

# THE BATTLE FOR THE TRUTH

FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION  
IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA WORLD

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**KVAB POSITION PAPERS**

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# The battle for the truth

## Fake news and disinformation in the digital media world

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## Executive Summary

Ever since Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign the term "fake news" has become an integral part of daily media reports (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Presumably, this is one of the reasons why the term has become associated with the president of the US. Specific events exemplify the phenomenon, as when spokesman Sean Spicer asserted – against all evidence – that the crowd at Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017 was the biggest ever. After TV footage and head counts showed incontestably that his contention was false, Trump's spokesman continued to deny that "fact". The then communications advisor, Kellyanne Conway, came to Spicer's defence, claiming that his observations were based on "*alternative facts*". This sounds like a way of legitimising fake news: fake news need not give way to factual news, because it relies on a different (alternative) view of the 'multifarious' facts and looks at them from another perspective (Kakutani, 2018).

In addition to the abovementioned US election campaign, the unexpected results of the Brexit referendum have also fed the discussion on the long-term consequences for democracy of deliberate and targeted campaigns that use demographic, and even psychological, profiles ('*micro targeting*') of voters in order to spread misleading information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 4, 26-28). What the *United Nations* revealed about the mass expulsion of the *Rohingya* from Myanmar, and about the role of hate campaigns among millions of *Facebook* users in this process, strengthens the realisation that terms such as 'power', 'mass violence' and 'hate campaigns' are all part of the wider debate on fake news and disinformation. What is involved is a struggle over feelings, thoughts, mindsets and knowledge.

Donald Trump's election campaign and the 'micro-targeting' activities of *Cambridge Analytica* during the Brexit campaign reveal the darker side of the digital world. But there is another side that we would do well not to forget when looking for ways to legislate the digital world. The facilities of the digital world allow countless users to stay in touch with friends and family across the entire world. Finding useful information, when planning all kinds of activities, has never been easier. In an interview, the famous philosopher-sociologist Jürgen Habermas compared the rise of the online society with the invention of the printing press. The internet has already created millions of useful niches where reliable information and well-founded opinions can be exchanged. Academics can now attract a wider public for their discoveries, publications and critical discussions. This is the reason why in this position paper we would like to make nuanced and very specific recommendations that counter (online) disinformation, without discounting the positive accomplishments of the digital society and freedom of expression.

The *first chapter* provides an overview of the public discussion that has taken place over the last few years on the theme of fake news and disinformation. How new is this phenomenon and how does it differ from similar phenomena in the past, such as political satire, cartoons and propaganda? How does direct political communication with 'followers' fit within the framework of political democracy as we know it? The fact that in surrounding countries political authorities addressed the phenomenon is duly noted. We will put a lot of emphasis on trust in science and expertise in the current digital society.

The *second chapter* looks at concepts that are regularly used in discussions about the impact of fake news and disinformation: the difference between 'true' and 'untrue', 'honest' and 'dishonest', 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable', 'biased' and 'unbiased'. What is the significance of these distinctions in the context of the so-called post-truth era? In countries where fake news is a dominating force, chances are higher that a significant segment of the population will turn its back on the social consensus. A democratic society usually requires a sufficient degree of shared critical understanding in order to function. What is offered in schools and universities, in government communication and in the quality press, loses meaning and is now trusted less and less or not at all.

The *third chapter* provides insights into the complex factors and actors behind the dissemination of disinformation and fake news. Social network websites and social media platforms are especially good breeding grounds for fake news. In order to formulate a sufficiently well-considered response to the challenges facing a free democratic society as a result of the far-reaching and rapid dissemination of online disinformation and fake news, some understanding of the logic and the facilitating context of the present-day online communication system is needed. The advantages and disadvantages of online participative culture will be discussed, and a more in-depth analysis of the specific role of news media, social media platforms and news users themselves will be provided.

The *fourth chapter* takes a closer look at the causes of fake news and disinformation and relates this to the way in which democracy functions. The erosion of the trust in traditional media and the rising political polarisation are of great relevance in this context. These factors do not exist to the same degree in all Western countries, so that fake news is currently a much more serious problem in the US and the UK than in a country like Belgium, where the number of people coming into contact with real fake news is significantly lower. Even the content of fake news differs from country to country. Just because fake news is not a pervasive phenomenon in our own country does not alter the fact that people are concerned about other forms of disinformation, such as sloppy journalism and misleading communication by politicians and their parties.



The *fifth chapter* presents the various initiatives that have already been taken by national and supranational authorities or are in the planning stages. This is a lead-up to the recommendations that the KVAB would like to propose, in accordance with its mission. The recommendations mainly concern the need for more scientific research into the various aspects of this issue, and investments in fact-checking and media wisdom. The recommendations are summarised below in a list. We realize that the measures proposed are limited in scope and effect. This awareness goes hand in hand, however, with the firm desire to combat fake news and disinformation as effectively as possible. After all, it is not difficult to imagine what the consequences might be if, on the one hand, influential political leaders were to believe in conspiracy theories and deliberately spread them, while on the other hand denying 'evidence-based' research into, for example, climate change.

This *Standpunt* ends with a reflective *afterword* that takes a critical look at the work presented and brings up questions that demand further investigation. It points out how a lot of attention has been paid to the supply and dissemination of fake news by powerful players via media platforms, as well as to the response to this problem via regulation, 'empowerment' of the users and 'fact-checking'. Note is taken of the fact that the problem of the digital media world arises not only from technological and economic developments, but also from socio-political shifts and group-or-mass psychological factors. The users are not passive "victims". In some population groups, fake news is "tasted", "savoured" and frequently forwarded via social media. What are the consequences of this behaviour for the functioning of democracy? The aim of the "thinkers' programme" that the KVAB is organizing as a follow-up to this *Standpunt*, is to find an answer to this question and to related ones by means of study, research and an exchange of ideas.

## Foreword

The *Standpunten* series The Academy's *Standpunten* (Position Papers) series contributes to a scientifically validated debate on current social and artistic topics. The authors, members and workgroups of the Academy write under their own name, independently and with complete intellectual freedom. The approval for publication by one or more Klassen of the Academy is an assurance of quality. This *Standpunt* was approved for publication by the Class of the Humanities on 17 November 2018.

The authors are especially grateful to the members of the working group (see list on page xxx) as well as the many individuals who have spontaneously provided us with documents in preparation for this *Standpunt*. We would like to give special thanks to: Freddy Dumortier (permanent secretary at KVAB), Joos Vandewalle (chairman of KVAB), Hubert Bocken (former chairman), the Klasse directors Godelieve Laureys and Kristiaan Versluys, Jan Jagers (lecturer and journalist), Maarten Boudry (philosopher and journalist) and the support staff at KVAB, in particular Nathalie Boelens and Ellen Van Impe. They have all helped bring this *Standpunt* to fruition.

## The battle for the truth. Fake news and disinformation in the digital media world

*"The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist."* (Arendt, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Eversince the US election campaign in 2016, the term '*alternative facts*' has remained in the news as *the* word of 2017 and seems to be inextricably linked to the term '*fake news*' (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Meanwhile, there have been several occasions on which followers have not needed sophisticated arguments to continue to support their leader despite empirical evidence to the contrary. This is one of the cognitive and socio-psychological '*miracles*' confronting us in the contemporary globalised information environment.

The unexpected results of the Brexit referendum have equally fuelled the discussion about the consequences for future democracy of media campaigns that use demographic and psychological profiling ('*microtargeting*') of voters to spread misleading information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 4, 26-28). Taking these two clear examples from the political domain, you might get the impression that the malady of disinformation, and sometimes of deliberate misinformation via the media, is limited to matters of political importance. A few examples from other domains will correct that impression: a leading meteorologist allegedly claimed that climate change is a lie and '*global warming does not exist*'; and apparently '*Vaccines can arouse homosexual feelings in children*' (taken from Van Dijck 2018). The Affordable Care Act in the US, for instance, also suffered from a case of misinformation (Pasek, Sood & Krosnick, 2015).<sup>2</sup> However, the advantage of linking fake news with politics is that its rapid and widespread dissemination is seen as a form of exercising power. In a NATO document about fighting IS with '*the same weapons*', Jeff Giese articulated this hypothesis as follows: "*In today's globalized information environment, the ability to influence narrative and perception has become arguably the most leveraged, participatory, and relevant form of power*" (Giese, 2017: 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Quote also obtained from the introduction to Kakutani's '*The Death of Truth*' (2018): 11. Michiko Kakutani won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism (1998) and was a literary critic of *The New York Times*. See also: Hayes, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The misinformation especially concerns facilities on which elites spread incorrect information, in other words in case of disinformation.

Anyone who has read Giese's article, which first appeared in 2015 in the journal *Defense Strategic Communications*,<sup>3</sup> will not be surprised to learn that the spread of fake news and other forms of disinformation via social media is regarded as a 'wargame' ('mememic warfare') in the digital era. There may be a tendency to point to such a claim as highly exaggerated, even though we now know that ruling powers and (supra)national security services employ 'troll armies' of information and media experts to reinforce or expand their power. This is not limited to phenomena such as the fight against IS. What came to light as a result of the action of the *United Nations* about the mass expulsion of the Rohingya people from Myanmar, and about the role of hate campaigns among millions of *Facebook* users via the 'Free Basics Service' (HC 363, 2018: 22-12), feeds the realisation that terms such as 'war', 'mass violence' and 'hate campaigns' in the debate on fake news are really not exaggerated. 'Unintended consequences' is a phrase that inadvertently comes to mind when Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, tells us what he dreamed of when designing Facebook: bringing people from all around the world closer to each other<sup>4</sup> (Ireton & Posetti, 2018: 95-96). And a suitable metaphor springs to mind, of the 'apprentice wizard' who couldn't (?) predict how the distributors of information and their followers would abuse the technical possibilities on offer.

We can view the forms of fake news as expressions of power and influence within the globalised information environment. It is all about power over feelings, thoughts, mindsets and knowledge. This power goes with the talent to influence both the story being told and the perception of that story in a media environment that spreads information far and fast via a number of channels like *Facebook* and *Google* that can no longer be controlled (Dekeyser, 2018: 22). By referencing Donald Trump's election campaign and the 'microtargeting' activities of Cambridge Analytica in the introduction of this *Standpunt*, we find ourselves inevitably on the dark side of the digital media world.

But there is a flipside that should not go unnoticed when looking for ways to monitor and regulate the digital world. On the light side there is the realisation that the facilities of the digital world allow countless users to stay in touch with acquaintances, friends and family across the entire world, regardless of physical distances and barriers. It has never been easier to find practical information when planning all manner of activities. We are standing at the starting blocks of a new era, as the famous philosopher-sociologist Jürgen Habermas has it. The internet has already provided millions of useful niches in which reliable information and substantiated opinions are exchanged and critically scrutinized. (Hermoso, 2018: 82).

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<sup>3</sup> his peer-reviewed journal is a project of the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Zuckerberg in: '*Inside Facebook: Secrets of a Social Network*'. Documentary about Facebook's moderation centre: VRT Canvas on 13/09/2018.

This *Standpunt* consists of five sections, a list of recommendations, and an epilogue. The societal discussion that has developed on the theme of fake news and disinformation is the focus of the *first section*. The *second section* is of a more philosophical nature and looks at the relevance of a series of conceptual distinctions that are regularly highlighted in discussions on the impact of fake news and disinformation. The *third section* offers an insight into the factors and actors behind the dissemination and thriving of disinformation and fake news in the digital media world. The *fourth section* takes a more in-depth look at the causes of fake news and disinformation, in which technology is not the only decisive of its success. The section makes a link to the way democracy functions. The *fifth section* outlines the initiatives being proposed, or that have already been started, to prevent or curtail the harmful effects of disinformation in the future. Some people would like to limit freedom of expression and opinion. But this is frequently cautioned against. In line with the position of the *International Federation of Library Associates and Institutes (IFLA)*, the KVAB is also against any form of censure.

Starting from the many initiatives already taken or in preparation, the *Standpunt* eventually proposes several positive measures, in connection to the KVAB's mission. It is clear that the recommendations will not automatically translate into final solutions. The awareness of a certain constraint, however, is not inconsistent with the strong determination to fight fake news and disinformation wherever possible. We know all too well what might happen if influential political leaders believe in conspiracy theories and deliberately spread them, while denying the existence of cause-and-effect chains that, on the basis of evidence-based research, correlate collective behaviour with natural phenomena (see Schwartz 2018). The *Standpunt* closes with a reflective *epilogue* in which the paper is critiqued, and the door is opened for questions that require further attention.

# 1. Overview of the social discussion

Fake news is often linked to the US presidential campaign at the end of 2016. In the three months prior to these presidential elections there was more communication around fake news in social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* than communication around factual news (Silverman, 2016; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 11; see also Farkas & Schou, 2018).<sup>5</sup> In the margins of these events there was an upsurge in academic research on the emergence and spread of fake news. This research revealed that the top 20 false election stories in that period came from 'hoax sites'<sup>6</sup> and blogs created by fervent supporters of Donald Trump. Is fake news a typical phenomenon of the current digital era or has it always been around? Does it dominate the media because of the technical possibilities and changes in media culture and structure, which influential actors are able to make use of with the help of media experts?

## **Fake news: an old story in a new technological outfit**

The study by Allcott & Gentzkow (2017: 222) reports that in 2016 in the US, when examining 65 'fake news sites', the percentage of social media as source was four times bigger than on 690 'top news sites'. The mass presence of citizens on social networks, and the fact that these citizens increasingly get their news exclusively from this channel, facilitates the rapid dissemination of fake news. Researchers at *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT) traced the spread of 126,000 news stories in 2016 and 2017 that had been 'retweeted' more than 4.5 million times by more than three million Twitterers. Six independent 'factchecking' organisations classified these stories as 'true' or 'false' (fake news). The results of this research into the online dissemination of "true and false news" are published in *Science* (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018: 1146-51). Fake news reports apparently had a 70 percent higher chance of being retweeted than tweets that were classified as 'true'. This study inspired *De Standaard* (09/03/2018: D7) to publish a contribution under the striking headline "*Nepnieuws tweekert het luidst*" (fake news tweets loudest). It is worth noting that these claims were not systematically denied by the source in which they appeared once the story broke that these reports were 'fake'. In contrast to the original fake message, the correction was shared a great deal less on internet platforms. The sensation value of fake news is seemingly greater than any interest in the correction.

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<sup>5</sup> In the report by the *Council of Europe* (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 11) it was reported, in reference to a contribution by C. Silverman in *Buzzfeed News*, that in the last three months of the US presidential election campaign fabricated news reports were shared no less than 8.7 million times, elicited reactions, and/or provoked commentary on Facebook. In the same period the top 20 stories on the 19 leading websites were shared a total of 7,367 times, or elicited reactions or comments on Facebook (Silverman, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> *Hoax*: deception, tricks, fraud, jokes. If the dissemination occurs via caricatures, these are called 'memes'.

