

# Denkersprogramma Democracy & Disinformation

## Interview met Anja Bechmann en Ben O'Loughlin

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*De nieuwe cyclus in de reeks van het Denkersprogramma is getiteld 'Democracy & Disinformation' en zal het functioneren van de democratie bekijken vanuit twee invalshoeken: de massale online verspreiding van desinformatie en de aanvaarding en verdere verspreiding door grote lagen van de bevolking. Hiervoor werden twee complementaire Denkers aangetrokken, Anja Bechmann (Aarhus University) experte in digitale media en Ben O'Loughlin (Royal Holloway, London) expert internationale relaties en communicatie. Het slotsymposium zal plaatsvinden op 11 oktober in het Vlaams Parlement. Meer info: [www.kvab.be/denkersprogramma](http://www.kvab.be/denkersprogramma)*

### How are you approaching the subject of the programme from your very different backgrounds?

**Anja Bechmann:** My background is in information, communication and media studies. The focus in my research is studying platforms and how users and companies act and react on digital platforms and social media. I study this from the perspective of data analysis and data infrastructure. I try to see patterns in how people share data and how platforms allow people to access data. I'm very happy to collaborate with Ben for the Thinker's Programme. Ben offers a different angle through his focus on political discourses and narratives. This collaboration is also interesting in terms of methods. It is useful to zoom out of aspects like Big Data, infrastructure, regulation, economy and to use the perspective of narrative to see how content is constructed.

**Ben O'Loughlin:** I have a background in political science. While Anja can explain the inner workings of our media system and data infrastructure, I look at how political groups, NGOs, world leaders and even ordinary people use that system strategically to advance their goals. But there are also narratives about the infrastructure itself. Media infrastructures influence the distribution of power by putting people or groups in a good or bad position. Part of the political game being played at the moment lies in creating the infrastructure that suits you as a party, organisation or social group. For example, if you are the leader of an authoritarian state, then you want to make sure your

infrastructure is controlling. Whereas in Europe or America we are supposed to have free and democratic societies, which means strong leadership is providing an open and democratic internet system. Hillary Clinton talked a lot about internet freedom, she was trying to illustrate what a liberal and democratic internet would look like. There is a political game being played within the existing structures and there is a game about the infrastructure itself. I am interested in both aspects.

### How are you defining 'disinformation' within this Thinkers' Programme?

**Anja Bechmann:** We have opted to use the definition from the European Commission report which is as follows: "Forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit." In the KVAB Position Paper [The battle for the truth] 'fake news' was also recognized as a concept. The Commission's report does not recognize 'fake news' in their conceptual framework because the term itself is already political. We will have to decide whether or not we wish to include 'fake news' in our conceptual framework or not. There are arguments to opt for a broad definition within the scope of this report because of the tendencies of disinformation specific to the Flemish context.

### Research show that 'Fake news' isn't as prevalent in Flanders and Belgium when compared with other countries. How do you think this will evolve in the future?

**Anja Bechmann:** The presence of fake news may not be radical in Belgium and Flanders. Yet we have learned from our meetings with stakeholders that there are definitely issues with the normalizing of extreme voices. They start out in online communities and spread out to media coverage to reach a much broader community. This might normalize hostility in a way we haven't seen before. It is definitely something we want to follow up in our report.

**Ben O'Loughlin:** There is also a media tendency to have a so called 'balanced' debate on issues where there isn't really a debate to be had. For example, if 99% of scientists say climate change is real and 1% says it is not,



Denkers Anja Bechmann en Ben O'Loughlin



media have a tendency to give an equal voice to that 1%. This legitimizes extreme perspectives. We see that this is becoming a problem in most countries.

Another aspect that we need to look out for is the fact that trust in news media is really high in Flanders. There is a relatively limited number of news options; there is an important public broadcaster and a few good newspapers. We have a similar situation in Britain and studies there have shown that this makes people really susceptible to fake news. Because of their trust in the BBC, they are not used to having to compare news stories and sources. The British level of news literacy is therefore lower in comparison with the people in Greece, Italy or Eastern Europe. In those countries citizens are used to having to look at three or more news sources because they don't have high trust in the main news outlets. We can expect it to be similar in Belgium. Because people are trusting of the main sources, they have less skill and competence in critically engaging with news and understanding how it's produced.

