Report on the sixth expert roundtable:
The role of public service media in countering disinformation

20 June 2022

1. <u>Opening speech</u>

Teresa Ribeiro
OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Distinguished delegates of the OSCE participating States,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

It is a pleasure to welcome you today to our sixth roundtable dedicated to the topic of disinformation.

As we have seen in our previous roundtables, the danger of disinformation has grown substantially with the onset of the internet and the speed at which words and images can travel across borders and territories. It is therefore more important than ever that we look at ways to counter harmful disinformation. One of them, which we will discuss today, is the role of public service media.

As a public good, public service media is an important platform for promoting citizens' democratic rights. The PSM have been especially relied upon in tackling disinformation and keeping citizens informed of the dangers, that disinformation may pose, providing quality, trustworthy information.

The BBC in the UK, as one of the largest broadcasters in the world, serves as a prime example of a successful public service broadcaster, having been established in 1922 with its core mission to "inform, educate and entertain." I couldn't sum up the role of public service media any better myself.

With that in mind, I recently returned from an official visit to Romania, where I met with representatives of the public service broadcaster, TVR, which is committed to strengthen its relevance as a public interest defender. During my visit, I reiterated the importance of ensuring the broadcaster's independence in order to safeguard quality journalism in the country.

Before that, in April this year, I also visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the public service broadcaster, BHRT, is facing numerous challenges. Over 800

journalists and staff working for the broadcaster are at risk of losing their jobs due to a lack of funding and exorbitant debt. This situation must be rectified.

Alongside my visits, the RFoM also provides legal expertise on the topic. Earlier this year, for example, my Office prepared a legal review on amendments to Moldova's Code of Audiovisual Media Services, underlining risks of ceding control over the public service broadcaster, TRM, to the parliamentary majority.

Today, we will also hear about the experience in Armenia and Belgium, from our expert speakers, who will provide an insight into the challenges that the public service broadcasters face in relation to disinformation.

As one of our speakers, will probably attest to today, a recent report from his organization has shown that, among 546 state-administered media companies in 151 countries, 80 per cent lack editorial independence. This is a shocking and deeply concerning figure and stresses the urgent need for governments across the OSCE region to do more to ensure the financial sustainability and independence of public service media.

Public service media experience continued and increasing pressure throughout the OSCE region. This comes not just from governments' interference and threats to cut sustainable funding, but also from alternative sources of information cutting their shares of the general viewership of the PSM and facilitating, through disinformation, the spread of biased bubbles in societies.

We have nevertheless come a long way in establishing rules, standards and expectations when it comes to public service media, which underpins their importance and why we must preserve them. I would like to take a moment to enumerate some of the key values that make them invaluable:

First, they are accountable to the public that funds them;
They are accessible to all sections of the population;
They are independent, both in terms of ownership and editorial values;
They signify a more pluralistic and diverse media landscape;
They provide quality, trustworthy information;
Lastly, they are universal and representative of the societies they serve, particularly of women, minorities and marginalized communities.

These values, as the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly decreed in a set of recommendations in 2019, show that public service media have, I quote, "an indispensable mission to fulfil in democratic societies," providing a forum for pluralistic debate and a means of countering disinformation.

With the onset of the internet, citizens are increasingly turning away from traditional, legacy media to alternative channels of information, particularly online. This has made them especially vulnerable to the dangers of disinformation. Faced with these modern challenges, ladies and gentlemen, the role of public service media has become more relevant than before.

Just five years ago, in 2017, the RFoM, together with the special rapporteurs on freedom of expression of the UN, the organization of American States, and African Commission on Human and People's Rights, issued key recommendations in a joint declaration on "fake news", disinformation and propaganda.

In particular, we urged States to ensure the presence of strong, independent and adequately resourced public service media, which operate under a clear mandate to serve the overall public interest and to set and maintain high standards of journalism, to ensure an enabling environment for freedom of expression and as a means of tackling disinformation.