The period in which the intensity of the reporting on fake news was observed might easily give the impression that fake news came primarily from President Trump's camp. And there are of course arguments in support of this. The number of fake or misleading claims by the 45<sup>th</sup> US president during his first year in office was calculated by *The Washington Post*. The result was a total of 2,450 such claims, with an average of 5.9 per day (Kakutani, 2018: 13). However, this tally has been adjusted slightly since then. In the pro-Trump camp there were soon reports of fake news being spread by the opposition party. An article in *The Federalist* by Daniel Payne is an example of this.<sup>7</sup> In it the author defends the assertion that after the election there was real hysteria about fake news in the established media, while that same 'left' media was itself guilty of the large-scale dissemination of fake news: "*day after day, even hour after hour, the media continue to broadcast, spread, promulgate, publicize, and promote fake news on an industrial scale*" (Payne, 2016: 1). The author corroborates his allegation with sixteen fake news reports that appeared after 8 November 2016, the day of Trump's victory. All come from sources opposing that victory. These reports were shared and retweeted by thousands of followers and taken up by a broad range of media.<sup>8</sup> According to Payne, these were clear examples of fake news. Sometimes it is also a case of unintentionally incorrect information ('*misinformation*') and sloppy journalism that is later corrected. On 8 February 2017, two days after its publication, Payne's article was picked up by Trump himself and shared further.

Rather than viewing Donald Trump or his supporters as *the* source of the spread of fake news during the election campaign, the use of this term is seen as a rhetorical means used by the President himself to undermine and contradict claims made by his opponents, among them journalists from the established mainstream media. A case in point is the denial of global warming as well as the denial of facts from his family past (De Foer, 2017; Van Dijck, 2018a: 1). 'Real news', analyses, and the opinions of opponents are frequently classified as fake news by those in power or the spokespeople of non-democratic regimes where press freedom is restricted. There the term 'fake news' is used to justify silencing the 'free press' (Erlanger, 2017: 1-2).

Is this only happening now? And do the so-called Western democracies *not* make use of fake news? In these democracies too, politicians are flexible and strategic with 'the truth', and that has been going on for a long time. One of the most famous examples contradicting the idea that fake news is a new phenomenon is the deliberate vagueness between 'knowing' and 'believing' of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair when he claimed on 3 April 2002 that President Saddam

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Payne: co-editor of *The College Fix* (the news magazine of the *Student Free Press Association*); regularly publishes in *The Federalist*. A division of *FDRLST Media*.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Nancy Sinatra's so-called complaint, spread by CNN, about the song "*My Way*" being played at Trump's inauguration.

Hussain of Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction (McSmith & Cooper: 2016). The spread of inaccurate information and fake news in the context of psychological warfare to discourage 'the enemy' or as propaganda and legitimacy before, during and after wars or armed conflicts, is a time-honoured tradition (Van der Horst, 2018). Julius Caesar was already aware in his 'De Bello Gallico' how this could be done and what it could yield for him.<sup>9</sup> History is littered with stories in which groups are accused of crimes and epidemics. This is supposedly the justification for expulsion and extermination. The Jews could tell you a thing or two about that. No, fake news is certainly not a new phenomenon. What is new is the form, speed and scope that it takes in the digital world.

### **Fake news or disinformation?**

Nearly everyone who writes about fake news is quick to say that this is not really an appropriate or useful term. That doesn't mean the term is forbidden. There are still articles about fake news but in the titles the terms fake news and disinformation are used. The best example of a 'failed' attempt to suppress the use of the term 'fake news' appeared on the cover of a recent UNESCO publication entitled '*Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: A Handbook of Journalism Education and Training*' (Ireton & Rosetti., 2018).

When preparing this *Standpunt* there was also repeated discussion about whether the term 'fake news' was suitable for explaining the phenomenon. Isn't the scope of 'fake news' too narrow and wouldn't it be better to talk about 'disinformation'?

What are the arguments for crossing out the term 'fake news'? In a number of reports and studies that appeared after 2016 it was posited that the term 'disinformation' should be used rather than 'fake news' because: (1) the term 'fake news' is inadequate for describing the complex phenomenon of the 'information pollution', given that fake news also refers to content that is not completely 'fake' but is fabricated, and is mixed up with facts and practices that have very little to do with news;<sup>10</sup> (2) the term 'fake news' largely ignores the deliberate and often automated dissemination of these reports;<sup>11</sup> and (3) the term is misleading because some politicians and their supporters use it to refute 'unfavourable' news that appears in the established media (HLGFD, 2018: 10; see also Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 5). In that discussion the impression arises that

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<sup>9</sup> See for example: Vereniging Classici Nederland, 2018 ([http:// klassieken .nu/2017/09/21/de-bello-gallico-caesars-zelfverheerlijking/](http://klassieken.nu/2017/09/21/de-bello-gallico-caesars-zelfverheerlijking/)).

<sup>10</sup> The reference here is to messages sent by Donald Trump that cannot be branded as 'fake' in terms of their content, but which contain no information (time, place) with which to put them in a particular context.

<sup>11</sup> The reference here is to automatically created 'accounts' or *bots*, to networks of non-existent (fake) followers, and to targeted and disguised advertising.



'disinformation' is a neutral concept while fake news has become part of political discussions in many different countries.

Disinformation is broader in scope than fake news because it refers not only to 'news' but also to all kinds of 'distorted' information. You could even claim that fake news is a specific subtype of disinformation.<sup>12</sup> Aware that fake news is a loaded term, in this *Standpunt* we have included both 'disinformation' and 'fake news' in the title and will use them in the text because this best ties in with the current social debates in the media.<sup>13</sup> Then the reader knows immediately what the article is about. Where it is more appropriate, other forms of disinformation are also referenced.

### **Fake news! Easy to distinguish from real news?**

A news report that inadvertently contains incorrect content is not fake news. Neither is incorrect information if this is not done deliberately or can be ascribed to a lack of knowledge or insight. Unintentional mistakes or inaccuracies in scientific articles are not fake news either. Nor is the very frequent incorrect interpretation of statistical information in the media, even if this may also lead to the wrong conclusions and interpretations because of the lack of elementary statistical knowledge necessary to venture an interpretation of such information.<sup>14</sup> These are all cases of misinformation. The credibility of such claims is largely dependent on the ability to evaluate the procedures and methods on which the pronouncements are based.

We talk of fake news when there is an intentional creation of misinformation, called 'disinformation'. In this case fabricated stories taken from thin air are spread with the intention of influencing people (propaganda), misleading them, and/or collecting as many clicks in the internet traffic as possible (financial gain). Fake news reports are posted on false news sites that have been specially set up for this purpose. These reports are then disseminated as widely as possible via social media in order to influence certain sections of the population. Forms of 'fake news' include: inventing content, changing the formal features of existing content, falsifying the source, presenting commentary as fact, and linking accurate content with a false context (HC 363, 2018: 7). Satire and parodies are not covered by this definition, even though they might be recognised as such. With that last entry we enter a grey zone.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> There is an important difference between 'misinformation' (incorrect but unintentional) and 'disinformation' (intentionally incorrect).

<sup>13</sup> Note that the expert group behind the HLEG report also uses both terms: *High-Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation*.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example: 'De onzekerheid van politieke barometers' (Billiet, Molenberghs & Vansteelandt, 2012), and 'Politieke peilingen in de media: fictie of frictie?' (Billiet & Sonck, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> For example, some contributions in *Apache* and the contributions at the back of the weekly *Knack* by Koen Meulenaere (until 2012).



The producers of fake news may have specific political goals, such as influencing the outcome of an election, but sometimes the motives are purely commercial. The more people click on or share a report, the higher the advertising income (Hermans, 2017;). *"Every time you click on 'fake news', somebody else gets a little bit richer. Up to 10,000 dollars a month can be earned by spreading lies"* (De Greef, 2016: 40-44). Sometimes a third form of misinformation is identified, namely 'malinformation', if the intention is to cause damage to people, organisations or nations (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 20). The spread of fake news becomes really dramatic when very targeted dissemination ('data targeting') is carried out by extremely partisan factions that capitalise on the fears and prejudices of citizens with the intention of influencing their voting intentions, political beliefs and behaviour (HC 363, 2018: 3). Floating voters are especially vulnerable to this type of activity because in this digital era it is easier to reach them via social media than via traditional media channels (Witte, 2017: 58).

### **The targeted online dissemination of fake news: jammer in a democracy?**

One of the most talked about and more direct consequences of 'fake news' concerns the manipulation of election results by means of *data targeting*. Both the majority decision to 'leave' in the Brexit referendum, so feared by many in Europe, and the election of Trump, are attributed to misleading claims in 'fake news' and other forms of disinformation during the election campaigns. How much does this form of political mobilisation differ from the activities we witnessed in our regions in the heyday of pillarisation around the middle of last century? Back then the necessary information and knowledge was passed on to enable

people to make rational political choices while still weighing it up within their 'own' circle. Ideologically separate networks of organisations, each exclusively bound to a political 'family', ensured the political education of the 'members' via all kinds of activities and channels (Witte, 2017; Billiet, 1988). At that time, their own 'truth' was largely aimed at the wider ranks of supporters. After the 1950s, during which a Schools War raged, the cracks started to show. Journalists from the public and other broadcasters demanded 'independent' news gathering and interpretation. An increasingly unrestrained press was gaining ground. Despite the continued existence of a vertical parallel structure of education networks, a greater diversity of ideas and opinions was already emerging within education. The cleavages can now be found elsewhere. In '*Onderwijs in de symbolische samenleving*' (Education in the symbolic society) (2002) sociologist Mark Elchardus maintained that the variation in social value orientations around the turn of the century was largely sustained by differences in education. In the '*Dramademocratie*' (Elchardus, 2003) from the same period, he was already expressing concern that the conduct of citizens was increasingly being determined by media, advertising and the machinations of the market, and that politicians were greedily making use of entertainment programmes on the radio and TV with high sensational content.<sup>16</sup> Media strategies such as the 'voting test' could to some extent be seen as attempts to orient the choice of floating voters in a depillarised context towards the party 'best suited' to them.

The current direct influencing of voters via social online networks, especially if the information is saturated with widely shared fake news, is of a completely different order. If future voters are not able to form a reliable picture of the political scene or of what is going on in society, then it is not possible for those voters to assess the policy being implemented according to their own priorities and interests. Which means they are not in any position to make an adequate assessment of political options and to elect competent politicians (Auger, 2017).

'Fake news' meets 'Big Data'

After the revelations about *Cambridge Analytica*, the very targeted influencing of segments of the population via the targeted sharing of information tailored to those segments was addressed. It became clear what drastic consequences this could have for society. It is called 'microtargeting'.<sup>17</sup> By merging large databases with all kinds of data, including demographic characteristics and information about consumer behaviour, an attempt is made to determine psychological profiles within segments of the population. By this means, the perpetrators want to find

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the attempt to get upcoming politicians into electable positions in the VTM programme '*Idool 200x*'.

<sup>17</sup> The 'microtargeting' methodology is developed within various departments of *Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL)*, a group of businesses with specialist departments as diverse as '*defence consultancy*', '*Elections*', etc. (HC 363, 2018: 34).

out what the chances are that certain choices will be made within cohorts of more or less like-minded individuals in one segment. On the basis of predisposition profiles tailor-made information is then sent in which it is incredibly difficult for the recipients to distinguish fact from fiction.<sup>18</sup> In May 2017, in response to the approaching elections, Edward Greenspon, CEO of the Canadian 'Public Policy Forum' and Taylor Owen, a professor of digital media, published an alarming article about this, entitled '*Fake news 2.0: A threat to Canada's Democracy*'. In it they reported that "*a combination of artificial intelligence software and data analytics built on vast consumer surveillance will allow depictions of events and statements to be instantly and automatically tailored, manipulated and manufactured to the predispositions of tiny subsets of the population*".

The influencing of citizens' preferences by means of political propaganda is of course nothing new. Advertisements are 'by nature' a form of influencing. Techniques to increase credibility are taught on marketing courses. The border between fact and fiction, true and false, has to a certain extent always been blurred in political communication. What's different about fake news is that it is false information that is not recognised as an advertisement for a politician or party. In the case of deliberately misleading information, traps are deliberately set due to a political interest or objective. The author of such reports falsifies facts, makes up events, or even stages them (Verhoeven, 2017: 1).

### **The political powers are worried**

It is clear from the enormous amount of attention devoted to the phenomenon by the news media that the social consequences of the deliberate and organised dissemination of fake news have been recognised. The traditionally reliable news sources are taking action to continue to safeguard the credibility of their news. Wikipedia has also started a new news site to fight the onslaught of fake news. Even Facebook, which entered the eye of the storm due to a possible link with '*microtargeting*', claims to have taken measures. However, as far as the use of algorithms and the reckless treatment of personal information is concerned, even during 'hearings' on this subject the necessary transparency is still not being demonstrated (HC 363, 2018: 19, 34-36)<sup>19</sup>.

An increasing number of government institutions, sometimes in collaboration with academic institutions, are examining this phenomenon called 'fake news'. In

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<sup>18</sup> For example, a certain part of a party programme, or a selection of arguments.

<sup>19</sup> De samenwerking met sommige academici (psychologen) die Facebookgegevens niet uitsluitend voor academische doeleinden gebruikten, werd opgeheven (HC 363, 2018: 28-34).

these domains, people are concerned about the scope and speed with which both (unintentional) misinformation and deliberate disinformation are now spreading via digital channels. In this respect we can point to the announcement by French President Macron of an upcoming law to tackle '*fausses nouvelles*' (Masse, 2018: 18), or to the establishment of a special unit within the British *National Security Council* (Lomas, 2018: 1-4). More recently (29 July 2018) the British *House of Commons* published a bulky report that benefited from previously published reports and the recently publicised *microtargeting* activities of Cambridge Analytica (HC 363, 2018: 26-28). In Germany a law has already been introduced, the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, under which social networks are required to prevent hate speech and fake news on their networks. It won't come as a surprise that such measures have been fiercely resisted and have even been described as worse than the disease they are trying to cure because they can be seen as a form of censure that is in conflict with freedom of speech (Steltman, 2018). Nevertheless, it is emphasised in the abovementioned government initiatives that freedom of speech cannot (and will not) be jeopardised. The importance of that principle is strongly underlined in the report by the '*Belgische expertengroep inzake fake news en desinformatie*' (the Belgian expert group on fake news and disinformation), which was clearly able to learn lessons from the experiences of its neighbours and introduced a balanced series of proposals<sup>20</sup> in July 2018. The stance of the *International Federation of Library Associates* (IFLA) also stresses the need to continue to guarantee freedom of speech and access to information when taking measures.<sup>21</sup>

Two reported studies carried out on the initiative of European institutions also express the concern of governments about fake news. These are of particular interest to us because of the concepts developed in them and the remedies they propose. The study on '*information disorder*' was conducted by two academics (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) for the *Council of Europe*. The other study on fake news and online disinformation was carried out for the *European Commission* by an independent *High-Level Expert Group* (HLGFD)<sup>22</sup>. These reports, compiled by independent experts, develop a conceptual framework that makes it possible to study and understand the emergence and spread of fake news within the broader context of disinformation in the digital era. The digital environment enables citizens not only to find new ways of self-expression, it also increasingly facilitates the development or dissemination, intentional or otherwise, of all kinds

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<sup>20</sup> Zie: See: <https://www.decree.be/nl/expertengroep-formuleert-aanbevelingen-voor-aanpak-fake-news>. At the bottom of this website there is a link to the report in PDF format: [https://www.dropbox.com/s/99iza9kmbwjbels/20180718\\_rapport\\_onlinedesinformatieNL.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/99iza9kmbwjbels/20180718_rapport_onlinedesinformatieNL.pdf?dl=0)

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67341>

<sup>22</sup> The report was published in March 2018 by the Director-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology under the title "*A multidimensional approach to disinformation*" (HLEG, 2018).

of disinformation (HLGFD, 2018: 10). These reports take an in-depth look at the measures necessary to fight fake news without threatening freedom of speech. There is even a real 'roadmap' with initiatives that the EC is expected to take between July 2018 and April 2019 (HLGFD, 2018: 33-34). In the closing section of this *Standpunt*, we will take a closer look at some of those measures with a particular focus on those in the areas of competence of academia.

