A TRUTHFUL PRESS AND MEDIA
MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND 'TRUTHFUL HYPERBOLE'

INTRODUCTION

"What is Truth?", asked by Pilate of Jesus this question remains at the heart of justice and good governance.

The role of a free press as crucial to a democracy has long been recognised, but what happens to democracy when there is so much information available that citizens are not able to distinguish between information, misinformation, and disinformation? These questions were at the heart of our discussion for the Paddy Ashdown Forum, supported by the European Liberal Forum on 17th June 2021.

As the Chair of the Legal Affairs Committee in the European Parliament [JURI] 2019-2020 I became involved in the debate from the point of view of how best to regulate the internet, and the role of platforms such as Facebook and Google in how we receive information.

For me a key part of this issue is the difference in the way people respond to accurate information when they are uninformed vs misinformed. Someone who has no information, and knows they are uninformed, is open to accurate information. A person who has been misinformed believes they know the truth, and under such circumstances getting them to accept accurate information is far more difficult. This difference matters.

The difference mattered to me as a UK MEP involved in the Brexit debate, where the level of misinformation about the European Union and the impact of Brexit on the UK was enormous. But however crucial for me personally that debate was, the impact of misinformation during a pandemic is far more important, both for the UK and globally. The impact of accurate vs misinformation on vaccines, on our willingness to accept restrictions on our liberty and to act in ways that help protect the entire population has been crucial. During the pandemic we have enjoyed huge benefit from the successful sharing of accurate information, as well as significant risk from sharing of inaccurate information. The point is that truth matters.

The discussion on 17th June 2021 focused largely on the UK, our media and our public debate. We brought in experts from Europe, so that we could learn from their experience, and touched on many issues common across the western world and further afield. All modern democracies are facing the challenge of how we tackle misinformation in the internet age. For me this discussion crystallises some key areas of agreement and suggests some of the ways in which we can begin to tackle the problems we face in a world where our sources of information have become deeply personalised and fractured.

I am incredibly grateful to the ELF, as well as Judith Bunting, Chris Gleadle and Robert Woodthorpe Browne MBE from the Paddy Ashdown Forum, Jonathan Broad, at the NLC, and all those who took part for making this such an interesting and varied debate.

A few highlights can be found below but do listen to the whole debate if you have time, it is quite fun, and only 1.5 hours long!

Lucy Nethsingha (former MEP for the East of England, Leader of Cambridgeshire Council)
00:03:10

I became particularly interested in this topic when I became the Chair of the Legal Affairs Committee at the European Parliament [JURI], which has responsibility for regulation and copyrights, and I got lobbied by Nick Clegg. I thought I'd better go and do some reading, and I came across an amazing document, a really impressive European Commission paper called _Understanding our Political Nature_. The first chapter of this talks about how much more difficult it is to change somebody's mind if they are misinformed than if they are uninformed.

If you have misinformation, if you have received information which is incorrect, it is then very, very much more difficult to change somebody's views, than if they know that they know nothing. That is the position we are in now with an enormous quantity of misinformation out there. It is much more difficult to persuade people of accurate information because they believe that they are informed.

As a British MEP, clearly misinformation was quite high on my agenda and, given what we've had since then, with the COVID pandemic, and now as somebody who has significant responsibility for public health, and with issues with vaccine uptake in my area, I am only more worried.

Misinformation is more important than ever.

Nick Davies (Special Correspondent, The Guardian. Author of Flat Earth News)
00:05:55

Journalism is no longer capable of performing its function properly. It doesn't have the resources to go out and find the stories itself and check the truth of what journalists are picking up, which is a really important structural problem. Take that and put it in the background as a very important fact, then look at how it combines with the growth of an industry which scarcely existed when I became a reporter in the mid 1970s. This is the public relations industry.

'Public relations' sounds like a perfectly innocent thing, but in the context of mainstream news organisations not being able to perform their function, the result is we've reached a point which would have been unthinkable in the Fifties, 60s, and 70s: That governments, corporations, trade unions, celebrities, are able to decide over and over again what the supposedly Free Press says about them.

This doesn't necessarily involve lies. What's much more important is they get to decide what truths we tell about them. They manage the news. They manipulate, and more and more news organisations simply passively recycle what those powerful people have decided we should say about them. And this you could categorise as distortion.