I am confident that the OSCE participating States should therefore continue to allow independent, public service media to flourish. They should refrain from cutting funding or pursuing censorship to prevent PSM from playing their important watchdog role.

Governments should also guarantee the editorial independence of public service media to ensure they are able to continue producing accurate, reliable news and information as well as quality journalism, as an antidote to the scourge of disinformation, and not allow them to fall prey to private business interests or party-affiliated influence.

In this regard, I hope that our speakers will be able to provide us with an overview of the checks and balances needed to prevent broadcasters from turning into government mouthpieces.

Public service media on their part also have responsibilities. Those in Europe should work together to implement the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) guidelines and editorial principles. Today, we will be able to discuss in more detail on what this entails.

The key responsibility, in the context of today's roundtable topic, is for public service media to make countering harmful disinformation one of their main priorities and engage with social media platforms, civil society, governments and other stakeholders to develop a multi-stakeholder approach to tackling it.

I cannot stress enough the need to adopt a comprehensive approach to the problem of disinformation. The OSCE and my institution, as the world's only intergovernmental media freedom watchdog, are needed now more than ever, whereby there cannot be security without media freedom.

As we can see, ladies and gentlemen, with disinformation posing an ever-greater threat to the security of the OSCE region, to the very democratic foundation of societies and to citizens' right to be informed, we must and can do more.

The best antidote to disinformation is to demonstrate our commitment to quality journalism, to public service media, and to democratic values.

On that note, there is a lot of work that remains to be done and for us to unpack. I hope that we will cover some of that ground today, with the goal of producing clear, practical recommendations for the OSCE participating States to act upon, in order to make our societies stronger and more resilient to the dangers posed by disinformation.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to our discussions.

2. **Panel presentations**

Minna Aslama Horowitz
Researcher at the Nordic Observatory for Digital Media and Information Disorder (NORDIS)

I could not agree with the Representative more. I have studied Public Service Media (PSM) for some 20 years now, and I am currently researching PSM and disinformation in the Nordic countries. I want to address PSM in my perspective as a researcher and then present a framework we have developed to address the concrete role of PSM in combating disinformation based on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe resolution.

First, why do PSM matter?

At NORDIS, we work with fact-checkers and policy-makers, with a focus on media literacy. I was slightly disheartened when I read the new Strengthened Code of Practice for platforms that was recently publicized by the EU and which connects in a way with the new Digital Services Act. The Code of Practice features the role of civil society, fact-checkers and individual users as well as governments, but not PSM. As we know, platforms and the challenges they face present a double-edged sword for PSM; PSM need platforms to reach audiences, to achieve universality.

However, PSM also face certain risks, one of them being to operate in a context where disinformation may be rampant. The other aspect is that disinformation must also be understood in the context of information disorder, a term originally coined by the Council of Europe in 2017. It distinguished between misinformation (accidental sharing of information without checking its veracity), disinformation (intentional spread of false information) and malinformation (deliberate weaponziation of content to deliberately cause harm to a person or group).

The underlying idea of misinformation is trust, or lack thereof. People feel they need to spread (alternative) information in the belief they are doing a good deed, even if it is not verified or vetted, as they believe that mainstream media are not worth their trust.

In parallel, we can differentiate between emerging PSM countries and mature PSM countries. In Finland, the public service broadcaster, Yle, is constantly bombarded with complaints by commercial competitors, as they cannot address the platforms that interfere with their journalistic business model.

We also have clear policy recommendations and guidelines, one being the resolution of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly. What does it mean if we operationalize this resolution? We developed a framework to assess what different PSM organizations are doing, focusing on four countries (the Czech Republic, Spain, Finland and the UK) as they represent different styles of national media systems in Europe. First, we looked at different statistical indicators that describe the media landscape, audience, preferences, and the role of PSM as a market share resource. We know from previous studies that the stronger the PSM, the higher the resilience against online disinformation.