One thing that the abovementioned expert reports have in common is that they regard disinformation via the internet as a threat to democracy because it is assumed that the credibility of elections and democratic values in a multitude of sectors is at stake (HLGFD, 2018: 5). The rapid and wide-scale dissemination of fake news can after all increase distrust and confusion among citizens, and play right into the hands of nationalist, ethnic, racial and religious tensions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 4). Fake news is also sometimes regarded as a threat to national security, as mentioned in a rigorous report resulting from a workshop held on 20 November 2017 in the context of the '*Academic Outreach*' programme of the Canadian security services.<sup>23</sup>

### **Trust in science and expertise in a digital society**

Alongside the enormous interest among political powers, there is also rising concern in renowned scientific institutions. This *Standpunt* can corroborate that. In this respect the KVAB sides with *All European Academies* (ALLEA), an organisation that forms an umbrella group for the European science academies. Within that organisation an expert group produced a discussion paper clearly addressing the trust, credibility and scientific expertise in the so-called '*post-truth*' era. One of the sharpest critiques can be found in the annual address of the President<sup>24</sup> of the *Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences* (KNAW) held on 28 May 2018 (Van Dijck, 2018a). Its analysis deserves our full attention.

Trust in science has been attracting a lot of attention in recent years. This is not only because of numerous widely broadcast stories in the media about fraud and the action taken against this by scientific institutions, but also because of the discussions about all kinds of issues that are often debated in the media by scientists and journalists with insufficient caution. The attention devoted to trust in science in speeches and documents is an illustration of the concern in this

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<sup>23</sup> An interdisciplinary group of experts from Canada, the US, and Europe came together there to examine, on the basis of prepared papers, the manipulation of information for political ends and the possible consequences for national security and the integrity of democratic institutions (CSIC, 2018: 3). This resulted in a report entitled '*Who said what? The Security Challenges of Modern Information*'. In contrast to the earlier mentioned government reports, it is difficult to deny the NATO ideology behind the selection of the cases.

<sup>24</sup> The president of KNAW is a member of the ALLEA work group '*Truth, Trust & Expertise*'.

area.<sup>25</sup> The remarkable speech by the departing KNAW President about trust in science in a media climate in which fake news can rage so rampantly (Van Dijck, 2018a) nicely illustrates this point. Diminishing trust in science has been linked to the appeal of fake news, even though according to opinion polls more than 80 percent of those questioned still regard professors and scientists as belonging to the top 5 of the most trustworthy professions.<sup>26</sup>

After years of in-depth research, critical reflection and discussion within scientific disciplines a large consensus has grown on a number of facts. However, that is not (yet) the case for many topics. But according to Van Dijck this uncertainty and doubt should not undermine our trust in science, as long as the process of acquiring scientific knowledge focuses on finding 'common ground'. In other words, a collection of facts and insights that has been obtained with due care. 'Care' refers here to a process that satisfies the criteria of integrity, transparency, independence, and accountability. Researchers meet these criteria by cooperating and communicating with each other, and in particular by assessing each other and organising dissent by means of replicate studies, amongst other things. In practice this means that researchers must "*expose data, methods, sources and substantiations to reanalysis, reinterpretation and debate with colleagues and with the public*" (Van Dijck, 2018a: 2). Consensus emerges if there is respect for dialogue and for different insights. Although scientists are not referees of the 'truth', they do nonetheless operate on the basis of an institutionally embedded trust in their judgement, by including 'checks and balances' in the research process (ALLEA, 2018: 6). This is the only way in which scientists can be reliable experts (Van Dijck, 2018a: 2).<sup>27</sup> The fraudulent feigning of these basic conditions by journals that claim to be scientific is the reason why they are called 'fake'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The opening speech '*Integriteit en vertrouwen, een universiteit kan niet zonder*' by KU Leuven Rector Luc Sels at the opening of the 2018-2019 academic year on 24 September also expresses this concern. <https://www.kuleuven.be/communicatie/congresbureau/opening-academiejaar/toespraken/integriteit-en-vertrouwen-een-universiteit-kan-niet-zonder>.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 4 in Van Dijck (2018a:2). See also a 2017 IPSOS survey about trust in professional groups. Source: Veracity Index IPSOS Mori, 2017. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2017-11/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2017-slides.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Research shows that for many people this demand for transparency is a real challenge that has yet to receive adequate attention. Researchers from the Centre for Sociological Research of the KU Leuven examined how much information is given in the 'Data and Methods' sections of 305 published articles about comparative research in 29 international journals. They also investigated the variation in transparency between the articles. The result is disconcerting. Not one article gives complete information about the analysis carried out, and half of the articles only supplies half of the information necessary for accurately evaluating the research (Damian, Meuleman & Van Oorschot, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion on this topic in the Flemish press and on websites between 8 and 13 August 2018 (*De Morgen*, 8, 10 and 13 August; *De Volkskrant*, 8 August; *De Tijd*, 10 August; *Belga*, 11 August, 7:10 pm; *De Standaard*, 13 August).

The rapid rise of online communication and 'social media' has given rise to a whole new dynamic whereby the focus of public debate has shifted from traditional media to the online world. There, the scientific discourse of logical reasoning, rational argumentation, and transparency, is under attack. These institutional pillars of trust in science are teetering (Van Dijck, 2018a: 3). Yet it would be unwise to regard the 'digital society' simply as a threat to our trust in scientific expertise. There are also new opportunities associated with the online participatory culture.<sup>29</sup> This is good for the development of the "common ground" we mentioned.

All in all, the pillars of trust in the media are not that different from those on which trust in science is based. There too a systematic control is vital in order to find '*common ground*' by '*comparing and contrasting facts and opinions in a public debate and arguing their veracity or reasonableness*' (Van Dijck, 2018a: 3). The process of digitisation and platformisation means that scientists have to be even more transparent about their sources, the origins of their data, and the methods of processing and interpretation used (Van Dijck, 2018a: 5). This in turn increases pressure on scientific experts to be accountable.

### **Are journalistic and scientific values being thrown overboard in the participative online culture?**

The rapid growth of participative online culture has profoundly changed the relationship between experts and 'laypersons'. Nowadays, any individual or organisation can easily generate, publish and distribute information themselves. In the parallel universe of the 'digital' society important information and fabrication appear to have equal authority, but the digital channels that distribute the information give little guidance to the users on the reliability of that information (Rushdie, 2018). The sources mentioned may have dubious origins but may look reliable (Van Dijck, 2018a: 4).

As mentioned previously, research on the 2016 US election campaign shows that social media users were more interested in disinformation than in 'true' reports (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Many users are guided by their prior knowledge or prejudices when estimating the value of reports. Sensational disinformation often chimes with existing prejudices and with what '*friends*' are thinking and claiming (Van Dijck, 2018a: 4). Search behaviour on the internet can easily facilitate a 'tunnel vision' among users to the extent that the media platforms (such as Facebook, Google, etc.) and search engines play a major role in selecting and identifying "news" on the basis of the previous interests of users.<sup>30</sup> Insight into

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<sup>29</sup> See the reference to the interview with Habermas on this subject in the introduction (Hermoso, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> On this matter, see the article in *De Standaard* on 10/08/2018: *Facebook promoot betrouwbaar nieuws (en dat is wat we zelf kiezen)* (Van Ginneken, 2018: 2-3).



such cognitive psychological processes is important for understanding what is happening and how some actors make use of it.

The algorithms behind the search engines are not neutral. They use various criteria such as: matching with user interests (measured according to click history); behaviour in total population (what is viewed most); sudden increase or decrease in an item; what is 'hot' and sensational and has a major sensation value ('*trending topics*'); what can be explained briefly and simply. What the viewer (or listener) observes as 'news' is largely sent without the media user being aware of it.<sup>31</sup> In traditional media studies this is called '*confirmation bias*'<sup>32</sup> whereby established prejudices and hypotheses are readily confirmed in public opinion. The fact that this can lead to abuse with major societal consequences has recently been highlighted in the case of the whistleblower Christopher Wylie who uncovered the role allegedly played by Cambridge Analytica in 2016 in the run-up to and outcome of the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections (Garschagen, 2018; Vanderschoot, 2018).

Conspiracy theories are invoked to explain the *rage* of fake news. Besides the desire of opinion makers and stakeholders to manipulate 'public opinion', political as well as commercial interests have also been blamed (De Greef, 2016: 40-44). Google and Facebook are even in on the act. Fake news can be produced and disseminated at very little cost by groups representing all kinds of ideologies. It also fits in nicely with the so-called '*clickbait*'<sup>33</sup> tendencies of internet journalism where misleading sensational headlines are used with an article or video to seduce the reader into making that 'click'. This is how they generate more income from internet advertising. This spread of misinformation is embedded in the *financial model* of the digital media (Greenspon & Owen, 2017: 1). In the public media too, there is an increase in the use of reports from other media without quoting the source. Under pressure of tight deadlines journalists often restrict themselves to checking those 'facts' that are easy to verify. Links between facts that are much more difficult to check, or that allow for different interpretations and debate, are easily made without much critical analysis and exalted as the 'truth' (Elchardus, 2017: 23). In this way dubious reports from other less reliable sources are legitimised by the 'serious' media. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are eminently suitable for spreading fake news. There are websites that

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<sup>31</sup> See the third section for a more detailed treatment of this topic.

<sup>32</sup> This concept comes from the traditional mass communication media studies of the 1960s. At that time it was shown in a number of scientific articles that people have a tendency to confirm their own existing beliefs. Not only do people look for information that confirms their own ideas, they also interpret new information in a way that corresponds to their own ideas. These cognitive mechanisms also play a role in how we remember information or events. Confirmation bias is therefore the tendency to collect or remember information selectively.

<sup>33</sup> See: Frampton, 2015.

publish '*hoaxes*' and disinformation.<sup>34</sup> These sites are not like satire (humouristic) websites because the deception is deliberate, and their intention is to make visitors believe that they are reliable sources of news. However, political interests are also involved here. As already mentioned, this practice increased dramatically during the Trump-Clinton campaign. In that sense it is hardly surprising that people now talk about the 'post-truth' period.

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<sup>34</sup> A list of fake news websites published by Wikipedia contains (last updated on 31/01/2019) dozens of websites in which they are described (Wikipedia, 2018a). There is also a list per country (Wikipedia, 2018b).

## 2. Introductory explanation of terms

In this section we will discuss a number of conceptual distinctions that are regularly highlighted in discussions on the impact of fake news and disinformation, such as the difference between 'true' and 'untrue', 'fact' and 'fiction', 'partial' and 'impartial'. For each concept in turn we will indicate the way in which those distinctions teach us something about how 'post-truth' is characterised in the context of reporting.

### **True and untrue**

People use the terms 'true' and 'untrue' very frequently. By saying 'that is true', they are indicating that they agree with something. Believing that something is true means agreeing that it can be used as a basis for whatever is going to be discussed. When people agree in a normal conversation with what has been claimed or established, nobody expects them to do so with mathematical precision. The quality of the evaluation of what we allow to be 'true' in a conversation is determined by the sort of conversation in which it is discussed. When friends are relaxing and chatting in a bar, they will agree with one another's convictions using different criteria from those they apply when discussing a medical diagnosis with doctors or when meeting with the board of directors about the correct business strategy to adopt. In that sense, the nature of the criteria used when agreeing with each other's observations and opinions in a conversation depends *on the type of relationship* in which that opinion is expressed.

Believing that something is true does not necessarily mean believing that it is true forever. We do not immediately regard things that we endorse as the ultimate truth. People know that if they are shown facts that threaten the reliability of what they believe to be true, they will have to revise their beliefs. However, that doesn't stop them calling certain statements true during a conversation and in so doing demonstrating that they are prepared to have those statements apply momentarily as reliable starting points within their discussion. Without a consensus on what people regard amongst themselves as 'the facts', there can be no discussion or consultation. A minimum of 'common ground' is required in order to exchange views with each other and to be able to assess the relevance of each other's arguments.

It is important to be aware that convictions are only convictions as long as people can continue to be convinced that, given the information that is available up to that point, they are true. When in a conversation, via a message or when reading a publication, we are confronted with facts that threaten the plausibility of our conviction, then that conviction ceases to be our conviction. People cannot be convinced of something they know is untrue. If that were the case and we

could believe what we wanted to believe, without taking account of the facts, then there would be no point exchanging views with each other. It is because, and as long as, 'true' and 'untrue' define the relevance of our convictions, that there is something at stake that is important to us whenever we think about, investigate or discuss something. If everything was equally true, it would no longer make sense to think about, investigate and discuss things.

As indicated, the criteria people use when establishing whether something is true differ according to the sort of relationship in which they exchange views. In some relationships people play it fast and loose. In others the participants are rigorous about finding out exactly what the issue is. Within this sort of *critical relationship* every discussion partner is expected to look at anything that might threaten the temporary common set of principles. It is safe to assume that such a critical relationship must, for example, develop in the context of a legal process or in scientific discussions. During a legal process the judge ensures that any potential witnesses and any possible opinions and facts that could jeopardise the intermediary beliefs, are analysed in order to arrive at the most robust and balanced final verdict possible. The same also applies (ideally) in the debate between scientists: there researchers are invited to examine all data, all methodological shortcomings and all errors in reasoning that could bring into question the conclusions of a certain publication. The idea is to make that which the scientists can agree on, that which they all find reliable, more precise, more accurate, more correct and more robust. It is not just judges and scientists who are charged with assessing as veraciously as possible what is true and what is not true. The same goes for journalists as well. We'll come back to that in a minute.