To give a concrete example, if you were the press officer for a for the Metropolitan Police and you come in in the morning and on the log, it says that the Assistant Commissioner, no names here and entirely fictional, last night happened to be so drunk that he had to be taken home in a car and put to bed. But also on the log, it says that a young officer is getting a medal this morning because they rescued a baby from a burning building. Well, you as the press officer must decide which story to put out. You've got 2 seconds. It isn't a difficult choice. You know what you'll put out and the press will recycle that because of their weakness. They won't even know about the drunken Assistant Commissioner, let alone have the time to check it and put it into print alongside the PR industry there is propaganda.

There are military and intelligence agencies who fabricate entirely false stories in order to achieve a diplomatic, political or military end, and this, too, is being fed into these passive mainstream news organisations who are not capable of discerning truth from falsehood.

That's a slight overstatement of the case, but if you stand back and look at it, that's the trend.

Dr Evan Harris (former Executive Director, Hacked Off)
00:10:54

When I left Parliament, I became involved in the Hacked Off campaign which was designed to find a way of ensuring that there was independent press regulation which protected investigative journalism and freedom of expression, but also tried to ensure the rights of individuals, especially those without the recourse to law, were protected and that we could improve the truth-telling, of the press, in particular.

It is a deficit that I look at only in terms of the press and not broadcast, because whatever the criticisms there are of broadcast, and with new entrants into the field, I think there will be more complaints, in Ofcom there is somewhere to go [for adjudication and regulation] that is reasonably independent and accessible, at least in terms of dealing with accuracy and distortion and, under UK law, the need for a balanced output.

We have proposals in the online hate legislation to regulate social media, but the exception will be newspapers. If they can pretend to be regulated as they are by their non-regulator poodle, IPSO, they will not be subject to any regulation. So, you'll have broadcast media regulated by Ofcom, you'll have the newspapers unregulated, and then you'll have increasing regulation of social media, which is not without free speech implications. So that is the background against which we're working and the problem in the room is often the one that's ignored and ignored by itself.

Marie Helly (Head, BBC Beyond Fake News, BBC News International Services)
00:17:09

By 2018, in England people understood about bot factories and bad actors and Russians and the American elections, and in the UK, people still didn't really think this was something about us. I mean, only three years ago. That's kind of amazing, isn't it?

But because we operate in 42 languages, we were aware that there was incredible harm being done on the ground around the world. In India there was a whole spate of murderous mobs where people were sharing content on social media. It was classic stranger danger, it's not unique, but it led to about 30 deaths over a couple of months. Shocking numbers. It happened because people suddenly had cheap smartphones, very cheap smartphones with free data as long as you had Facebook. And the news was Facebook. People didn't really understand, especially in these rural areas where things were happening, that the Internet is not [always reliable].

Beyond Fake News, which is my project, grew from that. It concerns with how we reach out to people who are not media literate, even more so than here, people who don't really understand the Internet and who suddenly have all this data. We know people just read headlines. That's a huge problem for us. How do you get people to read the small print?

Reality Check is our biggest fact-checking brand. The problem is that it just super-serves the elites, certainly in the UK and beyond. You know this. It's not going to change the hearts and minds of most of our wider audiences, so I'd say the journey we've had in the last three years, thinking about the UK and globally, is how do we reach those people who are sharing conspiracy theories?

We still want to do the high impact, investigative work, but we want to reach out to people who are getting anti vax messages or who are having their rights as citizens undermined with harmful information. And we're not there yet. We're investing in it, but we certainly haven't got the answers yet.

Lucy Nethsingha (former MEP for the East of England, Leader of Cambridgeshire Council) 00:00:42

I have become even more interested in this topic after discussions with my teenage and young adult children in relation to the impact of pornography and what has become normalised sexual behaviour.

There is a really, really difficult balance between what is between a society where we would like everybody to have the right to free speech and a society where giving people the right to free speech is actually doing potentially really quite serious damage to some of those in our society who need protection. This is where the pornography industry is difficult. There have been interesting discussions focusing on the question of how you drive traffic towards particular websites. This is particularly true in the in the pornography area.