We then looked at the Council of Europe mandate; what do these organizations do in terms of fact-checking, content addressing disinformation, media literacy, how do they address young people and disinformation, what new innovations do they provide to build trust, and what kind of collaboration do they undertake? We also interviewed experts within and outside PSM to give us ideas of how they view the role of PSM.

As part of our findings, we saw that capacities differ. There are surprisingly many activities that all these organizations in these countries do to tackle disinformation. There is a modest degree of transferability because these countries and organizations are so different. Providing one-size-fits-all guidelines is somewhat difficult. We also saw that these organizations viewed fact-checking in very different ways at the time (it is perhaps different now), which was viewed more as part of their traditional journalistic practices and quality journalism, whereas others, such as the BBC for instance, now have a fact-checking unit. However, there are also different understandings of what constitutes fact-checking.

We saw a modest degree of collaboration among PSMs; this is something that can be improved and enforced. Non-profit organizations can help by providing media literacy and independent journalism that could easily fit into the values of PSM. Importantly, literacy activities were a strong suit and this kind of educational role was emphasised by external experts and PSM professionals. This is also important because the information disorder is not going away, we cannot dial back the clock to the "good old times" when we were not in this situation. In some sense, media literacy efforts are a way of empowering citizens themselves, and it is positive that PSM are seen as one of the key organizations – in the countries that we examined at least.

To summarize policy recommendations, the antidote to disinformation is trust. We saw this during the COVID-19 pandemic, when PSM organizations were gaining considerably in terms of viewership, listeners and online audiences, as they were trusted. However, trust does not happen automatically in this complex digital ecosystem that we live in.

As was said by the OSCE Representative, governments should ensure that PSM are politically, editorially, and financially independent to be able to responsibly and credibly play a leading role in fighting disinformation. This gives the audience trust in PSM.

PSM should be allocated resources to be able to produce quality content and lead digital media literacy efforts. They should also expand their online presence as a way of increasing their impact. We do not have a normative standard for PSM, as it is everything and anything, therefore we have different approaches towards different organizations.

PSM should be encouraged or even required to collaborate with other news and content producers as well as fact-checking groups. PSM should also involve in more meaningful ways the citizenry in its anti-disinformation efforts as, ultimately, it is the PSM's impact on audiences that will make a difference in countering disinformation. PSM therefore need partners that can enhance and multiply that trust. We have a good example from Norway, where fact-checkers are supported by commercial and public media organizations, and where they work together to combat disinformation.

Lastly, I am currently carrying out research on the Nordic countries. The EBU's Media Intelligence Service will help us gather information from public media organizations across Europe in the near future.

Nicola Frank
Head of Institutional and International Relations, European Broadcasting Union (EBU)

I was heartened by the words of the OSCE Representative and her strong message about the important role of public service media. EBU has established a regular exchange of information with the Representative and her office on developments related to PSM in the OSCE region. We also welcome the Representative's visits to PSM, which help to support them.

EBU is an alliance of public service media organizations with members in 56 countries, which reaches beyond the EU. Our members have television channels, radio, and online offers and are active on social media platforms.

I wish to highlight one of our services at EBU – the Eurovision News Exchange. Public service media across our membership are the biggest newsroom, employing more than 40,000 journalists who report from their regions/countries to provide quality information to their audiences. As an organization, we connect public service newsrooms in more than 30 countries and have 60 years of sharing video news content between broadcasters and other partners. This is essentially a network of trust, which is one of the most important elements in countering disinformation.

Generally, it can be found that traditional media are more trustworthy – people understand that they cannot trust social media, based on our figures. As to public service media, our research has found that in 16 of 26 countries that we studied, PSM is the most trusted news brand. This is not the case in all the countries; in some there are problems. However, it is a good sign. The OSCE Representative mentioned this: during crises, such as COVID-19 and now with

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, people resort to public service media to gain reliable and trustworthy information.

