IGF 2017 Reporting Template

- Session Title: WS #197 Fighting Fake News, Protecting Free Speech: Global Perspectives on Combatting Online Misinformation

- Date: December 19, 2017

- Time: 16:40-18:10

- Session Organizer: James Tager, PEN America

- Chair/Moderator: James Tager, PEN America

- Rapporteur/Notetaker: James Tager, PEN America

- List of Speakers and their institutional affiliations:

- Yehven Fedchenko, co-founder of STOPFake; Director of Mohyla School of Journalism at National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy
- Ashif Rabi, Fellow at National Endowment for Democracy; Editor (former), Bicchu
- Andreas Vlachos, Professor of Computer Science at the University of Sheffield and Chief Research Scientist for Factmata
- Rasha Abdulla, Associate Professor at the University of Cairo
- Dunja Mijatovic, former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
- Paolo Cesarini, head of unit, European Commission's Directorate-General for Competition.

- Key Issues raised (1 sentence per issue):

- Reconciling the need to address the damaging effects of fake news with the imperative to protect and safeguard free expression.

- Governments' ability to weaponize "fake news" as a way to restrict digital freedoms, and possible ways to address this.

- Which elements of societal—private enterprise, civil society, government, the academy—can play what roles in addressing fake news, and what the delineations between each should be.

- If there were presentations during the session, please provide a 1-paragraph summary for each presentation:

Yevhen Fedchenko
Yevhen Fedchenko is the director of the Mohyla School of journalism, and the co-founder of StopFake, a website dedicated to monitoring and debunking fake news disseminated by the Kremlin in Ukraine. Yevhen spoke about the Ukrainian experience of tackling fake news, and pointed out that StopFake has been dealing with this issue in the Ukraine since before fake news became such a prominent topic elsewhere. Yevhen spoke of the difficulties of separating real journalism from Fake News and explained that the questions that need to be addressed include how to explain to wider audiences, and to non-experts, that the danger is already out there and what they can do as users of media to effectively tackle these issues. He explained that consumers of media must be educated, so that they can become effective fact checkers, and not leave it to professionals. Yevhen explained the history of StopFake, stating that it began as a result of a wave of fake narratives that arose because of the war that erupted in Ukraine. Yevhen explained that fake news often deals with bigger narratives and is effective in making people believe them through the repetition of dominating

fake narratives, repeated across different media outlets. He noted that more than 1,000 fake stories have been debunked by StopFake in the past three and a half years, and remarked that many of them had been planted across different platforms. He specified that in Ukraine, television served as the primary platform for planting fake news. He noted that this was evident across all genres, and cited fake news and propaganda in children's programming as being particularly alarming. Yevhen explained that education is the only way in which to effectively tackle the growing threat of fake news.

Ashif Rabi [Online Panelist]

Ashif Rabi, noted Bangladeshi journalist and blogger, noted that he had experienced both the highs of having internet access as a way for him to connect with global communities, and the lows of having a militant website encourage attacks on him, after he hosted a television talk show that referenced the slaying of a publisher by extremists. As such, he has focused his own career on building online spaces where Bangladeshis can comment civically without fear. Rabi discussed the destructive effects that fake news had had in a Bangladeshi context, especially given myriad other pressures from religious conservative groups against writers—including digital writers.

Andreas Vlachos

Andreas Vlachos is a lecturer at the University of Sheffield and the chief research scientist for Factmata, a website dedicated to fact checking and debunking fake news through the use of artificial intelligence. He stated that at the moment no artificial intelligence exists that can accurately and completely without error, fact check. He explained that his project began in 2014 as he started to question what it is exactly we want from information, and how to certify its accuracy. Andreas explained his awareness of the dangers of entrusting this process to a computer, and the need for the public to understand the process before they accept the results. He explained the careful work that is needed to ensure that the algorithm does not discriminate depending on who says the statement and he also explained that it does not concern itself with opinions, or speculative pieces. Andreas explained that Fake News is a business that makes money, and that this explains its prevalence. He stated that making fact checking accessible to the general public is a crucial step in reducing the impact of Fake News.

Rasha Abdulla

Rasha Abdulla is an associate professor and Graduate Director of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo. She explained that the internet affords everyone the opportunity to be a broadcaster and stated that restricting sources of information is a bad thing, even if some of the sources are invalid. Rasha stated fake news must be defined around two main criteria, which are intent and consequence and spoke of her own experience confronting fake news in Egypt. She explained that debunking Fake News is not always straightforward, particularly when it is disseminated by governmental bodies. Rasha explained that in Egypt, disagreeing with the government is a crime punishable by a fine of half a million Egpytian dollars. She also explained how preventing Fake News becomes the perfect excuse to silence, or shut down any dissident voice on the media. In Egypt, more than 40 websites have been shut down as a result of this. Rasha explained how the majority of these were websites dedicated to, or focusing on, human rights issues. She also cited a recent example of Twitter shutting down one of the more famous accounts operated by an Egyptian journalist (Wael Abbas) who is particularly renowned for documenting issues of human rights abuses. Rasha identified that what is most troubling about this case is that it was Twitter, and not the government who shut the account down, seemingly without reason. She responded to the other panellist's claims that education is the way to combat Fake News. Rasha seemingly agreed but also reasoned that education is more difficult in certain parts of the world, citing Egypt as an example, where this education would have to be provided in spite of those in power and not with the help of.

