

WILL WE START TRUSTING THE NEWS ON THE INTERNET?

A REPORT ON THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE CREDIBILITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

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On 27 January 2020, a discussion on the credibility of digital media was organised in the Tarabuk bookstore by the editors of *Stan Rzeczy* [State of Affairs] and *Res Publica Nova*. The meeting concerned the 2/2019 issue of *Res Publica Nova*, which was devoted to information sovereignty. Prof. Renata Wloch (*State of Affairs*), Piotr Górski (*Res Publica Nova*), and Bernard Osser (Agence France Presse) took part in the discussion, which was moderated by the editor-in-chief of *Res Publica Nova*, Dr Marcin Zaborowski.

In the beginning, Marcin Zaborowski briefly presented the *Res Publica Nova* special issue. Its topics include, on the one hand, the crisis of media credibility and the erosion of traditional mass media, and, on the other, the appropriation of public media and the uncontrolled nature of information flows on the web.

Next to speak was one of the editors of *Res Publica Nova*, Piotr Górski, whose article in the journal is about the struggle for information sovereignty in an era when the role of the internet is continually expanding. In the article, he addressed the phenomenon whereby the influence of opinion-forming media is increasingly being mediated by the internet. According to him, the most important question that should be answered concerns the extent to which we want sources of information on the internet to be regu-

lated. As he pointed out, while the rest of the public space is in some way regulated by custom and law, the internet still eludes such restrictions – it is an enclave excluded from all jurisdiction. It can even be said that the internet resembles the Warsaw of the 1990s, when there was considerable disorder in the streets along with extensive freedom – cars could park in any place and, until driving and parking rules were instituted, pedestrians often had difficulty getting where they wanted to go. Despite the far-reaching structuring imposed on that street chaos some twenty years ago, it is hard to feel that we have lost our freedom. Similarly, legal regulations regarding the flow of information on the internet need not necessarily mean a restriction of our freedom.

Would it be beneficial to regulate social media? When radio broadcasting was introduced in the 1930s, there was also chaos at the beginning, before regulations were applied. The same thing happened with television. Is it the internet's turn now? Twitter regulates itself, for instance. Can we consider the social media space a public space?

Another important issue for Piotr Górski is sovereignty and the related right to vote. When do we consider an individual or community to be sovereign? In answer to this question, democratic elections are most often indicated. One of the limitations of voter sovereignty in this sense is the principle of one vote and the possibility that undue influence can be exerted on voters: by buying their votes, for instance. The spirit of democracy can be destroyed without breaking democracy's formal rules. A similar threat to the sovereignty of citizens on the internet is the activity of bots, which undermine the democratic nature of the processes taking place, breaking the "one vote" rule and exerting a disproportionate influence on internet users.

As Marcin Zaborowski noted, the genuine sovereignty of a democratic entity is significantly threatened when citizens are unable to verify the truthfulness of the information they receive. With the erosion of traditional media, the appropriation of public media, and the huge amount of fake news circulating on the web, access to verifiable information is becoming increasingly difficult.

Bernard Osser responded to the issue by talking about his experience of working in an information agency. In the past, agencies only dealt with information that had been verified to be truthful. Today, however, false information is also of interest. It is investigated, shown to be false, and then announced as fake news. Such investigations are hard work – it can be harder to prove that a piece of information is false than to prove that a piece of information is true. The news agency's goal is also to provide

tools to enable readers to select information themselves. As modern times are characterised by a very high concentration of “information noise,” the verification of incoming news is becoming more and more difficult. Hence, modern news agencies employ people who only deal with fact-checking, which has become a service in itself.¹ Bernard Osser also explained what the fact-checking procedure is about – it is not about proving that an interpretation of given events is false but only about verifying facts that are not subject to opinion. Facebook also collaborates with Agence France Presse, providing statistics on the popularity of posts and topics. The agency then checks the credibility of the most popular information at the moment and on finding it false informs Facebook administrators who “restrict the reach” of such entries and information.

Renata Wloch, *State of Affairs*’ representative, addressed the question of the impact of fake news and new flows of information on society. In her opinion, an analysis of contemporary times should not omit reference to Foucault’s observations. Who produces knowledge and power? Who is producing the truth? Thus, the questions posed do not relate to knowledge but rather to its sources within the framework of an appropriate discourse. There is an impression that the academic world no longer produces the discourse anymore – information is rather increasingly the province of experts working on behalf of large corporations. These corporations subtly steer the processes of knowledge production and information dissemination.

In making her second argument, Renata Wloch agreed with the American scholar Susan Aaronson, who points out that in the modern world we have three information regimes: Chinese, European, and American. Under the American regime, knowledge is generated by corporations that exercise imperceptible control over information, maintaining an illusion of gratuitousness. In the Chinese model, information is controlled by the state, and under the European regime, data may be treated as a subject of civil rights and therefore deserve legal protection. This is difficult, however, because the flood of false information is considerable and fact-checking itself has become very hard. According to Renata Wloch, today we are witnessing the collapse of the Enlightenment project of rational politics and – perhaps – the end of the public sphere of which Jürgen Habermas wrote. Today, even the belief that deliberation based on factual arguments can occur is weakening. Expert discourse has collapsed and been devalued, as social trust in it has dissipated. Not only does this breakdown threaten to weaken or even destroy the practice of fact-checking itself, but it cannot be

¹ See <https://factcheck.afp.com/>, accessed 4.11.2020.

ruled out that the decline of democracy and the emergence of succeeding authoritarianisms are happening before our eyes. Renata Wloch was also interested in the question of the recipients of discourses: to what extent does the reception of information depend on the recipients' education?

In the face of such threats, regulation of the flow of information on the web is urgently needed. However, effective implementation will be much more difficult here than in the case of radio or television; there are currently no tools to guarantee the effectiveness of the regulations introduced. Only collaboration between countries and large corporations could bring success.

But what is fake news, which is such a vital threat to the condition of modern democracy? As Piotr Górski noted, it is information intended to elicit a certain emotional reaction. Thus it is not just falsehood but a falsehood with an impact. The challenge posed by fake news is even greater in regard to so-called deep fakes. In the face of so much convincing false information, our society could turn towards total distrust of the media or total indifference to information. Either of these would result in a deep erosion of social life. There are so many dangers. What then are the opportunities associated with social media? Let us recall Barack Obama's election campaign – the first campaign to be heavily based on social media. How is it that social media can be viewed as either hero or villain? As Renata Wloch pointed out, in the democratisation associated with social media the greatest problem is the lack of a rational point of reference and the emergence of bubbles. Bernard Osser offered a slightly more optimistic thought: as time flies on the internet, perhaps Facebook will be replaced by another, healthier channel of communication.

At the end of the meeting, the audience could comment and ask questions. The editor-in-chief of *State of Affairs*, Dr Jakub Motrenko, drew attention to the often-overlooked democratic nature of internet communication. After all, radio, television, or print media were one-way channels of communication. Perhaps the introduction of the internet gave a voice to those who were previously unable to express their opinion.