As an association, we have also come up with a number of core values, which all our members subscribe to, including universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation. On the basis of these core values, we also developed editorial principles, namely impartial and independent; being fair and respectful; accurate and relevant; and connected and accountable. 'Accountable' means that they should avoid having a top-down communication with their audience. Many of our members of course have their own values, but ours help to provide guidance and an overriding system to guide them.

As an example, during the war in Ukraine, news exchange increased substantially; members offer news items and share them within this system, whereby other members can use these items/videos in their news programmes. We also had a special interview with Ukrainian President, Volodomyr Zelenskyy, which aired on 3,194 separate occasions on 230 channels belonging to 126 media organizations, to ensure wider visibility. A particular challenge in Ukraine was the destruction of radio and television infrastructure. EBU Members and associates therefore used shortwave and podcasts to extend access to content and combat disinformation.

Fact-checking is another important element to counter disinformation. Many of our members have special, yet different, fact-checking systems. Nowadays, it involves a mix of traditional journalism skills with verification methods, complemented by AI-supported tools, for instance to verify photos, tracing the source, searching for the origin of a statement or quote, investigating videos and pictures, cross-checking information, contacting the right sources, and verifying testimonies.

Within the Eurovision News Exchange, we also have the Social Newswire system, which involves many of our members co-operating on fact-checking user-generated content. It also helps identify the source of the content, if it is politically funded or from a publicly funded institution, for example, which helps to increase transparency.

Another element is innovation. We have launched the European Perspective – a network of pan-European newsrooms, in which 11 members exchange online news items, which are automatically translated with a human quality-check and offered to the other members through their online news services in their own language. This is an innovative system supported by AI. As part of the project, we are developing a public-service algorithm, to take people out of their "bubbles" and ensure respect for public service values. Later this year, we also want to start a fact-checking network through media co-operation as partners of the project. We not only have public service media organizations but also the Constructive Institute in Denmark and AFP.

It is important for public service media to have the right framework and conditions under which they can work. The situation and context vary by country. However, we have the Council of Europe standards for public service

media, which need to be put into practice, which is currently lacking in a number of countries. These standards cover a flexible and future-proof remit, sufficient funding, as well as editorial independence and institutional autonomy; Member States of the Council of Europe have committed themselves to implement these standards at the national level.

Media plurality needs to be supported online. The right regulatory framework requires secure access and findability of media services of general interest. We also need to ensure the appropriate prominence of general interest. Importantly, the integrity of online media in Europe needs to be safeguarded, and there should be proper media brand/logo attribution, so that people know where content comes from and can make their own judgment about its trustworthiness.

Accountability of online platforms/social media is another important element. We heard about the recently published and strengthened EU Code of Practice on Disinformation; however it is not yet sufficient: it still lacks structural indicators and an effective monitoring framework which would enable assessing the impact of the platforms' actions against disinformation.

Lastly, EBU is organizing a joint conference with the Council of Europe in November 2022 on public service media and their importance for democracy.

Ara Shirinyan
Chair of the Council of Broadcasters of Armenia

My presentation will highlight some of the practical aspects of the Armenian public TV over the last two years.

The democratic reforms in Armenia that started following the Velvet revolution there in 2018 have sought to change the system of governance. Before 2018, public television was completely controlled by the government, the remaining (around 10) private TV stations which belonged to the ruling coalition parties or oligarchs associated with them, had eliminated all plurality, reducing broadcasting to the single aim of entertaining viewers without creating any public benefit. The TV content produced during those years, aside from being a platform for aggressive product placement, portrayed corruption in the country as something natural and lawlessness as an inevitable fate.

I describe the past to provide a better understanding of how difficult it was for public television back then while undergoing institutional reforms to face a new wave of disinformation related to COVID-19, along with the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. These events were deeply unsettling to the public and inevitably led to the polarization of society. All of this was followed by an internal political crisis. A group of former politicians who united to demand the resignation of the prime minister also challenged the values of the revolution, opposing democracy. The mass media was almost completely dragged into a proxy war. Taking advantage of democratic freedoms, many media outlets began to discredit democracy in general. It is not difficult to imagine how much

manipulative and false news the press has generated to serve different political agendas.

