



## **Media literacy in the post-truth era – surviving in a world of fake news and misinformation**

**10 November 2017**

**Speakers:** Tom Law (Director of Campaigns and Communications at Ethical Journalism Network, United Kingdom), Sophie Valais (Senior Legal Analyst at European Audiovisual Observatory, France), Ingo Heijnen (Senior Vice-President at Hill & Knowlton, the Netherlands), Isabelle Jegouzo (Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Paris, France)

**Moderator:** Victoria Main (Vice-President at Cambre Associates, Belgium)

*Media literacy* can be described as the capacity to access, critically understand and interact with media. Is it also the ability to distinguish real information from what is not real? This workshop explored the concept in today's climate, where the proliferation of misinformation and fake news is having a profound impact on people's lives. Just how important is media literacy? How is media literacy acquired? How are companies and institutions combating misinformation? These were some of the topics explored by the speakers and moderator, drawing on their expertise and practical experience in making others more media literate.

**Victoria Main** set the stage by historically contextualising the discussion and clarifying some misconceptions. In spite of Mr Trump claiming that he invented fake news, the term has been around for longer. It can be seen in the debates over sensationalist news in the 1990s. Its proliferation has been augmented by social media, but it is not a new concept. It should also be separated from a news item with mistakes – "to err is human". Fake news purposely claims that what is not true is true. We, as an audience, have to know how to navigate through them.

**Tom Law** reminded us that journalism is not free speech. It is actually a restraint on speech, as a journalist is constrained by a framework of values – accuracy, independence, impartiality, humanity, accountability - and by writing with a public interest. He argued that the ethics of journalism should be more widely known, as they are also a tool for the audience to distinguish real from fake journalism. In a more practical context, he identified some questions the audience should ask when going through news content. What is the status and the motives of the author; how far is their reach; how does the news item benefit the author's interests; is it meant to harm others; does the content incite violence; who is negatively affected and is there a pattern? It was his view then that journalism needs to be more transparent and clear about its standards. It needs to play a more pro-active role in media literacy, dialoguing with civil society, and building respect for ethics and communication values.

**Sophie Valais** presented the European Audiovisual Observatory's findings on media literacy projects throughout the EU. The goal of the report was not only to identify regional trends, but also to inspire new projects and collaborations. There is no common definition of *media literacy* across the Member States. The main stakeholders promoting media literacy are non-statutory bodies, with around one third of projects being carried out by civil society. Public authorities and academia fall into second and third places respectively. Most projects are based on *resources* (published text, leaflet, TV content), with less *end-user engagement* (face-to-face or online interaction). Policy development in this area is found to be scarce and with room for improvement. The main focus of projects is to promote *critical thought* and the target audience normally is teenagers. Older people are the ones least addressed. The most significant projects are the ones working in partnerships, which provide or secure access to funding and facilitate networking.



**Ingo Heijnen** started by asking the crowd who was aware they had shared a fake news item. He assumed he had done so, unknowingly at the time, and then retracted his post. Most people may not be aware they shared *fake news items* - a recent fake story on the Las Vegas shooting (21 October) reached Facebook's and Google's top stories. These websites help the proliferation of fake news, due to their reach and algorithms prone to confirmation bias. Fake news also affects corporate life. Companies are being targeted, affected and thinking of ways to counter-react. For example, the chemical company Monsanto has a millennial engagement director studying social media habits and strategising responses (i.e. delegating employees to personally engage online against fake allegations, not using the company's accounts for that purpose). Mr Heijnen listed six truths when dealing with fake news. (1) They can be published by anyone and (2) audiences are scattered (which requires *influence mapping* and *data analysis*). (3) Targeted messages work best. (4) Facts matter but emotions are countered by emotions. (5) Time is precious when reacting to fake allegations getting online traction (4 minutes to react). (6) The source of the fake allegation should be identified and exposed. Despite this advice, he warned that it is only the beginning of attempting to find appropriate ways to respond, and solutions to this problem still have to be explored further.

The final speaker, **Isabelle Jegouzo**, spoke of her and her team's experience in France, as the representatives of the European Commission. They identified a lack of information about the EU in France, which allows negative and inaccurate ideas to be disseminated and propagated. Constrained by not being able to engage directly, they wanted to ensure that the debate was based on truth. They therefore decided to identify the most common misconceptions, select the ones of public importance in France, and draw up an answer (content and format). Their engagement was to be through social media (with short messages, using simple language, a playful tone and humorous cartoons) and through the website (with longer texts that were written for communication purposes). The impact of this strategy was not only more website and social media traffic, but even media attention. They also identified a growing feeling that the EU is actively involved in the public debate, and success in using humour (contradicting the view that the EU is boring). These achievements came at a cost, as heavy work in this area was needed – through monitoring, managing of social media reaction and regular updates.

**Victoria Main** opened the floor. The discussion focused on the benefits of journalism promoting media literacy and ethical standards. Later, the panel emphasised the need for the EU to allocate resources and strategies to responding to misinformation and fake allegations. The panel argued that trust needs to be strengthened by collaboration, proactivity and engagement; and journalists have to distinguish themselves from other sources and justify their points of view and facts. Finally, the panellists agreed that fake news has been around for a long time, but standing up for yourself while following the ethics of good communication is the pathway to creating a better-informed society.