



Briefing| EBS - Fake News & why it's threatening your business

Dods - Debate Summary

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On May 24, the European Business Summit hosted a debate on the topic 'Fake News & why it's threatening your business'. The recent Facebook/Cambridge Analytica revelations show how, in an increasingly digitised world, data can be exploited and reminds companies of the importance to ensure transparency about how they use consumer information. At a time when citizens and businesses depend on a constant flow of data and information, the widespread loss of trust can have grave consequences for all. Trust, the backbone of business-client relationship and a valuable business commodity, lies at the centre of present-day discussions about the impact of disinformation online. The impact of Fake News – and the resulting loss of trust – in the wider economic fabric cannot be overlooked. Moreover, with the entering into force of the GDPR, all actors are called to play their role in tackling the disinformation challenge.

Please find below an overview of the debate.

The Moderator, Jennifer Baker, Freelance for EurActiv, BBC and Computerworld, opened the discussion by asking the speakers what had changed over the past 12 months in the realm of Fake News.

Hans van der Loo, Chairman, Institute for Integrated Economic Research, started by drawing attention to the fact that "there is nothing new about Fake News". In his view, the most important development was the establishment, by the European Commission, of a High-Level Group on Fake News and online disinformation. Now we have to see the results.

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, NATO, was of the view that people have begun to understand how Fake News is related to a wider concept, that of cyber warfare and with other forms of intimidation. Fake News is, so to speak, part of a package. How to deal with it? In his opinion, there is no quick solution. Fake News is possible because our adversaries are more effective in terms of propaganda. In addition, Fake News is something that is somehow ingrained in the way modern culture operates, and the silos and selectivity people seek online. Moreover, there is a freshness to Fake News that conventional news lack, and they also travel the web about 6 times faster than conventional news.

At the same time, there is an important dialogue between different actors which is starting to take place, and the hearing of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg with the European Parliament is an example. Issues

such as the right to be forgotten are being more and more discussed. Mr Shea also noted that the US is seeing a decrease in the use of Facebook, regardless of what the causes of this may be.

He then underlined the need to work much more closely with social media and to foster a greater "willingness in attribution", so that people understand better the authorship and sources of the news, and also for Europe to use its own algorithms and information technology resources. We need to understand how a specific event it is being boosted and who is being tackled, as this this allows us to understand the flow.

Jennifer Baker, Moderator , drew attention to the "Three V's" in Fake News: velocity, vectors and volume.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President, European Research Council , stressed that there is a political dimension and that it is also crucial to look at the training of young people at schools as well as at the training given to teachers. Young people should be able to establish facts but they often struggle to do so. The accessibility of good quality information is important and pupils ought to be trained from an early age and engaged in this type of more critical discussion. Mr Bourguignon then emphasised once more that this means also systematically retraining the teachers. He also noted that this debate has been largely absent from Member States. Finally, he was of the view that that Fake News can undermine the society at large.

Jennifer Baker, Moderator , drew attention to the fact that there are different types of information. For instance, there is information that is not true but it is not intended to harm. Then there is information which can even be considered as "technically true" but that is presented in a biased way and, crucially, it is intended to harm. She then asked the speakers whether education at numerical level could help to tackle the problem of Fake News.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President, European Research Council , noted that, because in modern societies, statistics play an increasing role, an early exposure to being able to discuss statistics and being critical has become much more important than it used to be.

Hans van der Loo, Chairman, Institute for Integrated Economic Research , underlined the importance of the concept of manipulative intent. He was of the view that Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is important but that the systemic thinking, which is critical, logical and holistic, combined with media literacy, is crucial. At the same time, he argued that Fake News is too big a phenomenon to be tackled only with education-related measures, also because this takes too long.

Mr van der Loo said that Fake News affects the decision-making process, particularly in democracies and has an important impact in the floating voters. He said that Fake News create a type of 'fog' and that the goal is to clear this fog. The better the vision a decision-maker has, the better he or she will in performing its job. At the same time, we should not get involved in "fighting" Fake News per se, because this might also create a backlash, but rather to effectively tag them as Fake News. he noted that the majority of people who read news has no subscriptions and read all information for free. This, in his view, carries the disadvantage that the news in question have no meta data being added on top.

He then drew attention to the fact that, in the past, there were many regional newspapers that did not have the capacity to do national coverage, only local. He gave the example of Germany before World War 2 and of Alfred Hugenberg, a media tycoon who provided the national coverage and that helped prepare a specific information framework which, in his view, facilitated what happened next in Germany.

Recently, slightly over 20% Europeans voted for populist parties. The voters say that those in power are incompetent. Mr van der Loo was of the view that the cause is that the current leaders did not understand reality and also lacked the capacity to discuss it honestly. 85% of the printed press in the UK is controlled by five non-British millionaires. In other words, the British were programmed to think about Europe the way they think now, he said.

He concluded by stressing that the danger for society is that the floating voters are so vulnerable to Fake News.

Jennifer Baker, Moderator , noted that these discussions are related to the issue of media plurality (and its lack). Media business pump up different messages depending on the target public and on the intended effect. This in turn is related to people's data. The targeting and the micro-targeting of news and behavioural advertising are a reality. She asked whether the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) will make a difference.

Hans van der Loo, Chairman, Institute for Integrated Economic Research , was of the view that the GDPR is but a temporary reprieve because the actors who gave a manipulative intent, like Russia or China, follow a plan.