In a number of contexts, it is vital to cultivate a critical relationship in which strict criteria concerning the truth apply, but there are also contexts in which people would rather not see a critical relationship developing. In intimate circles, between friends or family members, people spontaneously choose a relationship in which everyone tends to agree with the cosiness of a between-us atmosphere. In such an atmosphere people are expected to confirm each other's views and the mutual solidarity will protect against anything that threatens the *in-group*. Also, in circumstances where an *uncritical relationship* is appropriate, people tend to turn to institutions that protect their trusted opinions. After all, people don't like the presuppositions that guarantee the simplicity of their world view and the justification of their initiatives and plans to be called into question.<sup>35</sup> Which is why, in their social contacts or in the context of traditional and social media, they are more likely to radiate towards people who confirm their opinions.<sup>36</sup> It goes without saying that what is found to be 'true' in this

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<sup>35</sup> This state is sometimes described as 'anomie'.

<sup>36</sup> We refer here to the literature on *confirmation bias* (see Nickerson 1998) and also to the literature on *need for closure* (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) and the literature on *attribution theory* (Kelley, 1967).

kind of uncritical context will be different from the kinds of statements and opinions that one agrees with in a critical relationship.

What are the implications of this concept clarification for reporting in the media?

(1) As in a normal conversation where what is regarded as 'true' depends on the sort of relationship in which that conversation is held, so in the setting of public opinion the nature of the criteria for describing something as true will be dependent on the social climate in which those criteria are applied. Alongside educational institutions, cultural organisations and faith-based movements, media have an impact on the nature of the social climate. Ever since the enlightenment and the socio-cultural fight for emancipation, these institutions have had a tradition of striving towards the formation of a critical social relationship. In that sense, we also expect journalists to safeguard the quality of what their target public believe to be true by bringing to light anything that is misleading, unfounded or deceptive.<sup>37</sup>

However, as we have already said, people aren't spontaneously attracted to critical thinking. They are more likely to opt for the comfort of a harmless 'between us' setting, and because media function in a competitive environment, journalists give end users what they want. This implies that to make readers, listeners and viewers feel at home, television channels, radio networks, newspapers and magazines have explicitly positioned themselves as the virtual havens of specific target groups. Within this framework news editors have also been asked to bring the news 'closer to the people'. The proposal was to make the style of reporting less formal, more sassy and more jovial and to match topics to the 'between us' atmosphere that typifies the profile of the medium. This option wasn't and still isn't easy to reconcile with the cultivation of a critical social relationship. The most extreme journalistic concessions were made in countries where fake news now poses a serious problem, such as the US and the UK. The criteria by which readers, viewers and listeners who turn to tabloids, radio shows and tendentious cable news regard something as 'true' are most problematic in these countries. In this respect it's no accident that those who participate in these kinds of uncritical relationships don't have much of a problem with the widespread dissemination of fake news via social media. Moreover, it is precisely in these countries that there is precious little public consensus between the different parties and interest groups about what should be regarded as true or untrue.

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<sup>37</sup> International Federation of Journalists Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists (Adopted by 1954 World Congress of the International Federation of Journalists - IFJ. Amended by the 1986 World Congress.): "Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist." The current journalistic codes try and avoid the term 'truth'. Unjustifiably.

(2) Seen from the analogy of a normal conversation versus a public debate, it is self-evident that without consensus about what should be considered true or untrue in a society, no common convictions can be formed that could serve as the basis of a consultation between different parties and interest groups about matters of universal importance. In practice this means that whenever it becomes unclear what everyone in a society should regard as true or untrue, there will be insufficient '*common ground*' upon which to generate a reasonable discussion between the different ideologies. The more vague the distinction between true and untrue, the smaller the consensus about the basic tenets in the public discussions about the problems facing society, the greater the chance that everyone resorts to his or her individual world of experience on the basis of tendentious information. As a result, parties and interest groups will each fall back on their own beliefs based on their different experiences of reality. In other words, society will polarise, and all reasonable public discussions and negotiations will end in deadlock. Tragically, some people will think that the only way to settle conflicts will be to resort to violence.

If creating '*common ground*' for social debate is of public importance, how can it be done? Are there findings that nobody can ignore and that everyone confronted with them will have to agree with? It has traditionally been assumed that there are indeed findings that form a reliable basis for every discussion, namely 'the facts'.

### **Fact and fiction**

People understand 'facts' to be findings that nobody can deny: everyone who is confronted by them, will (have to) agree that they are 'true'. Facts are therefore regarded as stable starting points for consultation and discussion. 'Fiction' is regarded as quite the opposite: fiction concerns things that do not satisfy the facts. Fiction is made up, posited without evidence, and cannot be substantiated. Fiction can entertain, can increase creative thinking, can explore how things might have turned out,<sup>38</sup> but in contrast to facts fiction does not offer undisputable starting points about what emerges de facto in the context of consultation or discussion. Fiction in itself does not threaten a truthful approach to reality, as long as it is clear that it is fiction. This means that fake news in itself will not cause any harm as long as people realise that it is fake news. Only when fact and fiction become blurred does it become impossible to reach a consensus on the starting points for social debate.

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<sup>38</sup> A good example of this are historical novels that rely for the most part on 'facts' but in which certain gaps in the story are fleshed out such that they could have happened. These passages are fictitious but the extent to which they are embedded in 'real' and controlled events can vary from minor to very 'credible'. See for example the novels by Joris Tulkens about Vesalius and the Collegium Trilingue.

The robustness of facts is often attributed to their empirically verifiable nature. However, that point of view is misleading because the subjective meanings attributed to facts are often integral to their factualness.<sup>39</sup> In the humanities and social sciences it is assumed that the factuality of a fact derives not only from the materiality of that fact but also from the relevance of that fact within a given frame of reference.<sup>40</sup> It is on the basis of this assertion that some intellectuals have (prematurely) concluded that reporting can never be objective. Because any communication about a fact will necessarily be related to the context from which that fact has been taken. Since the context of a fact is usually manifold, and in that sense there are several applicable contexts from which the factuality of a fact can be interpreted, every interpretation is relative. That would imply that truth in the absolute sense does not exist.

That conclusion sounds more dramatic than it actually is, because truth in the absolute sense is rarely a point of discussion, either in our prevailing conversations or in our familiar experience of reality. Truth in the absolute sense is only part of the discussion within some religious, metaphysical and positivistic notions about reality, but in the sphere of socially relevant problems or in our daily interactions this sort of notion about truth no longer holds sway. Virtually all assertions and convictions that we assume are true in our daily life, are only true within a context of interpretation constructed by specific frameworks.<sup>41</sup> That is why a historian or journalist will never be able to limit themselves to an external description of empirically determinable events as seems to be the case in the exact sciences. Reporters will have to reconstruct the interaction patterns structured by specific frameworks from which those involved have attributed meaning to the historical or current events.

The reflections on the relativity of truth and the relative relevance of facts plays an important role in the discussions on *post-truth* and fake news. Both postmodern intellectuals such as Alessandro Baricco and populist communication strategists such as Steve Bannon and Mischaël Modrikamen deny that facts have a robust and objective nature, but the motives behind that argumentation

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<sup>39</sup> So the factuality of a banknote of twenty euros is defined by the subjective value that we attribute to that banknote based on our socio-economic interaction system. Outside the context within which we regard that note as twenty euros, it is merely a piece of paper. The factuality of a twenty-euro banknote relies in that sense not only on what that note represents empirically and observably in material, but also and primarily on the subjective value that is attributed to that note.

<sup>40</sup> This is an important topic in the work of the social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1932) who is closely linked to Wittgenstein, and the work of the symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman (1974).

<sup>41</sup> So the factuality of a date is only relevant in a community in which everyone assumes a particular division of time; and the factuality of someone's right of way at a crossroads depends on a particular traffic rule; and the fact that a player is 'offside' is only relevant within the context of the rules that apply in the game of football.

are diametrically opposed. Populist communication strategies relativise the robustness of facts because it suits them. They want to be able to suggest that their 'alternative' facts are just as credible as the real facts. If sceptical philosophers assume that facts have no objective nature, they do not mean that you can bend facts in any way you like. They only mean that the meaning of facts has no definitive character. In their view, the meaning of facts is determined by the context in which meaning is given to those facts. Because there are usually several contexts of meaning and in that sense different interpretations of the facts are possible, they assume that every interpretation is relative, but they do not conclude that you can claim any old thing.

While populist communication strategists disregard the hard facts, postmodern intellectuals only want to point out the relativity of the way in which those facts can be interpreted. Their motive for discussing the relativity of interpretations is not based on strategic opportunism but on epistemological considerations. They will never take seriously the alternative facts of the populists, for instance those related to the number of participants at President Trump's inauguration. Those sorts of facts are after all simple misunderstandings of reality. Populist communication strategists can allow themselves this kind of crude misunderstanding because they are targeting a public that is receptive to it. There are indeed groups that blindly agree with their 'alternative' facts, not because those facts correspond to an alternative interpretation of reality, but because there is a blind trust in the visions of their *in-group* and an emotional resistance to all information that contravenes those particular opinions.

Even though we know that the meanings that determine the factuality of a fact cannot be interpreted at will, it is not yet entirely clear how a consensus can be reached on the interpretation of the meaning of a fact. Even if we assume that truthful reporting about the facts is based not only on what a fact represents materially, but on what that fact means in the diverse contexts of meaning in which it occurs, there is still the question as to how much weight should be attributed to the various contexts. The interpretative frameworks that people use to establish what is going on are not only manifold, they are also often relationship-specific. Which implies that the meaning that is given to a fact will be interpreted from the perspective of different relationships and in different ways. With that in mind, how can you write an objective report?

### **Partial and impartial, reasonable and unreasonable**

In exact sciences, the meaning of objectivity is clear. Basically, everything that is not strictly observable is excluded. As mentioned, it is not easy in the context of reporting or historiography to exclude something that is not empirically verifiable, because you would instantly have to exclude the interaction patterns



structured by sign systems within which meaning and relevance are attributed to that material fact. So, what does it mean to work objectively in this sort of context?

Among historians, essayists, philosophers, cultural critics and journalists, objectivity is linked to impartiality. An impartial point of view corresponds to the point of view of someone who, as an outsider, has no preconceived sympathies and antipathies for the particular parties involved in the events. From an impartial perspective, *the in-out group* conflicts are transcended. In an impartial and truthful report, one is expected to evaluate the particular meanings attributed to a fact by various parties from the viewpoint of a *universal* public in which every individual has equal rights.

Showing respect for each other's viewpoint is sometimes naively seen as allowing all kinds of heterogenous opinions to exist side by side. One person sees things like this, another like that, and so be it. The result of impartial research is more than an inventory of all possible individual interpretations. In reporting those individual interpretations will be properly weighed up against each other. Not all interpretations are, after all, equally persuasive. Interpretations can be based on misunderstandings, lies or self-deceit. Impartial research is also about discussing all information that may threaten the plausibility of an interpretation, with the intention of being able to form as reliable picture as possible of how a fact can be interpreted.

The characteristics of an impartial attitude are in sharp contrast to those of an intimate *particularist* 'between-us' atmosphere. In a particularist atmosphere, when evaluating a fact, people use as a basis all kinds of implicit shared preconceptions that they believe to be so self-evident that they are not even aware of the particularity of those preconceptions. It is only when it turns out that the thing that is perceived and experienced by the intimate relationship is not understood by someone who is not familiar with the group of specific preconceptions, and that person has to be told how that fact is perceived and experienced from the perspective of the intimate relationship, that people will realise how particular those implicit group preconceptions are. For anyone not used to looking at the conventional preconceptions of his own circle from the perspective of someone who does not belong to that circle, those particular preconceptions seem universally self-evident; whereas people who do not start out with those preconceptions are perceived as strange, wrong, of bad faith, mad or something similar. It is only when you understand that the principles on which you spontaneously base distinctions<sup>42</sup> are relative, that you will find that your own principles are not true and natural in the absolute sense of the word.

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<sup>42</sup> Such as between what you can and cannot eat, how you should dress, how you should behave in various social circumstances, etc.

This awareness of relativity comes from the realisation that other distinctions are made in other cultures. It is in this context that reasonableness can be defined as what can be understood from the perspective of a universal public.<sup>43</sup>

We say that someone is 'reasonable' if that person is able to assess his own situation and that of others from a perspective in which his personal and emotional involvement no longer has a hold on him or her. Within such a perspective he or she can calmly look for the most ideal solutions possible, given the laws of reality and the conflicting interests of all parties. In contrast, when we accuse people of being unreasonable, we mean that they take insufficient distance from themselves and allow everything that they think and do to be determined by the passions and emotions that distort their perception of reality.

Standing back from what you spontaneously feel and think, by observing yourself from a perspective of a well-meaning outsider is not only relevant in the context of our personal involvement but also in the context of our collective involvement. Certainly, in societies that are inevitably becoming more and more multicultural, reasonableness is an absolute precondition for being able to confer with each other. A social relationship is ideally critical but preferably also rational and it goes without saying that reporting can make a contribution to this.

In contrast to exact-science rationality where objectivity means that one can disregard all sympathy, in the atmosphere of what we call reasonableness there is room for empathy, sympathy and evaluative appreciation. That which is regarded from an impartial reasonable standpoint as 'true' corresponds to *the description* of a private situation with which a well-meaning stranger, who has enough background information to understand the meaning of what occurs, can agree.

The cultural tradition in which people prioritise the importance of reasonableness and impartiality, lies at the heart of many other moral ideals that are difficult to dissociate from each other. It is not easy to reconstruct the origins and evolution of that cultural tradition, but it is safe to assume that the basis thereof developed mainly during the Enlightenment. That basis was and is that, from a universal point of view, all people are equal: that is the reason why we believe today that everyone is equal before the law; that every individual has the right to human dignity; that all people should be regarded as an end in themselves and never as a means; that decisions about people should never be taken without the agreement of those people, etc. While exact-science objectivity can be seen as

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<sup>43</sup> On this point we use Chaim Perelman's definition of reasonableness: something is reasonable if it is argumentatively persuasive for a universal audience.

a value-free methodological principle, reasonableness and impartiality are not morally and politically neutral. Reasonableness and impartiality are not parts of an instrumentally useful methodology. They are principles that rely on the belief that every human individual is equally valuable. In that respect, it is impossible, for example, from a reasonable and impartial standpoint, to base one's beliefs on the superiority of a race or on inequality between men and women. In principle every discourse in which the viewpoints of people that belong to an *out-group* are ignored, or in which the information that undermines the plausibility of the opinions of the *in-group* is left out, is unreasonable and partial. Equal rights means that nobody's input into the discussion or the investigation of what is happening in a society, can be excluded. Given the political discussions that are currently doing the rounds, this sort of principle is a lot less morally neutral than one would immediately imagine.