It was inevitable that some countries in the region would not hesitate to benefit from the crisis and attempt to provoke chaos and instability inside the country through disinformation. There were cases when false information published in the Azerbaijani press would provoke protests in the centre of Yerevan. This presented a challenge: how to cover the border situation, negotiations with the adversary and the country's foreign policy in general without harming the security of the country. Most journalists were not concerned with these issues.

Various political forces, using their own media outlets which formed the majority in the field, continued to spread panic and create a sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The government had to change the legislation to introduce a special permit for video reporting in the bordering areas. Although this did not create any real obstacles, it was interpreted as a restriction of the right to receive information.

In reality, we witnessed a collapse of information in Armenia. The press enjoyed a very low level of trust. According to poll results published by the International Republican Institute, 33 per cent of the Armenian population did not trust any media outlet at all. Although public television was the most reliable in this list, only 16 per cent of those polled trusted it. At that time, Armenia was facing the threat of the resumption of war. The public television would report official information and with its own reports from border areas would confront the manipulation and disinformation originating from news outlets associated with different political groups.

In order to address the political crisis in the country, the prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, resigned in 2021 and called for early elections in June of that year.

Among the steps that the public television took at the time was to drastically increase the number of social-political programmes. Right before the election, the public television launched a brand-new channel with hourly news updates. This gave an opportunity to broadcast more political debates, public discussions, and pre-election campaigns. Twenty-six parties participated in these snap elections; there were opposition politicians who appeared on air for the first time. Everyone was provided with equal opportunities to present their political programmes. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which joined as an observer, assessed the role of public television as positive during the elections. The elections resulted in Pashinyan again receiving the majority of votes. Both before and after the elections, public television maintained its political neutrality, paying no attention to the demands of certain groups to cover their interests, otherwise known as confirmation bias.

Public television continues to pursue a balanced position, representing a plurality of opinions, supporting public solidarity, and defending the state's sovereignty and democracy. It is of utmost importance that the host of public television, during interviews and debates, demands from all participants that they speak to the point. They should strictly prevent hate speech, as well as

expose false narratives and manipulation. This style is not a special strategy, but simply involves observing European principles of public broadcasting.

Freedom of speech is a hotly debated topic in Armenia today. Civil society, remembering the experience of the past, prefers to tolerate some disinformation, hate speech, even propaganda of violence, only for the state not to appear to be restricting freedom of speech; this is a real, universal dilemma – how to protect society from disinformation without appearing to be restricting freedom of speech.

To sum up, I would like to present the results of research conducted by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression in Armenia two years ago. The research monitored the press for 10 months, to find out to what extent European values were discredited. They examined how basic principles of human rights and European issues in general were covered. The research found that these issues are mainly covered in a positive or neutral light, while receiving only 0.6 per cent negative coverage. The most interesting aspect is who distorted facts and manipulated information, and referred to so-called anonymous sources. It turned out that journalists were the primary actors doing this, followed by experts and only then politicians and public officials who resorted to such tactics. Moreover, the research also showed that journalists create and disseminate disinformation as much as all other actors put together. This presents us with an issue: Are we able to protect the public from deliberate disinformation, do we have the tools to counter organized disinformation campaigns? In these conditions, the public television of Armenia is constantly seeking ways to find the right balance between freedom of speech and criticism of the government, as well as the presentation of alternative views which would contribute to public solidarity and not harm the legitimate government, which is the first guarantor of freedom of speech and democracy.

Luc van Bakel
Editor-in-chief of the research unit of VRT NWS (Belgium)

I will provide an overview of what VRT does and a survey we carried out. Luckily, we have a clear mandate from the government to tackle disinformation. We are working on disinformation since 2019; to get a clearer view on the effectiveness of what we did we held a comprehensive online survey with 2,000 Flemish participants. The focus was on the awareness of and attitude towards disinformation, and the extent to which media users think they are exposed to disinformation (PME – perceived misinformation exposure). We asked them about the role of VRT in the fight against "fake news" and what they expect VRT to do in this regard.