#### How important is 'factchecking' in the battle against disinformation?

**Anja Bechmann:** We have this idea that factchecking is the solution, that we can just find out what is true and what is not. But there is often a lack of transparency in how the factchecking itself takes place. Facebook teaches its algorithm to label content as 'fake' or 'not fake', but it does so in a way that is not transparent to a broader public. The goal standard is very fragile because the justification is lacking. Factchecking can even be used as a political weapon if we don't have transparency. We need to address the need for transparency as part of a discussion on the knowledge paradigm. We don't want to apply an ontological approach to truth but rather an epistemological one.

**Ben O'Loughlin:** The wider crisis in our society is not that people disagree about facts but rather that they have epistemological differences in how they have faith in anything. We assume that enough people understand that for example science and law operate through certain procedures, but people believe things for all kinds of reasons. This is an important moment in history in which we need to re-establish how truth procedures

work. Data literacy and data transparency will be of crucial importance in this. If we could have transparency in the procedures through which facts are arrived at, we can still disagree about the final meaning but we could have some agreement about what constitutes a legitimate fact.

#### Do we over- or underestimate the impact of disinformation on the workings of democracy? What can we learn from the US elections and the Brexit campaign?

**Ben O'Loughlin:** To understand the situation with Brexit specifically, we need to focus on the fact that news reporting in the UK over the past thirty years has always been anti-EU. That is why we haven't got strong leadership voices campaigning to stay in the EU. Digital media did not alter that narrative. We are exposed to millions of adverts every year, so even though there were many online ads during the Brexit campaign, the idea that they had an actual effect that we can measure is nonsense.

In the US elections most of the money spent during the campaign was on tv advertising and not digital media. Not a single study has shown that someone changed their opinion based on a microtargeting campaign. The campaigns can affirm people's existing beliefs. But we do see how political teams make strategic decisions to target certain areas. What we have learned from this is that political parties and platforms like Facebook have extremely good databases.

#### This is where the fear of microtargeting stems from...

**Ben O'Loughlin:** After the Trump election and Brexit, a narrative has emerged about the impact of microtargeting. But what we need to be looking at, is how and where microtargeting fits in within the general repertoire of campaigning. Democracy will always entail some conflict, some trying to persuade each other. Nobody wants to 'get rid' of microtargeting altogether but there is a growing consensus that the necessary regulatory framework needs to be created. Fifty years ago politicians managed to agree on regulation for tv and press advertising, now we need similar action. In the US we have already seen politicians starting to rise to the occasion but in Europe we have yet to see leadership on this matter.





**Anja Bechmann:** The Commission wishes to regulate the platforms through antitrust, which means breaking down databases into smaller units. The platforms have access to enormous amounts of data. Targeting happens on a fine grain level. Very specific patterns can be distinguished through geographic information, self-reported interests and likes etc. Targeting can therefore be very diversified. This ties into our earlier discussion on data transparency: we are only able to identify filter bubbles if we have access to the data. I see that there is some political momentum to push for more transparency on digital campaigning activities by political organisations. We need transparency on things like budget and the targeting parameters where some initiatives have already been developed. But we also need to educate people on how the social platforms work. Content on these platforms is unedited and people should be aware how advertising works and how they are profiled.

#### How are you approaching the fact finding of the Thinkers' Programme?

**Ben O'Loughlin:** This Thinkers' Programme is an interesting opportunity for us, bringing together disinformation and democracy. It is a very wide field, with many facets: technical, political, economic, cultural, psychological... We have narrowed down the main topics we wish to cover for our final symposium and report. During the fact finding we are searching for examples that are specific to the Flemish context. We have already

spoken to many academics during the winter and we are meeting with various expert groups. Tomorrow, we are speaking to a group of journalists. This is particularly interesting; journalists are knowledgeable on this topic but they are also part of what we are researching since they are potential vehicles for disinformation themselves though they aren't always aware of this.

**Anja Bechmann:** How far does the role of journalists extend? News spreads with incredible speed these days so it is impossible for journalists to factcheck everything. News outlets use social platforms even though they have no way of controlling them. The challenges we are facing go beyond the problem of content. What is put into question is the sustainability of our media ecosystem. How far do we wish to go to make sure social platforms are adapted to our users and to democratic values previously undertaken by legacy media?

We will be tying in issues of transparency, data access, freedom of press and privacy into our report. We will also be looking at what happens during the upcoming political campaign and European election. Finally, we hope to formulate recommendations for the research community in Flanders. One recommendation will be that researchers should insist on an evidence-based approach where documentation and transparency is needed to monitor what the digital narratives are, how and to what extent they spread and how users engage with it.



De Denkers samen met de stuurgroep en genodigde experts na een 'fact finding' sessie in het Hollands College, Leuven.