The conceptual distinction between reasonable and unreasonable is relevant for the interpretation of the actual *post-truth* atmosphere. In countries where the dissemination of misleading information in the context of the political decision-making process is a real problem, such as the US and the UK, a large percentage of the population has turned its back on everything that pretends to be 'reasonable' and 'impartial'. In both countries a breach of trust has occurred between the institutions that convey the traditional ideals of enlightenment (reasonableness, equal rights, human dignity, impartiality, etc.) and people who object to what they regard as a corrupt meritocratic elite. There is possibly something appealing in the claims made by some postmodern critics and populist communication strategists. It is true that in our Western societies, the importance of science, democracy, human dignity, reasonableness and impartiality has been promoted by a privileged class. It has always been the case, and indeed still is, that education and government institutions, authoritative quality newspapers, contemporary socio-cultural and political organisations inform us that critical thinking, freedom and human rights are fundamentally important. Those values were and are still crucial for most of us. Populist communication strategists seem to suggest that the hegemony of this sort of truth and reasonableness is waning and that what is *officially* 'true' and 'morally responsible' in the future will no longer be determined by people with cultural capital but by the man in the street. They believe that the time of the meritocratic elite having the final say is over. For them, tolerance for the violation of democratic principles in numerous democratic countries, the rejection of things on which there is scientific consensus (for example, climate change), the strengthening of protectionist and migrant-unfriendly political measures and such, are a sign of the new times. If they are right, then post-truth is a tipping point that shouldn't be underestimated.

It's true that a large percentage of the population in the US and the UK has distanced itself from the official cultural-correct debate and assumes that

everything that confirms their biased between-us beliefs is true. The reason for this is not the polarisation itself but the emotional disposition that led to that polarisation. That disposition seems to be based on a lack of official appreciation and the resulting lack of self-confidence. Sensational and marketing-driven media have fed that emotional aversion and deepened the hatred of the official cultural-correct mindset. That aversion is emotional and cannot therefore be rectified by education. You cannot change the views of someone who abhors smug reasonableness with educational programmes designed to stimulate more reasonableness. Quite the reverse.

The problem occurring in the US and UK, and in other countries too, undermines the ideals that Western civilisations have until recently been so proud of. And it won't be solved simply by preventing the production of fake news. Fake news is like fire in a nature reserve that has dried up because of a lack of rain. The basic problem of forest fires is not so much the fact that some people were careless with fire or deliberately set fires. But that everything that has dried out catches fire easily. Along the same lines, the problem of fake news is not so much the creation of fake news as the huge receptivity for it. So we should be asking ourselves why fake news is so eagerly read and so widely shared. We should be investigating why a growing number of people no longer believe that they should be critical, reasonable and impartial.

### 3. What facilitates the spread of disinformation and fake news in the digital media world?

As already mentioned in the introduction to this *Standpunt*, the phenomena referred to by the terms disinformation and fake news are not new. But they have been attracting a lot more attention in the media and in public and political discourse than ever before. This is the result of the rapid and dominant dissemination of information via the internet. Social network websites and social media platforms are especially good breeding grounds for fake news. The diversity of the actors involved explains the complexity of this phenomenon. A sufficiently well-considered response to the challenges facing a free democratic society, resulting from the far-reaching and rapid dissemination of online disinformation and fake news, requires some understanding of the logic and the facilitating context of the present-day online communication system. In the following sections we will discuss one by one the role that the online participatory culture, the online news media, the social media platforms and the news consumers play.

#### **The online participative culture: a two-headed god?**

The internet has provided a context in which there is a feeling that everyone can publish anything, and that they can do this where, when and in any form they choose. Concepts such as 'citizen journalism', 'user-generated content' and 'participatory culture' indicate the possibilities that citizens can make an active contribution to what appears online as 'news'. Via the digital applications they can participate actively in the news production process, in the dissemination of news messages, or in the social discussions that are conducted online. Users in the media landscape can no longer be seen as passive, anonymous consumers that will accept everything that comes their way. Although research has shown that only a minority of online users produce their own news and information on a regular basis (e.g. Pew Research Center, 2010; Reuters Institute, 2018), we have to recognise that the internet at least gives the idea that if people have something to say, they can say it. They can do so in various different ways: as a response to a news article, in a message on Facebook, via a vlog on their own YouTube channel, a tweet, and so much more. Not only can 'consumer-users' launch a message themselves, they can use today's digital advancements to publicly 'like', share with others, interpret, criticise or reframe messages and news reports from politicians, governments, companies and news media. This can be done, for example, via a personal blog text or by means of a critical tweet. Of course, citizens were also able to have their voice and opinion heard in the pre-internet era, for example in readers' letters to newspapers or in student newspapers that attacked government policies. But the speed and scope with which internet users can now send messages into the world is of a whole different magnitude and cannot be compared with the past.

Media professor Henry Jenkins (2004; 2006) talks about a 'convergence culture', a situation in which the public – enabled by digital technology amongst other things – has more opportunity than ever to work on the production and spread of news and information with each other and with various mainstream actors such as businesses, politicians and governments. So there is at the very least a theoretical possibility of convergence between the power of the mainstream actors and the power of consumers. In the pre-internet era these two groups had a relationship as well (e.g. producer-consumer or sender-recipient), but this was not characterised by an intensive partnership. Nowadays, businesses, media or politicians better take the public into account, i.e. scrap the top-down relationship and allow the public to participate from the bottom-up with a product, business or person. Jenkins refers in this context to the fact that this convergence could be a positive thing: politicians that offer the voting public the chance to enter into a conversation with them via Facebook pages or Twitter are in a better position to know what is going on and can adapt their policies accordingly. By setting up a digital eye witness platform, news media can get photos and videos from people who just happen to be on the scene faster than the competitors and can use these testimonials as part of their reporting. And when redesigning a new product or a introducing a new logo, businesses can launch a competition via social media asking customers to come up with ideas. Producers thus create a greater client base than when such things are decided at the top and they also get ideas that they would never have come up with themselves.

However, Jenkins also notes the flipside of this *convergence culture*. Mainstream actors can also interfere with, manipulate or even abuse this collaboration with the public. Take, for instance, the misuse and processing of personal data that online websites and platforms collect from their users, or the injection of unreliable messages into the flow of online information. And from the citizen's side too, the game is not always played ethically. The risk of misuse is connected to the opportunities that the mainstream actors offer the public to get actively involved and work together with those actors. The 'bashtagging' of companies or government services is a well-known phenomenon whereby a hashtag is hijacked and used by, for instance, the Twitter community to voice criticism or ridicule something. By way of illustration, McDonalds launched the hashtags #McDStories so that Twitter users could share nice memories about the brand. This is an example of 'convergence culture' whereby the citizen plays an active part in the *storytelling* of the company. However, this hashtag was almost immediately hijacked by the Twitter community and used to share negative stories about the fast-food chain (Hill, 2012). So it became an anti-ad for McDonalds, started by a few Twitter users and made possible by the interplay between business and public on an open platform such as Twitter. And nobody really knows if these messages are just a joke or if they reflect the reality. The 'tone of voice' of the online interactions is also becoming increasingly harsh. A study carried out by Pew Research (2016) indicated that most social media users admitted finding political interactions with

those of a different mindset stressful and frustrating on these platforms, largely because of the lack of respect and the anger in the debate.

And the subject of this *Standpoint*, namely the dissemination of unreliable or incorrect news, can also be taken as an example of the misuse of convergence. As an example, the press agency *Belga* launched a platform in 2009 on which citizens could flag up news facts, so that Belga could offer this news to subscribing media. A good idea on paper, completely in line with the shift from a passive to an active news consumer and the collaboration between mainstream media (MSM) and the public. Except that they forgot to activate an extra level of control, and in no time at all a certain Jos Joskens saw his chance to declare incorrectly via this platform that Queen Fabiola had died, with the result that the report appeared on several news sites in the telex news section that night (Theerlynck, 2009).

In short, the internet and accompanying digital and social media platforms have created a different kind of relationship between businesses, political parties and news media on the one hand, and citizens, news consumers and fans on the other. The public is no longer seen as an anonymous, passive and uncritical mass that will accept everything that is imposed or sent out from above. A convergence or collaboration between these previously distinct actors can lead to a better relationship, a better service and even a better product. But, at the same time, we should not be blind to the potential problems generated by this convergence: privacy problems, sabotage and fake news reports are just a few examples.

### **The news media in the online era: the increasing interest in shareable and sensational news**

News media play an important role within the convergence culture. It has been shown on numerous occasions that mainstream media are still largely responsible for news dissemination and conversations on online and social media (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018a). So it is natural to assume that if we are to understand fake news, it is important to reflect on the role and activities of mainstream media as well. In doing so, we should bear in mind that news consumers define fake news in various ways and rarely see it as a dichotomous division between 'real' news (factual news) on the one hand and fake news on the other (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). In other words, there are different points on the continuum of reliable news and fake news. If, as a provider of factual news, you want to make it clear to the public that this news is credible and reliable, then you will have to ensure that the news user can (instantly) differentiate this news from all the other news that does not have this status of reliability and credibility. Naturally, the producers of fake news also realise this and will therefore ensure that fake news cannot always be instantly recognised or unmasked by surfers and social media platforms.

As far as appearance and content is concerned, the difference between reliable news and fake news is generally less obvious than one might think. Providers of

fake news build online blogs and news sites that look more or less the same as those of professional, mainstream newsmakers. On social media too, there is little or no difference in terms of form between reliable and fake news. As soon as news appears on Facebook, it is put in a predefined Facebook format: a headline with a photo underneath, sometimes with a few sentences from the lead. The form in which a fake report created by the hoax website 'De Nieuwe Standaard' appears on your timeline looks no different from that of a professional journalistic article that is placed by the social media editor of 'De Standaard' or 'The New York Times'. The same goes for news that appears on Twitter and Instagram: a tweet containing a link to a fake news article on a pulp website looks just like a tweet with a link to the 'VRT NWS' or 'The Guardian' website.

If fake news is indistinguishable from factual news, then there has to be some distinction in the content. But that brings us to another problem. The news media are also starting to use strategies that at first glance are mainly adopted for fake news reports or pulp news, for instance clickbait(like) titles (Kuiken e.a., 2017) or emotional, subjective status updates at the top of an article (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018b), in an attempt to convince as many people as possible to click on the articles and show engagement in the form of 'likes', 'shares' and 'comments'. Not illogical, given that engagement via social media ensures brand awareness, reach and ultimately extra (advertising) revenue. In other words, the more clicks, shares and likes, the more income the article generates, and that's not something to be sniffed at in these times of free online news and hard-pressed revenue models.

Also, in terms of the choice of topic, we are seeing a number of shifts related to what has just been discussed. For example, research shows that traditional media are increasingly focusing on news values like shareability and virality on, for example, Facebook, and that they are taking into account not only news relevance but also the shareability of a news report (Trilling e.a., 2017). 'Shareability' as a news value (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) means the realisation that there is an increasing awareness of the expected chance of an article generating a lot of engagement on social media and going viral. These are reports that are bizarre or surprising, highly negative or positive or entertaining, or – as Al-Rawi (2017) puts it – have an *awe factor*, i.e. reports that leave readers/viewers a little 'perplexed'. It goes without saying that these kinds of reports often address the same sort of issues as those in fake or pulp news. Just take these reports as an example: 'Gizmo the dog survives 3 days in tumble dryer', 'This castle has a real ghost', 'An unbelievable coincidence saved this teenager from death', etc., etc. First and foremost, it's not about whether these reports are true or not – in many instances they are difficult to verify – but rather that these social media 'posts' are clicked on a lot and generate a lot of engagement, and so are good for the earnings model of news media. But they do threaten to create a situation in which social media are seen as a reservoir of mainly superficial news and in which the distinction



between traditional news media and fake news accounts is no longer instantly recognisable for the rapidly scanning and scrolling social media user.

It's hardly surprising therefore that recent research shows that news on social media platforms is seen as a lot less reliable than the more traditional news reports (Pew Research Center, 2017). In other words, there is a danger of a kind of contamination effect occurring within social media whereby the negative image of superficial and unreliable news radiates to the other forms of journalism, and whereby the extent of reliability of articles on social media is not measured on the basis of the specific value or features of that one report but is more influenced by the perception of the platform on which the article appears. The hope that news consumers – when weighing up whether or not to click on a Facebook article – will consider the source of the report (by, for example, looking at the author and publication date) is to all intents and purposes unfounded. Research conducted for *The Media Insight Project* (2017) shows, for example, that the reputation of those that place or share a news item on Facebook has a much bigger impact on the credibility of the news report than the reputation of the news medium on which the item is published. This is certainly one of the considerations for arming users against disinformation.

Another role that mainstream media plays in this context is that of a megaphone for fake news. News media seem to take a serious interest in anything to do with controversial and fake news. This too is not illogical: it can be very useful for news media to identify and unmask certain fake news reports, and to report on these, thereby informing the public and making them more media-savvy. But sometimes there is an exaggerated interest in fake news, which in itself can raise concerns that reporting about fake news makes it even more popular or at the very least makes it more visible. Research has shown that unmasking or factchecking incorrect news reports only has a minimal impact on public opinions and that the incorrect news is still frequently (and sometimes even more frequently) shared and believed despite the correction (Shin, Driscoll & Bar, 2016; Thorson, 2016). Journalistic corrections can even create a so-called 'back-fire effect' whereby supporters of incorrect news become even more convinced of their beliefs precisely because of the factchecking (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). We see the same thing happening in the reporting about Trump, whose 'mad' tweets containing incorrect information or populist attacks on the mainstream media attract a lot of attention from those media. The primary goal of this reporting was obviously to demonstrate the absurdity of his tweets or pronouncements, but in doing so they attract a huge amount of attention, which plays right into his hands (Wells e.a., 2016).

Research in the Dutch-speaking regions shows that the mainstream media is increasingly using social media as a source and that politicians' tweets, for example, act not only as an illustration but also as a trigger for an article (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). A politician tweets something and

that message is the 'trigger' for an article. Not illogical, given that politicians communicate more and more via social media instead of organising a press conference every time. But also because the 'embedding' of a tweet or Facebook message in an online report is so easy and fast and requires less time than when a journalist has to attend a press conference or even has to start digging around and calling up people looking for a few pithy quotes. In this context Broersma and Graham (2012) refer to a situation in which politicians and other elite sources learn PR techniques to increase the chance of their tweets being picked up by the news media. Their tweets are formulated in such a way that they sound spontaneous but are in fact intentionally designed to be bombed into a news item in a newspaper or on the news, whereby it is immediately given some form of credibility since it has been included as a source within an influential news debate.

By regarding tweets as a 'trigger' for a news story and by using these tweets, often without any further 'double-checking', there is a risk that news will cease to be the result of consultation and research but of a one-directional communication, sent out by an elite source that wants to get a certain message within a certain frame into the newspaper. That is why politicians place sophisticated, often very opinionated and even controversial messages on Twitter and Facebook, in the hope that they will be picked up by news media and can thus define in part the news agenda of that day or week. Just as company spokespersons also know how and what to put in a press release or tweet in order to get their story in the news.

