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### Inter Parliamentary Union 140th Assembly and related meetings (Doha, 09/04/19) Expert hearing on disinformation and 'fake news'

**Sometimes we get the impression that we are drowning in 'fake news'. The words 'fake news' seem to be used everywhere, for everything. What do people really mean when they talk about 'fake news'?**

There is a wide agreement in the scientific community that "fake news" is an *extremely bad term* to define the trouble of online communication we are currently experiencing.

It is a bad term precisely for its vagueness, which allows the terms to be applied to almost anything spanning from *online propaganda; *computational marketing; *use of political bots; *partisan discourses; *satire; * gossips and rumours; *Internet stalking; *trolling provocations; *conspiracy theories; *click baits; *Internet memes and *native advertising.

All these phenomena are indeed problematic, but they are also different and should be addressed differently – we don't have the time now, but I would be happy to discuss with you further these types of online misinformation.

If this ambiguity is not unravelled, there is a real risk for legislation on online misinformation to be ineffective (because of the impossibility to actually decide which content should be targeted) or worse to become an excuse for discretionary censorship.

The second problem with the label "fake news" is that it puts too much focus on the question of *fakeness*. While falsified stories that looks like traditional news but are fabricated with the intent of deceiving public option are clearly a problem,

1. First, they are *not an unprecedented problem* – falsified news existed long before digital media and can be addressed within the existing legislation, for instance through anti-defamation law.
2. Second, this is *not the only or the most frequent* type of misinformation encountered online. Most misinformation examples I encountered in my research, proclaim explicitly their satirical, partisan or provocative nature.
3. Third, while research suggests that Internet users are perfectly capable of distinguishing the untruthful nature of this type of information, this does stop them from consuming and spreading it anyway.

Instead of "*fake* news", things of this misinformation as "*junk* news". People do not consume junk food because they believe it has nourishing value, they consume it because they found it addictive. Similarly, we do not spread "junk news" because we believe it, but because we find it irresistibly distracting. Also, junk news, like junk food, is a large and flourishing industry.

The biggest danger in the current weave of misinformation is not the effort to deceive, but the effort to disrupt public debate by drowning it in a series of ephemeral distractions, irrelevant hot-buttons and superfluous controversies. False news stories are less dangerous than the general degradation of public debate produced by some of the very infrastructures of contemporary digital media.

**Is disinformation an inevitable characteristic of our modern communications systems? Is it possible to combat disinformation while still protecting the fundamental right to freedom of expression?**

One of the reasons why I insist so much on the fact that the main threat of junk news is distraction and not only deception is to counter the idea that online misinformation can be cured by simply detecting and filtering problematic news stories. The problem is much deeper than this.

If junk news is so widespread and so addictive, it is because it is tightly connected to the infrastructures of modern communications systems.

1. *Economically*, junk news is financed by the very same attention economy that support most online services. Junk news would not be such a flourishing industry, without the help of the system of online advertising, particularly (but not exclusively), the huge advertising networks run by large online platforms such as Google and Facebook.

2. *Technically*, junk news producers can monetize their productions thanks to a series of sophisticated technologies to track and sell even the most ephemeral attention-action, through the measure of simple actions such as clicking, scrolling and viewing. Additionally, the data collected through by these trackers is increasingly used to *amplify* this type of ephemeral attention feeding into recommendation algorithms that maximize the consumption of online services (and thus of online advertising).

3. *Socially*, junk news profit from the system of micro-celebrity and vanity metrics created by online platforms. By encouraging their users to compete by the same measures of visibility once limited to commercial and political marketing (number of likes, number of views, number of friends…), social platforms incentivise strategies of personal branding, encouraging their users to find and spread contents with high viral potential.

4. *Culturally*, junk contents have become the *raison d'être* of a series of virality-oriented subcultures populating sites such as 4chan and Reddit (but also YouTube, Facebook, Instagram…). The competition for ephemeral visibility has pushed some these communities to adopt an increasingly provocative and inflammatory discourse, which promote extremism and radicalization.

5. Finally, *politically*, many actors have understood that, rather than promote and explain their own positions, is often easier and more effective to disrupt the conversation of their opponents, through forms of political trolling armed by paid commentators and political bots.

All these mechanisms are deeply seated in modern communication systems and self-reinforce each other. This does not mean that junk news is *inevitable*. But it does mean that it cannot be fought by simply removing problematic contents. Curbing junk news demands to reconsider the very infrastructures of our communication systems, which is extremely difficult and time-consuming.

**What role does disinformation play in elections? What could, or should, be done to limit the risks of influencing election results?**

If, as I argued before, the main danger of junk misinformation is the disruption of public debate, this danger is even bigger in times of elections, because these are the times where a lively and thorough public discussion is the most needed.

I will suggest actions concerning digital platforms later on, but first let me remind something trivial but also crucially important. Besides fighting against the actors contributing to the degradation of public debate, legislators could and should support the actors that enhance it. This means, first of all, supporting legally and financially professional and amateur journalism (particularly investigative journalism) as well as civic and media education. These still remains the best ways of promoting a healthy public debate, especially but not exclusively during elections.

**There has been a lot of talk about the need to regulate the tech giants. Last week, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg called for greater legislation regarding the internet, and expressed his willingness to work with legislators in four areas: harmful content, election integrity, privacy and data portability. What do you make of that?**

The fact that the CEO of one of the largest Internet companies is now asking for more regulation shows that these companies are currently under a very strong pressure from public opinion. This is thus a good moment to pass legislation to increase the *accountability* of these actors, *but not* in the way this is done in some recent laws or law proposals.

Making platform responsible for detecting and removing problematic contents may in fact be counter-productive, because it may push them to implement forms of *algorithm censorship* that may be more dangerous than false news themselves.

Instead of such *negative* actions, legislators could focus on *positive* actions, by forcing platforms to be more transparent about their business models *and* the algorithms that sustain them.

1) This means reconsidering the regulation of online advertising. Instead of asking platforms to check the contents produced by their users, we should ask them to open up their bookkeeping to allow everyone (legislators and civil society in the first place) to check on who buy and sell online attention, through which technologies, for which purposes and with which consequences.

2) It also means asking social platforms (starting from YouTube and Facebook) for a much greater transparency on their recommendation algorithms, which (as I said before) play a crucial role in amplifying online distraction. Instead of asking algorithms to filter "fake news", which should be given a way to understand how, while trying to increase the time spent on the platforms, these platforms' algorithms end up promoting junk contents and supporting trolling strategies.