EuroPCom series 2018

Report of workshop: Facing up to Fake News

Date: 27 April 2018
Location: European Committee of the Regions

Speakers:
· Linda Curika (Public Relations Officer, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence)
· Daniel Fazekas (Social Media Expert and founder of Bakamo Social)
· Ruurd Oosterwoud (Developer of the serious game "Bad News" and founder of DROG),
· Marjory van den Broeke (Head of Spokesperson's Unit and Deputy Spokesperson, European Parliament)

Moderator: Katrina Sichel

As part of the "EuroPCom Series" initiative, a workshop titled "Facing up to Fake News" was held to facilitate communication experts in identifying the potential disruptive effects of fake news on political campaigning, and on communication within the EU and democratic discourse, more generally, focusing in particular on digital channels using concrete case studies presented by expert speakers.

Linda Curika opened the discussion by outlining the direct link between fake news and disinformation/misinformation together with the reasons why they are used. Firstly, it is used to make profit by manipulating people's emotions. Secondly, it is used for propaganda purposes. In the latter context, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence has developed a system whereby social media can be constantly monitored using an early warning system that allows disinformation to be detected. Moreover, a system called SAMANTHA has been developed to monitor activities on Twitter that are related to NATO. The aim of this research is to determine how bots communicate with each other, which is important given that communication between bots often serves to amplify messages and to create hype.

Daniel Fazekas gave a presentation on the methodology used during the French elections to analyse social media use. This research looked at the entire political conversation that took place on the open web during this time and analysed how people shared news. Observable behaviours helped them to build a media map and to explore the different conversations citizens were having about news sources.

Two sides (supply and demand) were identified in the course of the research. The supply side includes the following forms/sources of news: traditional media, political parties' websites, people who receive news via traditional media but who supplement this with other related arguments. Regarding the demand side, three behaviours were identified: repetition, missional behaviour and provocation. Moreover, four typical patterns of disinformation were employed during the French elections: hoax websites; fake polls; co-opting of self-publishing sites; and taking articles out of their historical context in order to support a position.

For the EU Institutions, disinformation campaigns can be approached via various means: strengthening identities, which involves putting an end to the disconnect between the public and the EU Institutions; de-radicalisation of people who are trapped in echo-chambers; and also helping people to have more meaningful conversations.

Ruurd Oosterwoud introduced the "theory of inoculation", which forms the basis of all his projects and is akin to a vaccine that could be injected into people's minds, thereby allowing them to experience fake news directly. The idea behind the game "Bad News", created by Oosterwoud, is to help people experience and identify disinformation by allowing them to act as a "disinformant", thus rendering the emotional and social impact of disinformation more believable and helping them to understand through the game how people can be reached using false information.

Marjory van den Broeke outlined the difference between disinformation, which may be a purposeful action by media, and fake news, which may be considered more of a joke or even a mistake. She explained that there is an emotional openness in certain elements of the population to believe something even though they might know that it is not necessarily true. The European Parliament's activities to counter fake news are divided between an internal job, which involves raising awareness inside the Parliament, linked to media relations and media literacy, and an external job whose focus is prevention, detection and counting. Prevention is crucial, all the more so given that debunking is not always effective. Detection involves listening to narratives, and monitoring and reflecting on what is shared.

Conclusions

In the case of the EU Institutions, disinformation is linked to a lack of trust. The EU needs to bridge the divide and explain in simple terms why its institutions are relevant to people. Emotions play a big part in this and people are often driven by a feeling of fear, frequently exploited by fake news creators to attract people by offering them what they would like to hear and read even if they know it is not true. Moreover, attraction to disinformation seems to be linked to trauma, as evidenced by an emotional openness that causes people to believe something that they know is not true, but that they have chosen to believe as "critical thinkers". EU Institutions need to understand people's fears and "spread" integrity and security. A number of tools may be helpful to achieve this aim, such as humour, visuals, media literacy, and the simulated experience of creating fake news (such as for example the Bad News Game) in order to improve citizens' capacity to identify it.