Dunja Mijatovic

Dunja Mijatovic is an expert on media law and media regulation, and the former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. Dunja explained that media and fake news is in fact a very old concept. She stated that the moment that we agreed to participate in a democracy, we agreed to participate in conversations we hate, and that we must be careful not to confuse propaganda and hatred with stupid news. She stated that what began with printing presses, film and radio is now being taken up by social media. Dunja explained that fake news is a close cousin of disinformation and propaganda and asserted her belief that money should go towards educating people as opposed to 'fixing' fake news.

Paolo Cesarini

Paolo Cesarini is Head of the Unit responsible for media convergence and social media within DG Communications Networks, Content and Technology at the European Commission. He is also a visiting Professor at Siena University. Paolo asserted that knowledge, and the right to know is also a right and that this is a principle that must be affirmed and defended. He elaborated that the consistent promotion of transparency within the media is the key concept. Paolo explained the process of the ongoing European Commission initiative to address fake news, and solicited stakeholder feedback at appropriate places within the process.

- Please describe the Discussions that took place during the workshop session (3 paragraphs):
A significant portion of the discussion centred around the intersections between fake news as a phenomenon, and the 'bubble' or 'echo chamber' that many media consumers fall into, whereby they only consume media that is 'personalized' to their opinions. The panellists were keen to impress the importance of distinguishing between the two, whilst noting that they were not unrelated. Paolo Cesarini stated that it has been proven that it is 93% more likely to find fake news in highly polarized debate. He also stated that seeking the truth is not useful, as no one can be the arbiter of that. He instead insisted that the aim is to give everyone access to diverse information and that media plurality online must be ensured. Yevhen Fedchenko agreed, stating that the bubbles are one of the reasons why this propaganda is so successful. He pointed to the 'tools' section of his website, that equips people to check the facts for themselves. He explained that it is important to teach media users to approach the news with the same discernment that they would any consumer product.

A question from an audience member moved the conversation on to discuss why there is still such a high degree of fake news in countries that also promote and defend free expression, primarily the United States. James Tager acknowledged that whilst fake news is relatively new—in regards of societal attention to the issues—to the United States, everywhere else has been dealing with it for years. He stressed that he believed that the appropriate place to put the effort is within civil societal efforts as opposed to governmental efforts. He also pointed to the current American governmental administration and their attempts to make it unclear what is fake and what is legitimate. Paolo Cesarini noted that free expression covers all areas from politics to science, and that there will be debates around these issues even in very open societies.

The panellists then moved to discuss the difference between social media and traditional media channels, and what constitutes a 'neutral' platform. A question from the audience addressed how certain American television outlets – which are openly biased – proved to be much more influential in the recent U.S Presidential election than the internet did. Rasha Abdulla noted that this is an issue that is different in different areas of the world. She argued that Facebook as a platform is not neutral. She stated that we are all producers of information online and that that is why it is different from other traditional media outlets. The discussion finished by stating that society must be careful to not blindly trust the organizations that have the checkmarks beside them as being automatically trustworthy.

- Please describe any Participant suggestions regarding the way forward/ potential next steps /key takeaways (3 paragraphs):

A recurring aspect of the workshop, and one that the entire panel seemed to be in agreement on, is the need for educational efforts to reach all media consumers, especially those outside of the field, and to equip them with the awareness and ability to discern fake news. Yevhen stated the need to explain to wider audiences what they can do to tackle these issues effectively, so as not to leave the responsibility to fact checkers and journalists. He explained that StopFake works to track dominant false narratives, so as to educate people. He reiterated that the people in the room must remember that most media users cannot discern what is real and false. He reaffirmed wider education is what is necessary to tackle it.

Andreas Vlachos agreed, stating that we need to make fact checking accessible, and asserting that algorithms are the way forward for doing this. Rasha Abdulla countered that whilst education is the way forward, it cannot be forgotten that it is more difficult to provide education in certain parts of the world, particularly where the government wishes to prohibit this education.

The panel also stressed the need to engage with a variety of media sources. Paulo Cesarini pointed to an increase in fake news when debates are highly polarized, and stressed we need to avoid engaging only with similarly thinking news outlets. Cesarini also stated it is important not to prioritise discerning real from fake but to provide people with the ability to identify fake news for themselves, and to remember that everyone is entitled to diverse information. Yevhen agreed that this must be a priority, and added that people should be taught how to differentiate poor quality media from non-media. James Tager stated that the issue of Fake News should be tackled by civil societal efforts, not governmental bodies.

Gender Reporting

- Estimate the overall number of the participants present at the session:

100

- Estimate the overall number of women present at the session:

40

- To what extent did the session discuss gender equality and/or women's empowerment?

The session did not address gender equality issues to a significant extent. Issues relevant to gender equality which were addressed within the session included: the need for the development of civic online spaces where all are equally welcome (Rabi); and the actions of authorities who discourage civic voices striking against traditional cultural mores (Rabi + Abdulla).

- If the session addressed issues related to gender equality and/or women's empowerment, please provide a brief summary of the discussion: