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Working Group 1: Media in Times of Crisis:
Focus on Media Service Providers in Times of Crisis
Background Document

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1. Introduction

The [EPRA Annual Work Programme](#) focuses this year on the issues of Media in Times of Crisis and the starting premise of this working group of the spring meeting is a particular focus on *Media Service Providers*.

In times of crisis, the importance of reliable, unbiased, true information is becoming even higher. The audience turns to various sources of information and news to see what is happening and tries to understand what might happen in the near future. On the other hand, media service providers are operating at full capacity on very tight deadlines and under these circumstances false reports as well as rumours are being circulated and taken as facts. This of course prevents the public to draw correct conclusions and to evaluate the information received in the right manner. In crisis situations a so called 'weaponization of information' occurs, which changes the media environment drastically, and this is the time when hate speech and propaganda in the media start to grow. It seems like in times of crisis hate speech and propaganda go hand in hand and it is vital to be able to expose and confront it.

Art. 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees the rights on freedom of expression, but at the same time according to Art. 20 - any propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence is prohibited.

The lack of definitions for terms 'propaganda' or 'hatred' is one of the most discussed and challenging issues on both national and international levels.

"Hate speech is an emotive concept, and there is no universally accepted definition of it in international human rights law. Many would claim they can identify 'hate speech' where they see it, but the criteria for doing so are often elusive or contradictory. International and regional human rights instruments imply varying standards for defining and limiting 'hate speech': these variations are reflected in differences in domestic legislation. In everyday settings, the use of the term and meanings attached to it vary – as do

*calls for regulating it. This could explain much of the confusion around the term, and what it means for human rights”.*¹

According to the Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis *“Media professionals need to adhere, especially in times of crisis, to the highest professional and ethical standards, having regard to their special responsibility in crisis situations to make available to the public timely, factual, accurate and comprehensive information while being attentive to the rights of other people, their special sensitivities and their possible feeling of uncertainty and fear”.*

News based on facts is the idea of fair, balanced, impartial and reliable media, though in time of crisis facts are being influenced by opinions and views and the share of confirmed news and information declines.

Nothing is more damaging for the freedom of the media, than extensive and organized propaganda. That is why media with its value system is a key. To be able to withstand to the pressure of propaganda in times of crisis, the media environment has to be diverse and dynamic. Media should operate freely if they are to succeed in their goal to serve the public.

*“dangers of propaganda become a useful excuse for governments to restrict or even ban all hostile messages, actual and potential, coming from abroad. Its threat gives a pretext for wider intervention of governments in the media matters, such as licensing, transfrontier broadcasting, as well as issues that supposedly were closed in Europe with the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975”. [...] At the same time, government counter-propaganda, which is often viewed as programming that rebuffs falsehoods in an authoritative way, is neither essentially different from propaganda itself nor an answer to it.*²

Indeed, in times of crisis, we often hear different and controversial opinions concerning anti-propaganda or simple blocking of undesirable media service providers. The questions remain on how different is anti-propaganda from propaganda itself and exactly what results might blocking of undesirable media outlets cause?

*“At all times, and especially in difficult times, blocking is not an answer because it leads to arbitrary and politically motivated actions. Limits on media freedom for the sake of political expediency lead to censorship and, when begun, censorship never stops. The answer lies in more debate and media pluralism – which is in danger in societies with dominant state-owned and state-controlled media that can be easily used to promulgate state propaganda”.*³

¹ See ‘Hate speech’ explained: A Toolkit – by Article 19

https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38231/Hate_speech_report-ID-files--final.pdf

²See A non-paper by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media on propaganda and media freedom, 26 November 2015 - <http://www.osce.org/fom/203926>

³Ibid., 11.

So what are the tools which one might oppose to fake and deceptive information? Such tools might be fact-based reporting, independent and impartial media service providers, strong public service broadcasters, guarantees in the national legislation for the independence of media regulatory authorities, transparency rules for the ownership issues, including the prohibition of the media ownership in offshore zones and effective self-regulation mechanisms for media, as professional and ethical issues should be dealt by independent media associations, councils and agencies.

*“Self-regulation as the most appropriate mechanism for ensuring that media professionals perform in a responsible and professional way needs to be made more effective in times of crisis. In this regard, co-operation between self-regulatory bodies is encouraged at both the regional and the European levels. Member states, professional organisations of journalists, other relevant non-governmental organisations and the media are invited to facilitate such co-operation and provide further assistance where appropriate”.*⁴

Other than that, we have to stress the importance of Media Literacy- not only amongst the general public or students, but amongst government officials and media professionals as well. Regulatory authorities often face harsh criticism for following the obligations and requirements of the law. Often these critics are the creators of the legislative acts in question. Therefore, strengthening educational programmes on media literacy should become one of the main goals for governments. According to suggestions by the Representative on the Freedom of the Media strengthening media literacy for citizens is crucial and the best way to prevent or to address war propaganda or hate speech is by educating and mobilizing the public in general and civil society in particular.

Most certainly providing the public with true facts and the opportunity to access the information might be the answer. Therefore, service providers such as <http://www.stopfake.org/en/news/> could play vital role in the times of crisis, but it is essential that this kind of service providers equally portray examples of fake news/information on all the involved parties.

⁴Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805ae60e

2. Objective and Structure of the Working Group session

Under the guidance of EPRA Vice-Chair *Helena Mandić*, Working group 1 will elaborate on some of the key issues raised by this introductory document. Terrorism, migration and new lines of conflict challenges regulators in new ways; the objective of the group will therefore be to provide broadcasting regulatory authorities with the best possible understanding of conflict reporting and the issues at stake.

In terms of structure, the session will start with a keynote of *Boro Kontić*, Director of the Media Centre in Sarajevo since 1995. He has over 30 years of experience in the field of journalism and is inter alia the author of the documentary movie "*Years eaten by lions*", about journalism and hate speech in ex-Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2010.

We will then hear from *Xesco Reverter*, World news editor at TV3, the generalist TV channel of the Catalan Broadcasting Corporation, and former special correspondent in different world crisis and hotspots. From his perspective as public broadcaster, he will report on how his channel has invested time and resources to cover and explain the refugee crisis.

Finally, Senior Adviser *Ingvil Conradi Andersen* will share the recent work and activities conducted by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in this field and report on the issues at stake for media from their perspective.

The presentations will be followed by a debate with the audience.