This doesn't mean that tweets from politicians are by definition unnewsworthy. When the American president lets us know via his smartphone what he is thinking, doing and planning, this is often relevant, however 'crazy' his tweets may sometimes be. And perhaps precisely because they are crazy. And just because they appear on Twitter doesn't mean that his messages are by definition unimportant. But it is a good idea to bear in mind that these tweets and Facebook messages are often part of a hybrid communication strategy whereby social media are used as a supplement to the more traditional forms of communication such as an interview for a newspaper, a speech at a party conference or a press release, the main difference being that these are very short messages, smoke screens that often contain blunt and controversial content. Just as it is not expedient to regard Trump's tweets as superficial by definition, it is also best not to attach too much importance to them and not to accept them without some critical evaluation. President Trump may well have a very good sense of the way in which messages on the internet function and the aim is to attract attention to the form, content and timing of those messages. The ease with which tweets can rapidly be fed into a news site or listed in a daily section in the newspaper doesn't mean that there can't be a critical reflection on the content, on the newsworthiness thereof, given that that the user is armed against it<sup>44</sup>. And that goes not just for Trump's tweets, but for tweets from for example Belgian politicians and opinion-makers.

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<sup>44</sup> Here we touch on the concept of 'empowerment' that comes up again in the final section.

## **Social media platforms: algorithms favour the spread of superficial news**

And so we come to a third reason why fake news is a complex matter, namely the role of social media platforms. At the end of 2017 Facebook, Twitter and Google had to come before the American Congress to give an explanation of their role in interfering in the elections by means of (mainly) Russian fake news accounts. The main question to which they had to give an answer was whether they were doing enough as a platform to counter this sort of interference via fake news. Today the three companies seem willing to help think of ways to reduce the influence of fake news. A top woman at Facebook admitted at the beginning of 2018 in Brussels that Facebook could have done more to counter fake news (Verheyden, 2018), and that was something new. After all, Facebook has long hidden (often at the request of Mark Zuckerberg) behind the excuse that it is not a medium that itself makes news but is merely a technical platform that facilitates the spread of news. Which would mean that Facebook is not responsible for the kind of information appearing on the platform. This is of course patently incorrect: Not only does Facebook transport the news from sender to recipient, the platform also gives the message form and content. This is done primarily via the algorithm that selects and detects the news. The friends, acquaintances and news accounts that a Facebook user follows jointly post maybe several hundred messages every day. Too many to read. Facebook therefore uses the algorithm to select the relevant news for the user, who will then get a manageable timeline containing information that is relevant.

The algorithm selects the news not only according to previous click behaviour, but also according to the interests of the target population that someone belongs to on the basis of common characteristics and the recency of the news. This means that the platform uses various parameters to determine which messages a user gets to see, and if a report with fake news meets these criteria, there's a chance that it will appear on the user's timeline. The detection of news works a little differently. You can see this if you take a look at Twitter, which uses the system of 'trending' topics<sup>45</sup>. The trending topics lead the user to tweets that are sent by profiles or accounts that don't necessarily belong to the same network as that user. The platform wants to detect reports that a user might be missing because those reports don't automatically appear on the specific timeline of the user but are popular in the Twitter community. Like Facebook Twitter is not very transparent about the 'what' and 'how' of the algorithm used for this purpose, but now and then the observant user will indirectly gain some understanding of how the algorithm works. Thus, Poell and Van Dijck (2014) argue that when identifying 'trending' topics the Twitter algorithm uses the speed with which topics are tweeted rather than the total quantity over a longer period. Keywords and hashtags whereby the volume peaks stand a greater chance of 'trending' than topics that may be

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<sup>45</sup> Until recently Facebook in the US was also working with a similar 'trending' topic system.

frequently tweeted but show no clear peak. To put it bluntly, when Hillary Clinton faints after an election speech and ten thousand people suddenly tweet about it, the hashtags #hillaryfaint and #sickhillary are trending. Tweets about the content of her ongoing programme, which may run into the hundreds of thousands but appear over a long period of time on Twitter and therefore do not peak, are not seen as 'trending'.

Needless to say, this logic works in favour of fake news, and against more complex and nuanced news that occupies more responsible users for a longer period of time. Fake news reports are usually eye-catching and surprising and are usually to do with items that have been made up and that have not yet (to that extent) been reported on. When a fake news item reports a shooting in a Catholic church, that item causes a peak in reporting on that subject via the many 'retweets' on Twitter and 'shares' on Facebook, because in the weeks before there have been little or no reports of a shooting in a church. These kinds of reports are spotted more quickly by the algorithms which then mark it as 'trending'. News reports on the revival of the economy or the problems with the affordability of an ageing population are also less likely to be spotted by the algorithms as a trending topic, because they do not generate a peak in the number of reports on this topic, unless something spectacular happens within these topics.

### **News users play into the hands of fake news**

All in all, social media platforms and news media don't make it easy for the news consumer to avoid or recognise fake news. But the news users themselves are also responsible for the success of fake news. Figures show that spectacular reports and fake news reports are frequently clicked on, shared and commented on. A large-scale study in *Science* showed that tweets containing fake or incorrect news had a far greater reach than tweets with correct information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). A study on the reporting about ZIKA-related news stories on social media revealed that tweets with rumours generated three times more reach than verified stories. The false tweets dismissed Zika as an innocent disease or linked the disorder incorrectly with the use of pesticides (Sommariva e.a., 2018). These kinds of stories match the mindset of a large group of people, and thereby generate a great many likes, shares and retweets. In this context we talk of a so-called 'confirmation bias', a term referring to the search for and interpretation of information that corresponds to an existing conviction, expectation or hypothesis (see e.g. Nickerson, 1998). If you give people the freedom to select news, they will usually select those reports that confirm their social and political beliefs. This could then lead to the much-feared 'news bubbles' that would envelop news consumers on social media and give them only a limited view of the world and the different opinions in it.

We talked earlier about the role of algorithms in selecting and detecting news. In addition to this algorithmic, automatic filtering, a manual filtering would also take place due to the surfing behaviour of the news consumers, due to the selection of news accounts that they decide to follow, when weighing up whether or not to click on an article, liking a post, etc. Research at MIT has shown that Trump's supporters discussed politics in relatively closed Twitter networks and had little to no connection with Clinton supporters and followed few or no mainstream media accounts (Thompson, 2016). It is important to mention here that recent research does refine the idea of extremely distinct filter bubbles (e.g. Flaxman, Goel & Rao, 2016; Zuiderveen Borgesius e.a., 2016), and demonstrates that in some cases news users even see a more diverse selection of news via social media (e.g. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). The relationship between social media, fake news and the public is still a relatively new area of research and it will be a while before some of the findings are sufficiently stable. A great deal more research is needed to analyse as well as understand or explain the influence of different sorts of fake news according to relevant target groups. In the first instance, we refer here to the media users in Flanders, because they are quite different from, for example, American users, on whom there is already more available research.

## 4. Do disinformation and fake news pose a threat to democracy?

### **Truthful factual knowledge and democracy**

Fake news and disinformation are a problem for democracies because both citizens and politicians rely on factual information and knowledge as a basis for their political decisions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). As discussed earlier in this *Standpunt* (see section 2), facts on their own are not an adequate foundation for a democracy, but they are a crucial part of it. To quote American researchers Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 8,11), facts are 'the currency of citizenship' which ensure that debates do not become separated from the 'real world' in which they take place. Politicians need factual information so that they can judge how serious a problem is and which solutions are most suitable for solving that problem. Citizens need factual information so that they can judge what a party stands for, and so that they can estimate whether, for example, unemployment or criminality is rising or falling. We often look to the traditional media to carry out this important task for us. In recent years, however, there has been a growing concern that the news media are less and less capable of fulfilling this role. In the past, researchers were primarily concerned that people consumed too little (quality) news, resulting in too many 'uninformed' citizens. Thanks to the digital revolution, the freedom of choice that consumers now enjoy has further increased, whereby people can avoid (political) news even more easily and go looking for 'alternative' sources of information (Van Aelst e.a., 2017). More recently, particularly in the US, there has been a rising concern about incorrect information that is deliberately being spread for political reasons and is leading to more 'misinformed' citizens (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder & Rich, 2000; Mohammad, 2012; Fowler & Margolis, 2013). Both uninformed and misinformed citizens are a problem because they have the potential to weaken democracy – they become less effective at fulfilling their role as voters that select and keep tabs on their representatives.

The current discussion around fake news and the importance of facts and knowledge fits within this context but has been going on for some time already. Truthful facts and arguments play a central role in the history of the emergence of the democratic system (Witte, 2017). From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the concepts of the democratic system acquire a meaning that is embedded in the Enlightenment. Later, 'reason' itself becomes a key concept in the thinking about democracy. It is the sovereign power in a world governed by the objective knowledge (Rosanvallon, 2000). The participating individual can use reason to distinguish what the personal and general interest is, make the correct judgements and in this way create a harmonious society in which different interests come together. Political policy therefore comes about via reasonable argumentation and debate. In this 19<sup>th</sup> century thinking, possession and civil awareness are inextricably linked, although this reasonableness can also be learned via education and science. Science and

knowledge set the citizen on the track of the 'right' political judgements. Politics is then the concern of those who are competent enough to recognise the truth. Elections form the process for discovering and selecting reason in society. Elected parliamentarians can then freely interpret the will of the people without having to consult those people too much. Later that parliamentary power will diminish and shift to parties and pressure groups, but the dialogue on the basis of reasonable arguments continues to govern our pacification democracy. But the result of this is a fall in the power of parliament, a more passive electorate, concentration of power among the elite and also a fall in the power of dialogue and debate. At the end of the 1960s there is a call for more self-determination and participation, which coincides with an increase in scientific understanding and a trend towards secularisation. People increasingly act according to insight, knowledge and manageability. All sections of society demand more democracy, but the dialogue within a parliamentary democracy with its strong parties and its institutionalised system of consultation is still the way to achieve these objectives.

From the 1980s onwards, populist counterforces begin to emerge, in which anti-positivism and ethnocentrism evolve, but also movements in which the better educated 'new citizens' demand more power, request more direct democracy and reject the old ideological contradictions and forms of hard-wired politicisation. Floating, independent voters have more of a say and the call for a participative democracy becomes louder, and so too the demand to adapt the dialogue, consultation and decision-making to that new reality. These are changes that make politicians more dependent on the media. These media operate, however, from the basis of a split between the dominance of commercial interests and their traditional function in the public domain. Journalists determine the content of their reporting more independently of political pressure but are experiencing more pressure from the news consumer and the increased speed of news dissemination. That in particular is not always beneficial for the dissemination of information or the organisation of a public debate. This problem has grown in the last decade because of the advent of social media platforms that are overloaded with facts and counter-facts, hence the problem of unreliable sources and of the possible deception of the electorate. *Fact-free reasoning*, without careful argument, without control, selection and factual precision, undermines political knowledge and the reasonable dialogue necessary for consultation. So, in this thinking about the place of real facts in democracy, based on the admittedly amended but nevertheless long-standing Enlightenment philosophy, fake news is indeed a jammer.

In the meantime political philosophers, political scientists and political historians have inserted sufficient footnotes to this thinking. So, they point to the fact that ruling powers have always attempted to deny or twist truths that are disagreeable and dysfunctional for them. In political negotiations untruths and lies are not uncommonly used instrumentally. Hannah Arendt (1972) in particular has referred to the fact that for democracy, which survives on debate and conflict, an

absolute declaration of truth in the political domain can be especially dangerous and can lead to totalitarianism. So the truth, and not the absolute truth, needs to be protected. Opinions and judgements can differ, according to Arendt, but among those opinions and judgements there must be incontestable, truthful facts to facilitate consultation. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernists were very popular in the abovementioned sciences. They unmasked the truth as a cultural construction and as a claim to power (see section 2). But despite the breakthrough of the idea that the truth is very relative, dialogue, judgements, and discourse remain central tenets of the thinking about democracy, which are all closely linked to the need for verifiable, true facts. That is of course the case among scientists who are followers of the tradition of rational thinking about democracy and for whom authors such as Weber, Parsons and Habermas have led the way. It is well known that Jürgen Habermas has played a central role in this area in recent decades (Müller-Doohm, 2016). For Habermas democracy is about the possibility governed by reason to come via the better argument to a transparent conclusion that benefits everyone. Communicative action is a central element of this. The reality can only be revealed by knowledge, insight and debate.

So, the thinking about the connection between rationality and politics is still alive and kicking today. Influential philosophers like Habermas continue to support the idea that knowledge and truth claims are still key players in the democratic process. Adherence to this thinking among intellectuals, scientists, journalists and politicians is also widespread and dominant. So the fight against fake news and disinformation as disruptive factors is their business. But in practice the problem of misinformation occurs in very different degrees in Western democracies. In a country like the US the problem has increased dramatically in the last decade, while in a country like Belgium the situation is (for now) a lot less problematic. There are several reasons for this, not only to do with the different media landscape in both lands, but also with structural political factors, and in particular the degree of polarisation that has increased considerably in recent years in the US. Before we look more closely at these causes, we will analyse the differences in the presence of disinformation and fake news in different countries.

### **Fake news in comparative perspective**

There are currently precious few studies investigating the presence and dissemination of fake news and disinformation. One exception is the study by Humprecht (2018) which examined the origin and content of fake news stories in four countries in 2016-2017 on the basis of the work of *Factcheckers*. The author came to two striking conclusions. Firstly, fake news stories occur less frequently in Germany and Austria than in the US and UK. Secondly, in the Anglo-Saxon countries fake news is mainly about politics and the government, and these actors are linked to scandals and mismanagement. In the European countries the fake news was more likely to target asylum seekers and immigrants by linking them



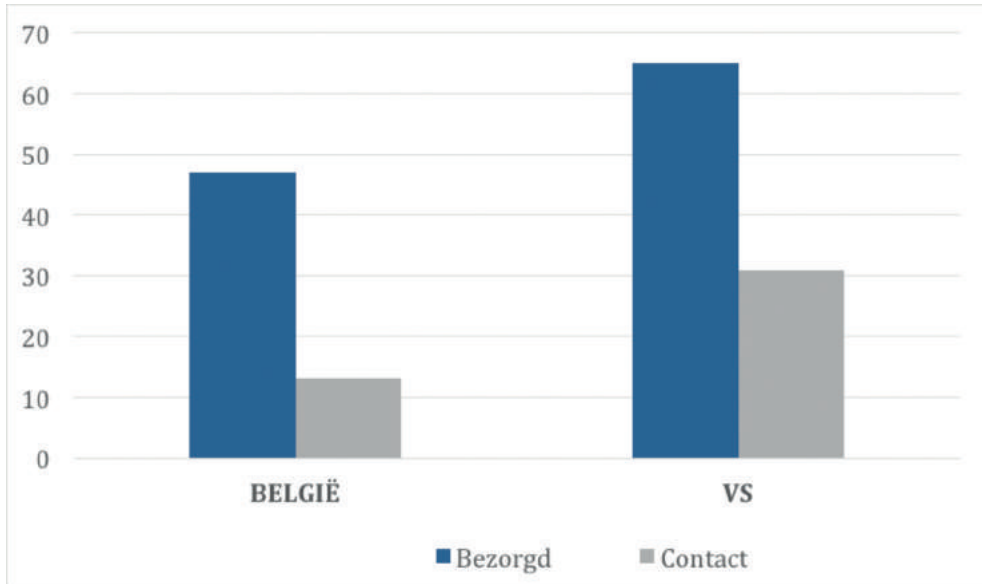
to fraud and criminality. These false reports often emerged as rumours from anonymous sources, while in the US and UK false reports often came from partial (media) organisations or from external powers such as organisations linked to Russia.