If you can't see what the algorithms are doing and if what the algorithms are doing is driving people towards ever more extreme content - and quite extreme content comes up quite quickly. That is a real problem. At the moment, we have no visibility about what those algorithms are doing. I think that this is an area where there is a real need for regulation, but that regulation is going to have to be done with collaboration from the big companies. I don't think anybody else is going to be able to have the mechanisms to do it.

Professor Marcus Ryder (Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, Chair of RADA, former Head of on BBC Scotland Current, former Chief Editor, International Digital News, China Global TV) 00:05:15

For me, diversity and freedom of speech are absolutely linked. They're inseparable. Let me explain why I fundamentally believe that diversity is a freedom of speech issue.

If you look at diversity within the media industry, there is not a single major news programme from BBC Breakfast News, the Today programme, Panorama, Dispatches on Channel 4, which is headed by a person of colour or a visibly disabled person. That is going to affect which stories they decide to pick and how they cover them.

And it's not just news that's important. Drama impacts us on an emotional level. It enables us to walk in the shoes of another person and understand their reality in a way that factual programmes do not. There was a very good reason that during the McCarthy witch-hunts they went for drama directors and writers. Right now, in the industry that I love, film and TV, women make up just 13.6% of working film directors. Black and Asian people and minority ethnics make up 14% of England and Wales. We make up just 2.2% of TV directors. And for disabled people, according to *Creative Skillset*, it's 0.3%. That's not even 1%. 0.3% of the total film workforce is disabled.

This has a massive knock-on effect for freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is meaningless if certain sections of society are disproportionately denied access to the platforms for their voices to be heard and stories to be told. You cannot have democracy unless you have diversity in your media industries.

This impact comes with the question of who actually decides? There must be some rules, regulations, libel laws, at the at the most extreme, but who decides those rules?

To echo the speaker that went just before me, if you're going to decide rules on pornography no one would, in this day and age, say it would be reasonable for the people that are deciding those rules to be 100% men, right? It would be untenable. Similarly, if we're going to look at the rules that decide what can and cannot be said with regards to race hate, it would be absolutely untenable if those walls were 100 decide percent decided by white men, for example.

So, diversity is again really important in actually deciding what those rules are and making sure that they are equitable and fair.

… So, what you have with Twitter is that there is a group of people deciding which hashtags to prioritise and which hashtags to demote, and we do not know what their diversity is, we do not know where they are based, we do not know what the makeup of that group at all.

We cannot live in a world that is completely free of censorship. There's no such thing. Everything is relative and everything is on a continuum. There will always be some form of spent censorship and some form of regulation, but what we need - which Twitter does not have - and which I was pointing to in my blog piece is transparency. And once we have that transparency, we need to have consistency, so that we can ensure that the same regulations which are applying to women are also applying to men and vice versa and all different types of groups. So that's what I think we should be aiming for. We should be aiming for transparency and consistency.

Catherine Bearder (former MEP for South East of England, Director, Unlock Democracy) 00:16:50

What was so frustrating during the Brexit debate, was the idea that we had to have balanced information about what Brexit meant, so they would wheel on somebody … who would talk complete nonsense. And it was always the same, they weren't challenged. They were not challenged. The journalists didn't know enough about the European Union to challenge them, and that was frustrating.
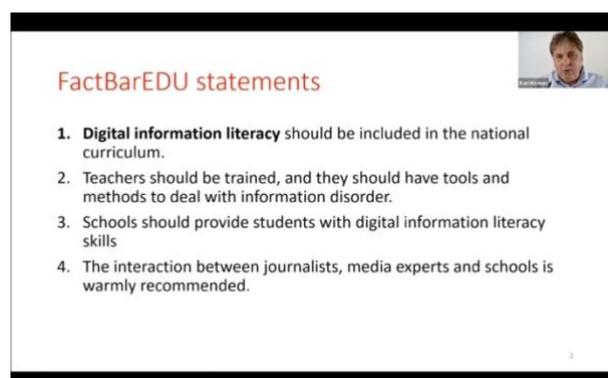
It doesn't happen when you have any other subject. When you're talking about health you don't have that. If we're talking about COVID, you don't have somebody wheeled on to talk about how the masks are going to kill us or saying they're going to inject chips into our arms. That's quite a difference.