First, we asked them if disinformation is a problem, to which 80 per cent of respondents agreed, although young people were less convinced of this. This can mean either one of two things: that young people (18-34 years old) can recognize "fake news" and do not see the problem, or are too self-confident and overestimate themselves.

Secondly, we asked how many people think they are exposed "fake news", to which 96 per cent of respondents believed they were, with social media (Facebook/TikTok/Instagram) being the main platforms, along with the main media channels on television, in traditional newspapers, and on radio. Sixty per cent also said they had been misled before by "fake news".

We then asked how disinformation affects trust in the news. The level of doubt in regard to this increased, whereby no target audience was immune to doubt about news stories. Moreover, one out of three people risks no longer following the news, due to the inability to distinguish between what is true and what is false.

Lastly, we asked about their future expectations regarding VRT as a public broadcaster. Most respondents believed that VRT should do even more, and recognized the importance of its mandate in the fight against disinformation.

However, there is a backlash, especially among young people, and scepticism about the work of VRT. While the majority believe a story when VRT covers it, there were some who expect VRT to step up their efforts to expose erroneous news stories.

In response to this, we developed a 360-degree programme, to work around disinformation, including through a radio show, podcasts, short fact-checking videos, social media to reach young people, and interacting with other media companies and the public. We have a disinformation team of seven people, working on fact-checking, data journalism, interpretation of disinformation, image verification through open-source intelligence, online media specialists, and sharing stories across multiple formats and platforms. Some examples of stories we covered included the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, COVID-19 and vaccines, and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Through this 360-degree approach, we seek to work especially with young people to build up their trust, through podcasts, social media and traditional media. We work with adults through radio broadcasts, podcasts and online news. We also have an added value finder with specialized programmes so that everyone is aware of what we do to tackle disinformation.

In conclusion, we have a clear mandate from the public, which is well received by the public. We are working on a 360-degree approach to reach as many audiences as possible, however 20-30 per cent of people are sceptical of what we do. We therefore seek to vary the form and approach that we adopt to tackle disinformation, including by changing the tone in our storytelling.

Marius Dragomir
Director of the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS)

I will share with you some of the findings and results of the research I have been doing for over 20 years, which we updated and published last year examining the state of public media in 151 countries. With this study, we also

introduced a new state media typology, which seeks to analyse in more detail how state media and public media perform across the world.

The first reason we came up with this state media "matrix" and system of measuring state media, is that, on the one hand, we noticed that the situation with public media is not black and white, so to speak, there are no fully independent outlets, but instead lots of nuances and views in between.

The second reason for this system was because of the numerous transformations and trends we have witnessed in recent years. Namely, the most important and relevant one being media capture, where we see private actors owning media outlets that are linked with governments, receiving funding, or having their editorial agenda directly or indirectly linked with the government.

Based on our experience and research, we built a model based on three sets of criteria:

1) Funding: to establish whether media outlets are predominantly state-funded and how to measure that; we defined this as media outlets receiving direct state support amounting to at least 50 per cent of their annual budget.

2) Governance and ownership: to establish whether there is control of governing structures and ownership; in other words whether the state media is majority owned by a government body or the majority of its governing body members are appointed by government or government-controlled institutions mostly on political grounds.

3) Editorial independence: to establish whether the government has editorial control over the media outlet; in this case if journalists of a state media outlet are not in a position to make editorial decisions independently, as a result of direct or indirect control exerted by authorities or allied entities over the outlet's editorial decision-making processes.

Of course, there are some research limitations regarding this; a lot of the performance of state and public media depends, among others, on the local context, on the audience and on media consumption. This matrix is nevertheless very important as it shows in what ways governments are controlling the media.

