entire system against you, as soon as you have a piece of news you will have blame going around. The issue of trusted sources is important as people risk their lives for that. How do you make it clear when a journalist can/cannot reveal his or her source, and make clear that it is in the interest of everybody that with that specific story the source must be kept secret? We can regulate it or face the facts, whereby most media outlets are competing with clickbait that masquerades as news items. It might be more convenient for a Head of State to speak via a blog rather than a national newspaper. So regarding trust, how can you prove it?

Moderator

Trust has increased a little bit, which is important for journalistic associations and the profession.

Yuri Kazakov

Referenced the code of ethics of journalists about the professional secret in Russia. There is a statement that a breach of anonymity can be revealed

when it is believed that the source twisted the facts or when revealing the source is the only way to prevent substantial and grave damage to the public. It is the journalist who decides whether a situation qualifies for a disclosure. There is also a media ethics standard, which states that the journalist is more liable for protecting their sources and the professional organizations that they associate themselves with shall identify the desirable degree of protection of confidentiality.

Kjersti Løken Stavrum

I think that we must keep in mind that there are so many different anonymous sources, some of them are vulnerable and need to be protected, and that is extremely difficult in the digital age. The question is can you grant sufficient anonymity on a long-term basis for this particular source. On the other hand you have a lot of other different anonymous sources, some have an interest in remaining anonymous. As a reporter, you risk being used by anonymous sources. In any case, the information needs to be cross-checked, which is challenging and difficult. But there is no fairness in this. When you have anonymous sources you have the risk that people will not trust what you write.

There was an interesting case in Norway, where a media outlet chose to reveal its source that had been anonymous. When it was discovered that the source turned against a journalist, which he was entitled to do as they had granted him anonymity, but they chose to reveal his identity, which sparked a huge debate in Norway on anonymous sources. It was a complaint case and the media outlet was criticised for naming a source.

2) Can journalists work ethically if the media are directly/indirectly controlled by the government and how should journalists be freed from the government?

Marina Tuneva

I can see the role of self-regulation here, as cases of this kind have been reported to our press council frequently, where journalists complained that information is centralized or in a way controlled or use limited sources of information, then they come across this problem in their reporting. We try to convince journalists and media that it is important not only to understand the meaning of self-regulation but also to get involved in the work of the press council. If they do it, then they will clearly understand the messages by not only increasing the sources of information and finding alternative voices, but also if they see that some ethical norms have been violated in the media reports then they can complain to the press council. I see the role of self-regulation very clearly in this process.

Olaf Steenfadt

Independence is a very high bar, which is quite important, but a first step towards that is transparency. Our take is if a publication controlled by a government is transparent about it, it might not be as dangerous as if it were

hidden, or worse mixed with economic interests and proxy owners and trades over media ownership and other commercial interests. This is a starting point, even extending to corporate publications. It is a question we have been asking ourselves also on sustainability, at corporate publications. If it is transparent about its editorial mission, we might see good journalism from these publications, then it is already a huge achievement. This is exactly the same with government ownership of media.

Kjersti Løken Stavrum

Last year, Norway got a new media responsibility law that the media sector has worked on for many years. We had a media freedom law, now it has been transformed into a media responsibility law, which sets out clearly the responsibilities of the media outlet and by law states the independence of the editor.

Mikhail Fedotov

Disinformation and media self-regulation, when, within the framework of our public collegium, we consider certain complaints, we simply cannot ascertain whether this or that piece of information is truthful or not. We are not sure right away if it is disinformation or misinformation or if the information was correct. We cannot ascertain the validity. We need to ascertain if there was a violation or not of journalists' behaviour, how the information was collected, what means of information collection was used, did anyone try to buy the journalist etc.

What is disinformation, what is "fake news"? Fake news is a piece of information that does not reflect reality, which is presented as real/truthful information. Unfortunately, it is very challenging to ascertain this through media self-regulation. Specifically, if you consider the secretiveness of a source, Mr. Kazakhov described our ethics code, but the law on media has a different slant. It states that journalists must protect their source of information and there are no excuses for a journalist to deviate from this principle. For example, if the editor knows this, the editor and staff should also protect the source. But it may be forced to reveal the secret if a court of law so orders. But this exemption does not refer to journalists. Journalists must reveal their secret source; this is not a journalist's right, it is a journalist's obligation, that is what the law states, practice could be different unfortunately. So any time we consider this during our sessions on complaints, whenever a journalist would step out and say it needs to protect its source, we would reply that we are not urging them to reveal their source, we are just asking how they got that information and if they vetted it and how, in order to assess the journalist's professionalism and whether they have been compliant with the ethical rules.

3) How can an official press release of a governmental department be considered disinformation and how can we solve this problem and stop labelling everything with disinformation?

Ricardo Gutiérrez

It is the responsibility of newsrooms to evaluate the credibility of any statement, be it official or private. One of the points raised by this question is about the capacity/power we give to online platforms to censor, which is a real problem.

To inform you about our current discussions with the European Commission, we are trying to convince them to modify the current framework of the digital service act, a new EU regulation of digital services. The current state of the European Parliament opinion on this DSA regulation will give the opportunity to online platforms to remove, censor, and edit editorial content, which is something we cannot accept as a journalist representative organization. So we are putting pressure on the European Parliament to modify and change their opinion on this new project of regulation in order not to allow online platforms, in any case, to remove or edit journalistic content online. This should remain the power of media companies, journalists and newsrooms; we cannot give that power to online platforms as they have other criteria than the public interest. A part of disinformation is monetized for instance; therefore we should be cautious with this problem.