The renowned Reuters Institute published a study very recently. In their Digital News Report of 2018 fake news and the wider problem of news contamination were examined more closely. In Reuter's survey of the population in 40 countries, citizens were asked about the extent to which they came into contact with various forms of misinformation. The results suggest firstly that fake news is not the biggest problem but that citizens around the world come into contact more frequently with, in their own words, 'bad journalism', 'stories in which facts had been twisted for political ends' and 'misleading headlines' or so-called clickbait. Globally around one in four citizens reports having come across a fake news report in the previous week. However, this number wildly fluctuates between countries. At 13% Belgium is at the back of the pack in the company of other West European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Switzerland (Picone & Vandenplas, 2018). The US scores much higher with 31% (see Figure 1). We should mention here that in countries like Hungary, Turkey, Mexico, and Greece the situation is much more problematic. In these countries more than four in ten respondents indicated that they had recently come into contact with fake news. Perhaps it is no coincidence that these are countries in which democracy has come under pressure in recent years or where there has been increasing polarisation between political groups.

VUB academics Picone and Vandenplas (2018) throw light on the answers of the Flemish respondents and identify a striking difference between concern about invented stories (48%) and the number of people that actually come into contact with them (13%). This shows that a great many people in Flanders are concerned about the phenomenon, possibly because of stories from other countries (Brexit, Trump), but have been far less exposed to it. In the US the unease is even greater and more than 60% of the respondents say that they are concerned about the phenomenon of fake news (see Figure 1).

### **Comparing the breeding ground for fake news and disinformation**

So there's a strong indication that fake news and disinformation occur in varying degrees in different countries. For the time being there is little comparative research to help us explain these differences. Which is why we present the following possible explanations with some degree of caution. These are as follows: (1) the different news consumption and trust in the media; (2) the increasing political polarisation and (3) a number of other reasons such as the size of our language area and the behaviour of politicians. In our discussion of these factors we will focus on the differences between Belgium and the US. In summary, the argument is that Belgians (as opposed to residents in the US) have relatively little

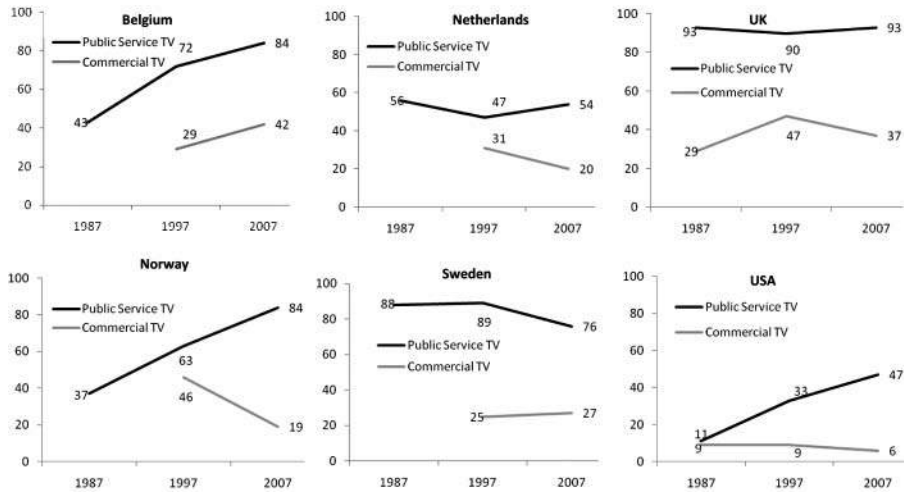


**Figure 1.** Percentage of those surveyed in Belgium and the US that claim to be concerned about invented news stories and percentage that also came into contact with fake news in the previous week (Digital News report Reuters Institute, 2018).

exposure to fake news because the majority of people still use traditional news media and also trust it, they live in a small political landscape with a broad range of parties and relatively little polarisation, where politicians stick to the facts for the most part. If we are to understand the breeding ground of disinformation we must take account of both the supply side (media, politicians) and the demand side (how willing people are to accept and share false information).

### **News consumption and trust in traditional media**

An important condition for the proper exchange of information and sufficient political knowledge is the presence of an extensive media landscape, with a 'healthy' and free press, and preferably with a strong public broadcast station. Aalberg, Van Aelst & Curran (2010) have previously shown that US citizens have less political knowledge and that this coincides with lower news consumption. A comparative analysis also shows that the traditional media in the US also offer less news. In prime time in particular the commercial TV stations in the US offer little news and explanation compared to countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries (see Figure 2). The public service channel in the US has a very rich supply of news but a minimal audience (Newman e.a., 2018). A great many American citizens resort to news from local broadcasters that offer little in the way of 'hard' political news, or so-called 'news networks' like CNN and Fox News.



**Figure 2.** Supply of news and explanation expressed in minutes during prime time on public and commercial channels at three time points: 1987 -1997 -2007. (For more information, see Aalberg, Van Aelst & Curran, 2010).

Although these broadcast stations offer an abundance of news, the value of that news is not always clear. Fox News, by far the most popular source of information for Republican voters, has a particularly pronounced biased profile. Moreover, its viewers score as badly on their level of political knowledge as people who don't watch any news at all. The success of Fox News amongst Republicans and Trump supporters has a lot to do with the waning confidence in traditional news media (which Fox News is increasingly dissociating itself from<sup>46</sup>).

Approximately one in three US citizens thinks that the media can generally be trusted. That is lower than average and a whole lot lower than in Belgium (53%) or the Netherlands (58%) (Digital Report 2018, Reuters Institute). But even more striking is the division within the US, where more right-wing voters hardly trust the media at all (17%), while those on the left of the political spectrum have a lot more trust (49%). These figures reflect the deep polarisation within American society (see below). As a result of the fragmented media landscape in the US, citizens are consuming increasingly disparate media, which in terms of their content are also becoming increasingly polarised (Digital Report 2018, Reuters Institute).

The Flemish media landscape is in many respects the exact opposite of the American. Firstly, the use of traditional media is still very high. The public broadcasting channel in particular plays a central role in the media landscape

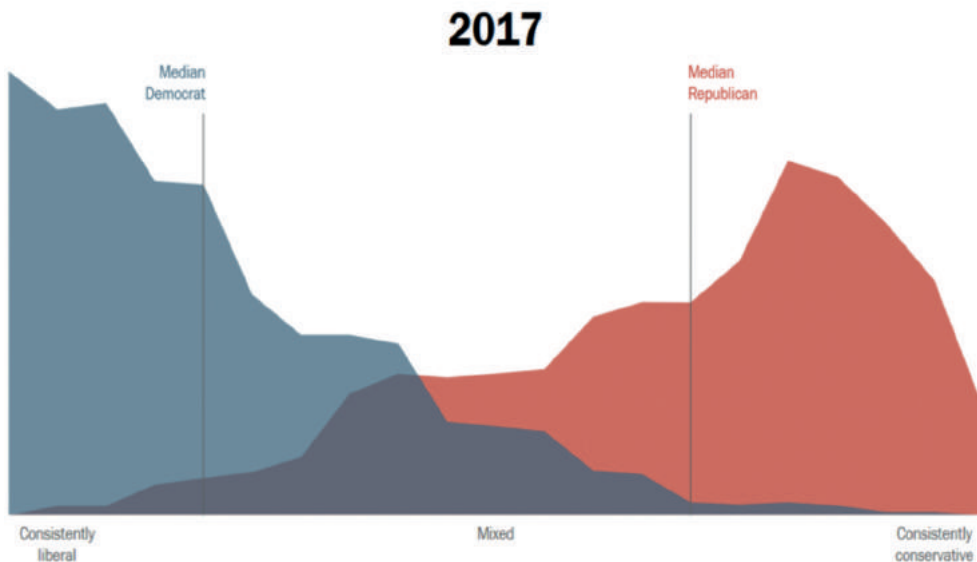
<sup>46</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/25/business/media/fox-news.html>

and is also regarded as the most reliable source of news. But the commercial broadcaster VTM also attracts large audiences and generates trust (Reuters Institute, 2018). This means that there are very few citizens in Flanders that rarely watch a traditional news programme (Van Aelst, 2014). Furthermore, Flanders has no real tabloids like the United Kingdom, whose outspoken biased messages are often eagerly shared online (Chadwick e.a., 2018). It is true that an increasing number of people in our country are consuming their news online, but this is almost exclusively online versions of newspapers and broadcasters. Finally, in Flanders too, the number of viewers getting their news via social media is increasing. That is not unimportant, because recent research shows that news consumers on social media are less informed about political current affairs. However, we should nuance this remark: only 3% of the population relies exclusively on social media as a source of news. The vast majority use this news media alongside the traditional channels (Van Erkel, Van Aelst & Thijssen, 2018).

### **Polarisation and the disappearance of the political middle ground**

Another important factor that appears to be a breeding ground for all forms of disinformation is the increased political polarisation. By this we mean the fact that certain groups in society are increasingly open about opposing each other. People are identifying more with their *in-group*, in this case people with the same political persuasion, and are at the same time more openly and loudly opposing the *out-group* of people with a different political view. This process is playing out in many countries and in recent years has also manifested more openly at the level of the man in the street (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012). The more vitriolic people become towards certain groups in society, the more open they are to negative information about this *out-group* and positive information about their own *in-group*. As a result of this negative attitude towards others and a selective view of politics, forms of disinformation and fake news can take hold faster. Moreover, these people are also more likely to share this incorrect information with others.

The scant longitudinal research on this subject shows that there is increasing polarisation in many countries. This trend is best documented and most visible in the US. The renowned *Pew Research* shows via surveys that voters are increasingly identifying themselves as extreme left or right. In the mid-90s the average Republican voter was not that much different from the average Democrat voter in terms of ideology. Candidates try to convince the 'centre' voter and thus attract voters from both camps. In the 2000s more and more voters identify themselves as more left (*liberal*) or more right (*conservative*) of the middle. Figure 3 shows that in 2017 the majority of voters position themselves to the extreme left or right of centre and the number of voters in the centre ground are gradually disappearing (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The positioning of Democrat (blue) and Republican (red) voters on a left (*liberal*) right scale on the basis of 10 political statements. The purple part is where the two overlap. (data from Pew Research).

Together with this political polarisation there is also a growing ‘partisan bias’ in political knowledge, whereby voters hold on to factual inaccuracies that are in line with their political views. A famous example is the popular, but incorrect belief that former president Obama was not born in the US (Hollander, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Pasek, Stark, Krosnick & Tompson, 2014; Kraft, Lodge & Taber, 2015). As an underlying explanation for the obstinacy with which these factually incorrect ideas are kept alive, reference is often made to cognitive phenomena such as ‘confirmation biases’ and ‘motivated reasoning’ (Prior, Sood & Khanna, 2015). In other words, people want to believe certain things because these things tie in with existing ‘common sense’ views. That phenomenon is not a recent thing but is capitalised on by media with an extreme political preference, who play on the strengths of their own party/ideology and the weaknesses of the opposition. In the US media landscape the users of various media are increasingly moving away from each other from an ideological perspective (Stroud, 2011). We referred earlier in this section to Fox News, but online media such as *Breitbart* position themselves even more partially and are also much less meticulous about checking the authenticity of their reporting.

These forms of polarisation among citizens and media also exist in other countries, especially in southern European countries such as Italy and Greece that have historically witnessed ideologically strong divisions. The Flemish party

landscape, like many other central and northern European countries, doesn't bear much resemblance to them. In terms of political preference, the users of popular Flemish media such as Het Nieuwsblad, Laatste Nieuws, VRT and VTM are not very different from the average population (Van Aelst, 2014). So there is barely any difference in the trust that left-wing and right-wing citizens have in the various Flemish newspapers and television channels (Picone & Vandenplas, 2018).

### **Other explanations**

In addition to the disparate media landscape and the differing degrees of polarisation, there are of course other possible factors to explain the difference in the spread of fake news.

#### *Language, scale and culture*

The Dutch language area is much smaller than the English-speaking population, which means that fake news doesn't spread as rapidly or as widely. Sometimes fake news is translated and adapted to the national context. A famous example of this is the video report on the fight between an aggressive refugee that attacked medical staff in the UZ Leuven (De Standaard, 24/08/2017). The report was sent out on social media but the culprit afterwards turned out not to be a refugee in Leuven but a drunken man in Russia. The report was quickly invalidated and was not shared further. It looks as though people in Flanders are less inclined to spread false reports to each and every one. That was also the case with an investigation by the NRC newspaper into the role of Russian trolls after the terrorist attacks of March 2016 in Brussels. After the attacks so-called trolls or non-existent individuals used false accounts to spread more than 900 Dutch-language tweets that played on the fears and negative feelings about Islam. But the reports were hardly shared at all in Flanders and the Netherlands and the number of reactions was minimal (NRC, 15/07/2018). The more than nine hundred Dutch-language IRA-tweets (*Internet Research Agency*) probably only reached a modest number of Dutch and Belgians. Jointly, the trolls who tweeted in Dutch had almost 250,000 followers when they sent the tweets, among them an unknown number of Dutch and Belgians. But they were, as said, not shared much at all and the number of reactions was limited and mostly negative.

What is remarkable in this respect is that fake news is also debunked by the media itself, like the Dutch *Geen Stijl*, an internet medium with the subheading "Tendentieus, ongefundeerd & nodeloos kwetsend" (tendentious, unfounded & needlessly hurtful). And yet there were reactions on this website against a false report about an immigrant that Donald Trump shared on Twitter, as well as recently against an incorrect quote by Guy Verhofstadt about Geert Wilders. Given that *Geen Stijl* is against immigration and is also far from being a supporter of further European integration, it is remarkable that in both cases these false reports were openly 'unmasked'.

### *Politicians and their respect for the truth*

Finally, we cannot ignore the phenomenon that politicians in some countries feel themselves less bound to the facts than in other countries and so create a climate that stimulates fake news and other forms of disinformation. Politicians playing fast and loose with the truth is of course not exactly headline news. But the way in which Donald Trump deals with the truth is on a whole different scale. According to the independent Factcheckers of *PolitiFact*, 7 out of 10 statements made by Trump during the election campaign were entirely or partially untrue. The same institute reports that President Trump only scored marginally better in the period after the campaign. The fact that this does not appear to have affected the popularity of Trump among his voters is telling. It is difficult to make a comparison with politicians in our country, since the pronouncements made by our politicians are not systematically checked by Factcheckers. Despite a number of recent incidents, Flemish politicians seem reluctant to join this trend of factual inaccuracies<sup>47</sup>.