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, NATO , said that a better filter is necessary and also stressed the importance of bodies like a Complaints Commission. He noted that during the French elections the French press was "invited" to hack Emmanuel Macron's emails but that French media, fortunately, refused to do so.

Mr Shea also expressed his concern with the fact that, as regards hybrid warfare, an effective toolbox is lacking. Such a toolbox can help change the way those targeting Europe think about it by affecting their calculus. Presently, the calculus of targeting Europe is "high benefit and low risk". It is also important to get out our own narrative out there to solve this problem. Deterrence does not work when one can do something to us but we cannot do anything to them, he underlined

Jennifer Baker, Moderator , said that a cultural problem requires a cultural solution and that people like Mr Zuckerberg have the power to "shut things down". She noted that for instance Google, in the context of the abortion referendum in Ireland on Friday 25 May, decided to shut down all advertising, both for the yes and no campaigns.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President, European Research Council , argued that that centralising and introducing strict controls is a contradictory measure in the European context and that people need to give more value to long-term efforts to get solid and quality information. The economic system for the media does not, for the moment, operate like this. It is not playing in the right direction. To reintroduce some values in the systems it is not so easy. He stressed the importance of addressing all sides of the problem, including the economic model, and that it is only necessary to change the opinion of a few people to make a difference.

Hans van der Loo, Chairman, Institute for Integrated Economic Research , said that commercial cooperation is part of a wider system. How to make it fit into our culture? Europe, unlike others, is very much used to transparency. The economic model problem is also true and, unless we have quality media, we will not have a quality society, he stressed. Investing in quality media has a societal return and the people who can invest should understand it.

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, NATO , argued that criminalisation is one of the possible options and underlined the need for rules to apply in the virtual world in the same way they apply in the offline world. Standards of objectivity are also important and the private sector should be encouraged to come up with ideas. In the cyber area, what companies like Microsoft are doing with Digital Geneva Convention, is a good example.

He said that he is a staunch believer in democracy and argued that buttering the democratic institutions and pointing out, day after day, where Fake News lie, is something that simply needs to be done. Robust democratic institutions are indispensable. He noted that the Dutch Commission investigating the Malaysia Airlines plane crash would publish its interim report, after 4 years. Such efforts are important to dismantle conspiracy theories.

Jennifer Baker, Moderator , questioned whether the process involved of such efforts is not too slow. "Trying to establish truth after 4 years, is this enough?"

Hans van der Loo, Chairman, Institute for Integrated Economic Research , recalled that publishers feel the pressure to publish very fast, but that of the speed is too high speed this can be very bad. It would be good to return to some principles of the media business. Fake News is, in his view, a "virtuous circle downwards" and that now we need "a virtuous circle upwards".

At this point, all speakers voiced their agreement that "getting as many clicks as possible" is a "broken business model".

Q&A Session

A **representative from Trinity College** noted that many citizens are increasingly reading scientific publications and that many people see themselves as scientists in their own minds and as experts in different fields. However, a methodology is often lacking and that the publications people read are often not peer reviewed.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President, European Research Council , stressed the importance of Open Science is important and of the accessibility of scientific content. Mr Bourguignon was of the view that scientific community, if it wants to be trusted, needs to organise itself in a way that certifies the information. Producing articles that are available to a large public and which disclose the source of information is part of this effort. As communities, if we want to behave responsibly, we need to make an effort, he stressed.

A **representative from EurActiv** drew attention to the issue of investing in the media and the velocity problem in the publishing of information. She noted that investigative journalism requires time and resources and can also be dangerous. Is there a role for investigative journalism?

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, NATO , said that political leaders need to stop seeing the press as a problem and considering 'Fake News' everything they do not like. Journalistic sources need to protect. Governments should not be able to break journalistic sources and/or use judges to chase journalists. He noted that unfortunately there are examples in Europe and this means that, domestically, we need to do a far better job in protecting the freedom of the press.

Hans van der Loo, Chairman, Institute for Integrated Economic Research , recalled that decades ago, in the Watergate Scandal in the US, journalists worked on it for weeks without publishing anything. They prepared everything properly and in the end a US President could be impeached. Investigative journalism is of critical importance. He said that the role of a Government is making democracy function in a way that contributes to the wellbeing of its people and that the great challenge of the 21st Century is to get to the other end of the century in a civilised way. However, quality decision making without quality media is not possible.

A representative of Young Professionals in Foreign Policy recalled that, in the run up to Brexit, Michael Gove had said that people "have had enough of experts" and asked how do Fake News affect supranational organisations.

Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, NATO , stated that one of the lessons from the Brexit campaign is that Fake News can linger for a long time and one cannot wait for them to simply fade away, because they can be quite effective. People are developing a tolerance for little lies and that this problem should be addressed. In his view, Brexiteers won because they put more emotion in their efforts and arguments, although not necessarily more truth. The lesson, he argued, is that those more responsible for something are also those who need to make the greater effort, noting that the Brexit Referendum concerned the EU yet EU officials were largely absent from the debate, probably because they feared that their intervention would be counter-productive. Yet, this tactic failed.

Mr Shea also drew attention to the fact that online platforms like Facebook have showed that. In issues like terrorism and child pornography, they can be quite effective in tackling such content and therefore, they can do the same thing with other types of content.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President, European Research Council , emphasised the need for every group in society to contribute to tackling the threat of Fake News.

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