Olaf Steenfadt

I have two recommendations:

1) One relates to ownership transparency: the first section of the JTI is all about ownership transparency specifications, there is a Council of Europe recommendation on media ownership transparency, and clearly it is not rocket science, it is only about political will to make it work and a prerequisite to due concentration control – you have to know who is controlling what in order to drive media pluralism on a supply side level. In many countries this is unfortunately still forthcoming.

2) The second recommendation would derive from JTI, one standard clause on anonymity of sources: we found that for many media outlets running this standard as a checklist, as a diagnostic tool, in most cases when there are flaws it is because, smaller outlets, they did not think of it. Running this, they might run across the anonymity of sources policy as a good thing to have. This underlines the heavy need for training on ethics and self-regulatory practices inside the newsroom. Sometimes we see it funded primarily by Google and Facebook, the focus is on digital tools, but should also focus on ethical practice and editorial standards in the newsroom, which is a domain where State actors and transnational organizations can play an important role.

States should support and conduct training on media ethics. Last year, Germany developed a bill that fell flat and was not even implemented. The purpose of these subsidies was on digital distribution tools, and that was not exactly the main need. This is the point of focus, if there is a drive for State subsidies or any other subsidies/support for the media, at least one specific focus should be on editorial guidelines and ethical practice.

Question to Marina Tuneva – In North Macedonia, you have not mentioned a single case when the council dealt with disinformation – does that mean there were no such cases or you could not reach a decision?

Marina Tuneva

We have been closely monitoring what happened during the pandemic regarding media reporting. What we noticed is that there is one-sided reporting. It seems to be a phenomenon related to disinfodemia. When journalists use only one source of information or do not clearly state the source of information, the public cannot trust the information. Almost 50 per cent of press complaints refer to this type of problem. We have been advocating for changes in newsroom practices. We have been involving them in capacity events. On the other hand, we have been approached by the media who clearly explained the dynamics of their work during the pandemic, the limited access to information from institutions, and their inability to work on investigative journalism, which limited their work. Therefore, we decided to expand the discussion and involve all relevant stakeholders, such as representatives of institutions and civil society, to discuss the issue together. We had to alert politicians and institutions that they need to be more open and transparent, because at certain points/stages, they were closed and whole processes of information sharing were centralised, regarding virtual events and press conferences. Journalists were limited in their ability to explore more and collect more information regarding details of the topics they raised. They had to seek alternative voices to be able to cover stories. On the other hand, this concept of investigative reporting seems to be unusual for these circumstances. On the one hand, you have centralization of information, and on the other you need to invest more in investigative stories, which requires a lot of work and effort, and then the public sees it as unusual, because most of the information is copy pasted, covered from press releases from other institutions. We should not label press releases or be too focused on State institutions' communication. We need to diversify sources of information and invest in journalism capacity-building. In this regard, it is important to work on initiatives aimed at deconstructing this anti-press sentiment. We see in general that the public does not trust the media. A lot of efforts need to be invested in this direction as well.

Alex Grech

My interpretation of media self-regulation is that journalists are looking to other media, to social media, to adopt the same codes of ethics. For someone like me, I am coming from a different point of view, that the former audience is no longer, sadly, taking broadcast journalism for the ethical journalism it may be and if things were supposed to be working well, we would not have seen people storming Capitol Hill in the US on 6 January. The information was also coming horizontally in this case, with people talking in their own echo chamber. You do not need the infrastructure of a media house to secure a following. How can you get trust back? There are technology firms, [Make Media Great Again](#), which try to help media companies that are trying to enter

the market. Journalists however have to react much faster and compete with stories being leaked untruthfully in some cases. My red flag: we need to be careful; the world has changed and has been changing for the last 10-15 years.

The OSCE and other powerful organization can dig a bit deeper; codes of ethics alone will not cut it. Forcing companies like Facebook to come to the table with fines will not be enough, but it needs to be done as that is where a lot of people get their information and news from and, crucially, misinterpreting it.

Kjersti Løken Stavrum

In Norway, we see several light initiatives starting up, with one or two reporters in the media house. The JTI and RSF are great, but they demand a lot of capacity from newsrooms. It is very challenging for a small newsroom to adhere to all those recommendations. At the same time, to develop self-regulation is a process. Recently, over the last year, we have seen huge confrontations on different non-fiction books, which have sparked a similar demand for ethical guidelines. This has recently ended with ethical guidelines for the publishing sector, not the complaints commission but guidelines that they agree upon. Just this small paper lifts the bar, makes them more ethical and improves the situation. For those societies without a well-functioning self-regulation system, you should encourage people with influence to get to the room and try to start the process on creating guidelines and take it from there, and that their target group should be small outlets.

Olaf Steenfadt

Following up on what Mr. Grech said referencing the self-regulatory and voluntary initiatives around big tech firms and regulation and Ricardo remembers well the high-level group on disinformation in 2018, where the code of practice was one outcome. It was pretty clear from the beginning that voluntary non-binding recommendations by companies like Facebook and Google would not deliver. It was evaluated and now we see a bit more teeth. It is a very valid lesson for this round regarding the limitations of self-regulation. Non-binding regulations are good but you need enforcement and evaluation as well. Without it you might not see the results you aspire to see.