The parallels with religion are interesting. When it's socially acceptable to say that the, uh, a woman gave birth as a virgin to a child, or that the God is three people, one of which is the son of that same person, and that's socially acceptable and everybody said that's fine, we'll go along with that, but for me that's problematic. It's a parallel that what we're seeing now is mistruths and disinformation.

THIRD TOPIC - What can be done?

Kari Kivinen (former Secretary General of the European School System, Education outreach expert at EU Intellectual Property Office) 00:00:24

At *FactBar EDU*, the Finnish fact checking organisation, we realised 5 years ago that fact checking always comes too late. It comes after the something has already said and written and the wrong information has been spread. We decided to target education. The idea was to add fact checking methods to the school curriculum. We did it in Finland, being guided by four statements:

We have spoken about the difficulty of finding information when search engines are based on algorithms. For example, if I am a child looking for information about a camel, I would be first guided to British rock band. Secondly, camel tobacco and third comes Amazon:
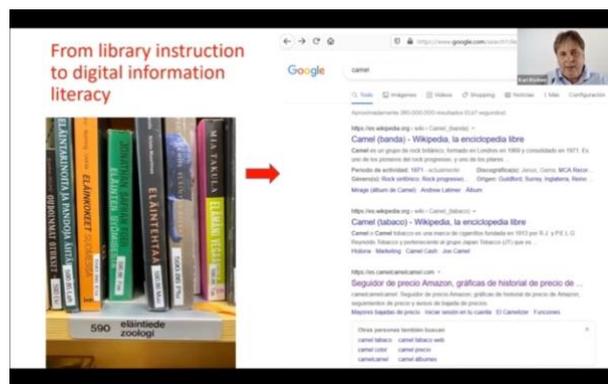
The platforms are designed just to capture our attention to monetize our data and they predict and influence our behaviour. They know lot of about us and this leads in many cases to the extremism and spread of disinformation.

School curricula should include digital information literacy. This can be defined as a set of skills and abilities which everybody needs to undertake information related tasks, how to discover, access, interpret, analyse, manage, create, communicate, store and share information in the digital environment.

This is very crucial from the democracy point of view, because if people are not able to find correct information, they are not able to be critical citizens or informed citizens.
…

There is so much information in the world that we should not spend our limited attention span on the rubbish, so we are promoting the strategic ignoring strategy:

Richard Allen, European from the European Digital Media Observatory.
00:08:52

Frankly, there is a lot we still don't know and that includes about really fundamental questions. For example, you know when you think about something like anti VAX misinformation.

One hypothesis is an individual goes online, sees one piece of anti VAX information, and cancels their vaccination appointment because it's persuaded them. The other hypothesis is like people see this stuff, but they know it's all bullshit and they don't really care. And the people who are not going to get a vaccination anyway don't change their minds, but neither do the people who are going to get vaccinations. If [the situation] the second one of those, we're in a very different space, it's a much less serious problem than if we're in the first one.

The only way we can really understand this is through research and people like Reuters Institute and others are doing the research that we need and there's lots of institutions and there's a Danish academic who's leading this for us, trying to get together 1 corpus of research so we can have evidence-based policymaking, because we would actually understand what the real-world effects of misinformation are.

Richard Reeves, CEO The Association of Online Publishers
00:48:07

I am challenged by the fact that some of you have actually referred to social media platforms as publishers today. As you know, they rigorously defend the fact that they aren't, and that's why they're not held accountable.

My view is, and I think it's it could be the greatest gift that politicians can make, with that [newsgathering] business model so broken, is that if an organisation supports commercial messages, wherever they place those commercial messages, in order to have the privilege to be supported by advertising, should by definition be accountable for everything that is on the page or when that commercial message appears. If that had been the case [so far], economically and societally we'd be in a very different place.

THANK YOU

Thank you to all our guests who took part in this discussion, both in the room and online. The full debate can be viewed online at:

http://www.thepaddyashdownforum.org/truthful-press-and-media

The next roundtable debate will be on **Democracy and the Rule of Law**. If you would like to take part in the discussion, please contact judith@judithbunting.co.uk.

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