

45<sup>th</sup> EPRA Meeting Edinburgh  
18-19 May 2017

**Plenary Session 1: News in Digital Age**  
**Focus on access, plurality, measurement & trust**  
**EPRA Introductory Document<sup>1</sup>**

Final post-meeting version

## Introduction

It is generally agreed that the provision of accurate and fairly-presented information is crucial for a democratic society. The critical role played by the news media means that they will be susceptible to competing interests – political, financial – and it is in society’s interest to create an environment where free and independent media can withstand such pressures. Independent regulators can play a role in promoting pluralism of voices and, where it is deemed appropriate and essential, overseeing the accuracy and impartiality of a certain part of the news media.

In order to maintain the right level of scrutiny and play their own role in the democratic process, regulators need to understand the state of plurality at any given time – looking beyond sensational headlines and conduct evidence-based analysis. To do this, many regulatory authorities in Europe regularly assess how the provision of news services and the consumption of news by the general public changes over time, and identify what risks and opportunities these observable changes pose to this dynamic.

For this reason, EPRA has [chosen to focus on the topic of News in the Digital Age in 2017](#), noting in particular that the provision of news content is currently in what appears to be a critical period. This period is characterised by notions of “fake news” and “post-truth” (the Oxford Dictionary’s word of 2016, defined as where “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”<sup>2</sup>).

These headlines actually reflect a wide set of developments that could pose a fundamental threat to plurality. In that respect, EPRA’s spring Plenary Session 1: [“News in the Digital Age: Focus on access, plurality, measurement & trust”](#) provided room for a timely and multi-faceted discussion in relation to the aforementioned. As the media turns its attention onto itself, we stepped back and considered how much news consumption has actually changed, from the perspective of the provision and access to

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<sup>1</sup> **Disclaimer:** this background document has been produced for an internal meeting by EPRA, an informal network of 52 regulatory authorities in the field of audiovisual media services. It is not a fully comprehensive overview of the issues, nor it represents the views nor the official position of EPRA or of any member within the EPRA network.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>, accessed on March 8, 2017.

news and current affairs programmes in such circumstances, analysing measurements of news consumption and levels and issues of trust among viewers with a panel of distinguished experts.

The discussion was built on the outcome of:

- last year's biannual working group on "Media in Times of Crisis"<sup>3</sup>, which looked at strategies, responses, regulation and co-regulation of issues linked to incitement to crime, terrorism and reporting on crisis situations and how to deal with bias, false and deceptive materials from the perspective of service providers and regulators;
- past Plenary sessions on Pluralism ("How to ensure and assess media pluralism and diversity of media content"; "The Regulators' Toolkit to encourage diversity of sources and output", Berne<sup>4</sup>, /Nuremberg<sup>5</sup> 2015);
- past discussions on access to quality content in a multiplatform environment ("Public service content in a multiplatform environment: from must carry to must-be-found", Nuremberg 2015).

To support this aim, this paper sets out a brief overview of the session's themes and provides a reading list of articles and evidence (as an annex) to stimulate debate.

## Trends and Developments

Research provides a complex picture of news consumption and trust: people still rely on the traditional sources, such as broadcaster and print media, as their primary and most trusted news source, but the numbers are increasingly equal to those who say they obtain their news "online"<sup>6</sup>. It's not obvious what "online" means in reality, but what is clear is that social media plays an increasingly central role, particularly for younger people<sup>7</sup>. It is also clear that there has been a shift over the last decade to alternative, mostly online sources of information and commentary.

In fact, little research has been done to understand the scale of that shift (a rare example being the Pew Research Centre's study of American online news habits<sup>8</sup> and one or two further studies, mostly from the US, included in the annex) and more is clearly urgently needed. But recent events have drawn attention to the subject of the consumption of news media in an unprecedented way. The overall impression is that the role of traditional media and journalism has been undermined and levels of trust are decreasing. Observers noted that famous "five 'W's" in journalism no longer present the golden rule. Proposed additional questions, like "Am I dreaming?", "Seriously?", "How did this happen?",

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.epra.org/attachments/yerevan-wg-i-media-in-times-of-crisis-the-role-of-regulatory-authorities-comparative-background-document>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.epra.org/attachments/berne-plenary-2-how-to-ensure-and-assess-media-pluralism-and-diversity-of-media-content-background-paper-full-version>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.epra.org/attachments/nuremberg-plenary-2-the-regulators-toolkit-to-encourage-diversity-of-sources-and-output-presentation-by-david-levy-reuters-institute>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/95642/ICMR-Full.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0026/95642/ICMR-Full.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.journalism.org/2017/02/09/how-americans-encounter-recall-and-act-upon-digital-news/>

“Have you no shame?”<sup>9</sup> and similar might be a witty way of expressing today’s paradigm, but in fact present a chilling retrospect of many occurring changes.

How has this situation arisen? One argument is the traditional news media has been increasingly seen as failing in its role to challenge the views of the political establishment. This has eroded the trust people had in those traditional news providers and encouraged them to seek alternative news sources, often online, which emerged due to the relatively low barriers of entry. Many of these sources were and remain ground-breaking and legitimate, offering immediate, unfiltered information or providing perspectives that reflect important experiences from minority and less well-represented groups that are often overlooked by the mainstream. Other outlets, however, produce and disseminate deliberate or simply lazy and careless falsities and gossip.

Simultaneously, the development of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook provided individuals with much faster online access to the information that they were interested. It became even easier when the platforms people used made decisions for them about what other types of information they might find helpful. Alongside this trend, notable is the development of a particular aspect of the online business model: click-driven revenues arguably encourage the provision of more and more controversial and sensational stories, and when no real stories are available, ad-hungry sites may be tempted to invent attractive content<sup>10</sup>.