When you combine the three sets of criteria, we identified seven types of media outlets, ranging from the highest level of state-controlled media, to captured private media, and then improving with media outlets being state managed and funded but maintaining editorial independence, to the point of being fully independent.

We applied this matrix to 151 countries, providing a global overview of the situation. What we witnessed at the global level is that when you look at various models, you have 80 per cent of state media in the world lacking editorial

independence, which is deeply troubling. Up to 350 outlets are considered to be in the most controlled category, which is also concerning.

Many of the media outlets under government control have not changed over decades. It is important to note that purely independent public media are rare. Of the 110 state media that have editorial independence, only 18 qualify as independent public service media. Most of them, a total of 11 outlets, are based in Europe. Most of the independent media in Europe, a total of seven, are based in five Western European countries (Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK). The rest of them are in Southern Europe (Portugal) and three in Central and Eastern Europe (the Czech Republic and Lithuania).

There are no independent public media outlets in Eurasia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a strong indicator of the widening gap between the quality and reliability of news and information in the West and the poor output of high-quality news output in the rest of the world.

On the other hand, state media in Europe are faced with numerous threats as governments and political groups are stepping up efforts to gain more control of the media.

Another finding we identified is that media capture is on the rise. Europe has a high number of independent state media; many of them are in the independent state-funded and state-managed category, which is the most at risk from an editorial point of view. A total of 24 media outlets in this category in Europe present the highest risk of losing their editorial independence and slide into the state-controlled category.

Europe is also faced with a high incidence of cases of captured media outlets (27), a third of all such cases worldwide. A total of 19 of them are media outlets with private ownership, mostly oligarchic structures that have ties to state authorities, that follow an editorial line ostensibly supportive of the government, including in Central and Eastern Europe, and Turkey, a sign of the declining media freedom in Europe's post-communist nations and in Turkey.

Lastly, in Asia and the MENA region, the state media are in a much worse situation compared to Europe due to a much higher level of state control. In Asia and MENA, for example, state-controlled media outlets account for 74 per cent and 63 per cent of all state media, respectively, much higher than the 20 per cent in Europe.

Regarding the question of how public service media can tackle disinformation, it has an important role to play, which many of these media outlets play. However, when you look at our numbers, the problem with misinformation in many countries lies with state media themselves, who are in fact part of the problem and not the solution.

3. **Q&A session**

Moderator to Marius Dragomir: What you were talking is also about media capture, which is as big a problem for public service media as for private media in a given country. We know from your research that media capture takes place both in democracies and authoritarian countries. What is the ultimate goal of media capture? Why would governments pursue it, spend huge resources, efforts and political clout in order to gain control over the media? Is it the same goal or does it differ from democracies and authoritarian countries?

Marius Dragomir: To really understand the impact of media capture on the overall editorial independence and how media perform, we need to understand what it is. We identified four components of media capture, namely control of regulation, control of public or state media, control over public resources, meaning that governments provide advertisement to friendly media, and the fourth element is when state structures and businesspeople/oligarchic structures buy private media. When you consider these four elements, and you have control over all of them, there is not much space left for independent journalism.

Regarding the reason why governments do this, we identified a strong and clear trend in those countries that we analysed: that state capture and increasing control of governments happens prior to elections, to ensure they do not lose the election. These tendencies are connected with issues of corruption and control of resources. Regarding how media capture is perceived or manifested in countries where you have a high level of state intervention in the media, particularly authoritarian ones, it is done in a more natural way. If you consider numerous countries in Asia, the government does not need to buy private media, as they already own most of the media. In other countries, it is more difficult as there is an open market; the best examples are Hungary and various other countries in Europe where, to achieve that level of state capture, governments need to do more than just control state media but instead need to buy out private media outlets. For media capture, the key element is that the government wants to remain in power, through authoritarian measures.

Luc van Bakel: Regarding fact-checking, particularly for a young audience, it is but one of many tools that can be used to tackle disinformation. There is always a risk regarding fact-checking of being perceived as being patronising. For young people, we do fact-checking on Instagram and only cover those topics that they ask us.