Reactions to these trends have already begun. Fact-checking sites have emerged, playing increasingly important and formal roles. Online intermediaries, originally avoiding any suggestion of responsibility for these developments, have recently begun to play a more active role: Facebook recently developed a fact-checking process into its platform, and Google prevents advertising from appearing on sites that it deems have “misrepresented” information. The BuzzFeed Editor in Chief Ben Smith has advocated for more support for objective, accurate reporting as a way to counterbalance the fake news creeping its way across social media feeds. Traditional news media have also woken to their role in setting standards for journalism and promoting critical understanding – as well as reacting to criticisms of complacency, lack of diversity, and establishment bias.

***With all of this in mind, it is timely to ask:***

- ***Where are citizens getting their information and what earns their trust?***
- ***Who are the relevant players involved, and what is their motivation?***
- ***What are the different editorial approaches of traditional and new media per se – have traditional media also had to adapt to this new reality?***

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/additions-to-the-five-journalistic-ws>, accessed on March 9, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2017/02/24/how-advertising-fuels-fake-news/>

## Risks and Opportunities

Although it is clearly not the only notable development in news media, it has been hard to avoid the term “Fake News” in 2017. Yet the term “Fake News” obscures the complexity of the picture. What are we really talking about when we notice risks relating to changes in the media landscape?

Many of the characteristics associated with “Fake News” are not new to us, and the risks are well known: for example, traditional broadcast media have been used for the purposes of disinformation and persuasion as long as they have existed, and citizens have relied on single information sources (living in their own “filter bubble”) just as long.

One view is that the scale of the problem has been exaggerated and resulted in automatic calls for greater online regulation – these are in fact reflected by draft Audiovisual Media Services Directive at EU level, something that will be discussed in more detail in the autumn session. But beyond the headlines, we could be facing a fundamental threat to plurality, traditionally the main defence against inaccurate and nefarious providers of information. Severe financial pressures mean that even with the very best intentions, fact-checks are neglected, inconvenient facts hidden and investigative journalism often forgotten and tagged as tedious and expensive. Media outlets are cutting down on editorial staff and even being forced to close. Local news is on the decline. Paid-for political advertising has been exploiting these trends so obviously that even Tim Berners-Lee has called for greater online regulation<sup>11</sup>. If traditional media outlets can no longer set high journalistic standards for the rest of the media to follow, there is a risk that standards will fall universally, and in the end that the public could lose all trust in news media, wherever it appears.

Seen in that light, it would be difficult to identify a greater risk in this context than a significant reduction of reliable, honest information for viewers and citizens.

In addition, there is another, perhaps more alarming trend produced by such occurrences in media. Namely, a recent poll of young people in several countries shows that young people hold a broad support for respecting and expanding various rights, except for right to freedom of expression. Polling data bolsters the view that today’s youth are embracing a right not to be offended, which could be found in contradiction to free speech<sup>12</sup>.

For this reason, these issues are debated around the world at present, with many contributions and analysis within the industry, to academia, NGOs, social networks, including those on the level of national governments and international structures, including European Union, Council of Europe, etc.

What is perhaps missing from this picture is a recognition of the benefits and opportunities that seemed so clear when new sources of information first began to emerge. Challenges to traditional players, greater plurality, more diverse content and perspectives, greater citizen participation in news production as well as consumption. These benefits should be understood and acknowledged, because too heavy a focus on risks motivates those who see solutions in more statutory control; we should be aware of the positive aspects that tighter regulation could destroy.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/11/tim-berners-lee-online-political-advertising-regulation>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/02/daily-chart-10?fsrc=scn%2Ftw%2Fte%2Fbl%2Fed%2F>, accessed on March 7, 2017.

### Questions to consider:

- *What exactly is meant by “Fake News”?*
- *What are the greatest obstacles to the provision of high quality news and analysis?*
- *What are the most worrying risks associated with recent developments?*
- *What are the main benefits and gains from the new media environment?*

### Structure of the Edinburgh spring 2017 session

The Plenary session, chaired by **Helena Mandić**, Vice-Chairperson of EPRA, opened with a general introduction to the topic of News in the Digital Age replacing the debate in its overall context.

The panel discussion was composed of:

- **Simon Milner**, Director of Policy at Facebook,
- **Gary Smith**, Head of BBC News Scotland, and
- **Sejal Parmar**, Senior Adviser at the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the OSCE

The three presentations were followed by a brief discussion among panellists on the main issues - as outlined earlier in this paper and interventions from EPRA members<sup>13</sup>.

### The Vienna autumn 2017 Session

In the autumn, based on a discussion of these themes, we considered the provision of remedies to the risks that we have identified, from the perspective of consumers, news creators, NRAs, etc. These include, but are certainly not limited to accountability, responsibility, credibility, within the paradigm of full respect of right to freedom of expression<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> For a summary of the main findings of the Edinburgh session, see the introduction of the Comparative Background Document for the Vienna session on News in the Digital Age: the Role of Regulators - Implementing Accuracy, Objectivity and Impartiality in practice, it can be accessed at this link: <https://www.epra.org/attachments/vienna-plenary-1-news-in-digital-age-the-role-of-regulators-epra-background-document>

<sup>14</sup> News in the Digital Age: the Role of Regulators - Implementing Accuracy, Objectivity and Impartiality in practice, it can be accessed at this link: <https://www.epra.org/attachments/vienna-plenary-1-news-in-digital-age-the-role-of-regulators-epra-background-document>