Moderator to Luc van Bakel: You provided an overview of the results of your research on the importance of disinformation for your audience. As it is unclear in which year the research was carried out, is there a link between what you do and the high level of acknowledgement of disinformation as a significant issue in Belgium? The figure you gave was very high – up to 90 per cent of the population believed that disinformation is their problem, not somebody else's (e.g., the EU). Did this level of awareness come about on its own or did your work contribute to this?

Luc van Bakel: We carried out a study, which found that our work was not very visible; so our goal was to make our work more visible. Our study was carried

out from November 2021, with the results available early 2022. We don't know, if what we are doing now is also effective. In two years, we will carry out a new study, which we hope will shed more light on the effectiveness of our work. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of disinformation programs.

Moderator: A particular feature of PSM in Armenia is that in the backdrop of heated debates with the use of hate speech by private channels, while PSM is more reserved and calm. Would this be an accurate characterization of the media field in Armenia? How would you rate PSM in this regard?

Ara Shirinyan: You are right that the public television in Armenia has a special characteristic and place in the country. Among 15 private companies, latest polls show that public television enjoys a certain degree of trust. However, the majority of the media landscape in the country is infected with disinformation. Most large-sized media outlets in Armenia participate in a struggle for people's minds and attention. Public television is ranked second when it comes to trust among the population in Armenia.

Moderator: Is there limited independence when it comes to the control of governments or limited funding?

Marius Dragomir: I think there is. For example, German public broadcasters have had a tradition of strong, independent news coverage. The same applies to the BBC. It is difficult to imagine these broadcasters being dismantled. As soon as you see your independence limited in some aspects, even if not editorially, that is a danger and should sound an alarm bell for the media. We have seen in past years how public broadcasters that were highly valued, such as in Austria and Denmark, have come under attack in various ways. They continue to remain independent, but we should not dismiss the danger that these media outlets face.

Moderator to Nicola Frank: You mentioned the Strengthened Code of Practice; will you try to change the picture? How do you see the Code in more general terms?

Nicola Frank: The code is certainly a step forward, however it also lacks structural indicators and an effective monitoring framework to judge what platforms do and what they commit to. There is a possibility to combine some provisions of the Digital Services Act, using elements of the code to tackle disinformation. The problem is that platforms still need to subscribe to concrete measures and that is lacking. We had the same problem with the first version, where it was difficult to measure what platforms did. More needs to be done in this regard.

Moderator: There are many international players who counteract disinformation in broadcasting in Europe, but who is taking the lead – just the EU, or others such as EBU?

Nicola Frank: Regarding the EBU, we don't know if we are taking the lead, but we are certainly tackling the problem; we co-operate with our members who do

a lot in this regard. It is a combination of elements, including PSM offering trustworthy information, fact-checking, and media literacy programmes, among others. We work with platforms to tackle the issue. At the same time, we try to assist members who may not have advanced on these issues, to improve their services.

Moderator: Every public broadcaster is different, but they all share common principles, and disinformation is not limited to just PSM. Is there any legal or international leader in this regard and what is its role?

Minna Aslama Horowitz: That is a tough question. When we want structural or policy solutions, we are often playing catch-up. A coalition for this is forming. The Council of Europe recommendations are not that old, coming in 2019. We have witnessed many observatories being formed, for example the Nordic Observatory. The EBU is an excellent hub and leader for PSM, but we also need to engage with other organizations, including those focused on media literacy.

Moderator to Ara Shirinyan: What do you do with regards to disinformation? How many people in public television in Armenia specialise in countering disinformation?

Ara Shirinyan: Unfortunately, I cannot provide an exact figure, as the process of tackling disinformation is only in its nascent stage. Civil society and journalists' organizations, together with parliamentarian groups and other stakeholders, are currently creating a concept, which would act as a platform for future laws to address the media. I hope all the stakeholders will have a role to play and will understand the importance of this initiative.