#### **In summary: is there any reason for concern?**

Does the fact that fake news occurs relatively infrequently in our country mean that there is no reason to pay it much attention? Not really. Firstly, the situation shows that certain trends now occurring in the US might also play out here in the future. Take as an example the fall in the use of traditional news media by young people and the increasing interest in social and alternative media for news consumption. A recent study at the University of Antwerp shows that people who only use social media to stay informed score less well in the area of knowledge about current political events.

But more importantly, fake news is only one well-defined form of 'information pollution'. The previously mentioned research by the Reuters Institute shows that the Flemish are more occupied with other forms of information that could be regarded as a form of disinformation. These are forms of sloppy or bad journalism whereby journalists barely get the time to check their sources and unintentionally spread incorrect or incomplete stories. There are also reports from political actors that are twisted to paint a better picture of reality (Picone & Vandenplas, 2018). Finally, there is growing concern about *microtargeting*, or the very targeted attempt to influence certain segments of public opinion. Micro-targeting is not new and not necessarily wrong, but after the revelations concerning *Cambridge*

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<sup>47</sup> A few recent controversial political statements concern Minister Liesbeth Homans and her use of poverty statistics (Vergauwen, 2017; [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180613\\_03560169](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180613_03560169)); the use of false e-mails by John Crombez in the F16s dossier ([Belga], 2018 <https://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/federaal/f-16-mails-brengen-crombez-in-verlegenheid/10018378.html>) and the criticism by Zuhair Demir and Liesbeth Homans of Unia. (Paelinck e.a., 2017, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/02/27/krantencomentaren-hekelenhalvewaarhedenheleleugensvandemirenho-1-2903986/>)

*Analytica* about the misuse of data to send people targeted messages during the Brexit campaign and the US election campaign, this form of campaigning is more directly linked to forms of disinformation. The recognition of these news forms of misleading information or propaganda requires better media literacy and shows that *factchecking* certainly has a role to play in Flanders (see section 5 and the recommendations). In short, just because pure fake news is not yet making inroads into our society, there is no reason why we shouldn't take the broader issue of good and trustworthy information seriously.



## 5. How can we tackle fake news and its damaging effects?

All of the documents mentioned in section 1 that expressly formulate a number of proposals to tackle fake news and its damaging effects comprehensively exclude any form of censure. The one document is more explicit than the other, but nowhere is freedom of speech and freedom of expression up for discussion. Measures that would form an obstacle to the technical functioning of the internet are also ruled out (HLGFD, 2018: 5, 14; Henley, 2018: 1). There have already been legislative initiatives here and there, for example in Germany, to fine platforms for 'hosting' inhumane content including bullying and incitement to hatred (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 57). In other EU countries measures are being considered or have been taken. This is the case for Sweden, Ireland, the Czech Republic (Henley, 2018: 2), France, and the UK (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 19; HC 363, 2018). Stimulated by the real fear that young people are unable to recognise fake news on social media<sup>48</sup>, both the Federal Minister for the Digital Agenda<sup>49</sup> and the Flemish Minister for Education<sup>50</sup> want to focus on promoting digital media literacy.

The discussion on tackling fake news seems to concentrate on the issue of how much emphasis should be placed on legislative initiatives by government or on stimulating self-regulation by the platforms and making users as individuals or as organised 'civil society' more resistant. The interim report by the *House of Commons* focuses heavily on mandatory rules and a mandatory professional code (HC 363, 2018: 64-73), while the report by the Belgian expert group opts for cooperation and consultation with the media platforms (X., 2018). As far as the legislative work goes, lawyers, technological experts and representatives of the media have expressed their concerns that hastily compiled and insufficiently considered policy measures will likely have little effect and may even be counterproductive. This is especially true if insufficient account is taken of the causes and if only the 'low-hanging fruit' is targeted. With respect to self-regulation, it was noted that the 'business model' of the news platforms contain few incentives to take on the role of the "*arbiters of truth*". It was pointed out that in order to achieve favourable effects in the long term, a balanced approach is needed in which both legislative initiatives, self-regulation, and '*empowering*' of the users must play a role (Henley, 2018). Here the technology companies also have a role to play (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 58-64). The KVAB subscribes to this point of view. On the one hand, the media platforms are not regarded as responsible publishers; on the other hand we cannot continue to claim that they are merely passive corridors of information.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.arteveldehogeschool.be/projecten/het-echt-waar-nieuwswijsheid-en-factchecken-als-katalysatorvoor-kritisch-burgerschap>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/de-croo-bindt-strijd-aan-met-fake-news~a58e25a6/>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.hildecrevits.be/nl/jeugd-ligt-niet-wakker-van-fake-news>

## A multidimensional approach with global objectives

In the belief that a multidimensional approach is required to stand up to disinformation including fake news, the *High-Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation* (HLGFD) proposes a number of mutually binding measures that reflect five global objectives: (1) improve the transparency of news that is disseminated online; (2) increase information and media literacy to help users when they are surfing in a digital environment; (3) develop and make available 'tools' to enable journalists and users to recognise disinformation; (4) safeguard the diversity and viability of the European media system; (5) promote scientific research into the functioning and effects of disinformation (including fake news) in order to continuously evaluate the measures that are being taken (HLGFD, 2018: 5-6). The concrete measures being designed or planned focus on the realisation of one or several of these objectives. The first three objectives can jointly be seen as increasing the transparency in order to strengthen resilience ('*empowerment*'). This can be done by providing tools for tackling disinformation, amongst other things. Obviously a diversity of '*stakeholders*' must be involved in drawing up the proposed measures. These would include online platforms, news publishers, broadcasters, factcheckers, organisations from the social civil society, teachers, academics, researchers (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 6-9) and, last but not least, journalists.<sup>51</sup>

There is talk of 'good practices' in the fight against disinformation, if these would have a reasonably good chance of being effective on the one hand and would pay sufficient attention to safeguarding freedom of speech and expression and protecting data privacy on the other. Some people suggest that internet traffic should be subject to stricter rules<sup>52</sup> (HC 363: 2018: 64-67) while others place more emphasis on greater empowerment and control in discussion with the sector.<sup>53</sup> Only in this way can we prevent these measures having unintended side effects over time and thus becoming counterproductive (HLGFD, 2018: 14). In the case of 'censure' and 'privacy protection', there are generally accepted guidelines and/or legislative stipulations. The criterion of counterproductivity is conversely an empirical question, the use of which requires research into the efficiency of the measures. With a view to maintaining freedom of speech, it is important that the risk of false-positive<sup>54</sup> conclusions is as low as possible when tracking down

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<sup>51</sup> In light of this, UNESCO published a manual aimed at educating and training journalists. The modules developed in the manual seem particularly suitable for increasing resilience to disinformation among this target group (see Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> The *House of Commons* committee in the UK seems more able to come up with a strong position than the EU. These are of course 'only' proposals.

<sup>53</sup> With reference to this the Belgian experts group advocates trialling partnership projects in a testing ground of platforms (X, 2018: 14).

<sup>54</sup> In other words, indicating that a report is 'fake' when it is not.

fake news or revealing suspicious sources. The risk of false-negative<sup>55</sup> conclusions must also be as low as possible to prevent us missing worthwhile information too often.

The interim report by the *UK House of Commons* examines in-depth the global objective of *transparency*. It is greatly influenced by the method of 'hearings'. Representatives of the online platforms and others involved were invited to testify about various thorny issues<sup>56</sup> whereby online platforms were called into question. The knowledge and insight gathered at these hearings may help explain why the report does not agree with the statement that the online platforms bear no responsibility since they are only 'platforms' and not 'publishers'. The proposed measures in this report dismiss that dichotomy. The report advocates greater responsibility on the part of the platforms, the reinforcement of a body that can monitor this, a guiding and sometimes binding professional code set up in consultation with the sector, and finally greater powers for an information officer in the '*Data Protection Act*' of 2018 (HC 363, 2018: 64-73). Given the very recent hate campaigns directed at population groups and the micro-targeting of voters, the KVAB is very keen to support greater responsibility of the online media platforms.

Measures to empower users (HLGFD, 2018: 14) include improving the literacy of users in the area of media and online information and enabling users to evaluate sources as well as the content of information for reliability in order to increase trust. *Factchecking* is one of the most widespread measures for restoring trust in news reports. It is an initiative that ensures greater transparency and greater empowerment. Partly as a result of this, *factchecking is preferable* to an extension of direct government intervention in internet traffic between media companies and users.<sup>57</sup> Should such implicit 'censure' be necessary after all in order to tackle serious abuses, due diligence is indicated. In addition to *factchecking*, other methods are being investigated to uncover fake news automatically and in time and to counter the spread of such information. Here the hope is that *Artificial Intelligence (AI)* will be able to distinguish reliable information from unreliable information with a low risk of error. But we are still a long way off.

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<sup>55</sup> In other words, indicating that a report is 'true' when it is 'fake'.

<sup>56</sup> A few notable examples are: The accusation concerning the misuse of data by microtargeting by *Cambridge Analytica* during the Brexit referendum and the role of Facebook in this; the large-scale hate campaign coordinated against the Rohingya in Myanmar via the "Free Basics" facility on Facebook that was used by millions of residents in Myanmar; the attempts by Russia to interfere in the elections of various countries (HC 363, 2018: 22-57).

<sup>57</sup> We refer here to initiatives that are aimed at increasing the chance of accessing reliable content when searching for information, and reducing the chance of coming into contact with fake news, or providing such content with a warning. There are also proposals to slow down the spread of fake news by intervening in network interactions (sharing, commenting, 'liking', etc.) and organised network structures (re-sharing or re-posting, outlawing fake accounts).

It is not our intention to list the dozens of measures proposed by the EC expert group and in other reports. We shall instead make a selection from the proposals that we regard as most important for the functioning of a democratic society whilst demonstrating caution and sustainability. These are recommendations that also fit in very nicely with the role that the academic world can play in stimulating and facilitating research and education with a major social relevance.

### **Promoting the transparency of digital platforms and (news)reports**

The transparency of online media is about acquiring insight into the networks around the media platforms and the financial resources of those who disseminate online media messages. Media platforms must be required to produce correct information on this. *Political* advertisements must be clearly *identifiable*. It is important to know where the money is coming from (*'follow the money'* principle), and whether or not the reports have been compiled and sent by robots (HLGFD, 2018: 22-23). In the case of manipulation by external players such as a political action group or a foreign power, the platforms must be able to intervene. They must also give the requisite information about the criteria used to present news as "trending news", as well as about the (artificial) interventions and algorithms used in this process. Such measures are best included in a code of conduct for media platforms (HLGFD, 2018: 31). It is the job of the *European Commission* and the associated political institutions to develop this. Support from the academic research world is indispensable in this area. Realistic rules can only be designed if there is available expertise substantiated by research at an academic level (see *recommendations 1 and 2*).

#### *Simple rules for the competent handling of online information*

Recognising fake news and disinformation in the online communication that reaches the user is no easy task. One of the reasons for this is that it is extremely difficult to distinguish 'true' from 'false' when the content of a report is in line with the ideology and prejudices that we harbour, or if the report comes from sources that we are familiar with from an ideological or cultural perspective. Media users often have tunnel vision without even realising it. A spontaneous critical attitude is indispensable for countering this. The impetus for this can be found in an article entitled *'Who told you that?' in Significance*.<sup>58</sup> Here David Hand (2018: 8-9) presents a simple rule that allows us to verify claims about events: always check the origins of a report! Given that the digital channels give little guidance on 'who says what in which context and with what authority and expertise' (the so-called *'context collapse'*) these questions must accompany any incoming information (Van Dijck, 2018b). This basic rule of historical criticism must be taught as a principle to the recipients and disseminators of information. Not everyone is in

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<sup>58</sup> Journal for the members of the *Royal Statistical Society* and the *Americatistical Association*.



Source: IFLA statement on Fake News.<sup>59</sup>

a position to evaluate the origin, but it is a minimum requirement that when disseminating news the sources must always be correctly cited (Hand, 2018: 9). The recipients of news will normally have to rely on the reputation of credibility of the sources that are cited, and on the response to the question whether that reputation is still valid.

Traditional news media still use journalists to check articles in a transparent way and if necessary to revise them. If these journalists take their job seriously, then they first check whether the source of the news itself has a reputation for 'reliability'. They also check when the detected events took place, who was involved, and when it was originally disseminated. They then contact the original source that first published the news and look for inconsistencies between the different sources that bring out the same news. All six steps are clearly outlined in the figure above which comes from a statement about 'fake news' from the *International Federation of Library Associates and Institutions*.

These steps in historical criticism are so elementary within the digital online community *that they should surely assume their place in every programme of*

<sup>59</sup> See <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67341>

*higher education*. They are not the only skills that historians and journalists have acquired, but for them they are a 'must'. They are also part of citizen education that will (hopefully) from now on form part of the final attainment targets in secondary education.

#### *Factchecking and the allocation of a 'truth' score*

'*Factchecking*' is one of the most striking journalistic initiatives of the last decade and it has influenced the way in which the social debate is being conducted (Graves, 2016). 'The new millennium has seen the rise and global spread of what we can safely call a new democratic institution,' write Graves and Cherubini in their study *The Rise of Fact-Checking sites in Europe* (2016: 6). According to them, that new institution is 'the independent political factchecker'. By factchecking we mean the allocation of a 'truth score' to claims presented as facts in the news. Factchecking goes further than the traditional checks and double-checks that journalists must apply when writing a news report. Factchecking as a genre aims to investigate pronouncements and claims in depth for their truth content and formulate a conclusion via an argumentation on the subject. What is characteristic of this genre is that the public knows exactly which sources in the piece lead to the conclusion 'true' or 'untrue'. As with scientific research, the logic is that complete transparency is the best way to a neutral truth and that truth is a question of permanently advancing insight. Next to research on the reliability of the information of specific items, also the reliability of the news sources can further be probed. We will confine the discussion here to 'factchecking'.<sup>60</sup>

According to Graves and Cherubini (2016) in the decade before their research 113 independent 'factcheckers' were found, of which more than 90% had been set up since 2010 and more than half after 2014. The first signs of checking 'facts' occurred via a blog that was set up in 2005 by Channel 4 news in relation to the UK parliamentary elections of that year. A similar initiative was taken by France and the Netherlands, and by the end of 2010 'factcheckers' were active in ten countries. About 40% of them are associated with news broadcasters; the others work as non-profit organisations (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). The appendix to the *Council of Europe Report* lists 47 initiatives that are active in 27 European countries (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018: 86-90). Belgium is not one of them. At present some of the daily and weekly papers do some sporadic factchecking in news reports or communications from politicians. However, there is no umbrella institute (or centre) that systematically carries out *factchecking*.

Both the online platforms, as well as the radio and television broadcasters, the written press, and organisations from civil society are making efforts to tackle

disinformation, and in so doing to increase the reliability of information. There is of course a variation in the intensity, scope and quality of such efforts. The two most important models for 'factchecking' are the 'newsroom model' and the 'NGO model'. The first is linked to existing news media and platforms and is predominant in Western Europe. The NGO model, which operates independently of the news media, is more common in Eastern Europe. Some 'factcheckers' identify themselves as reporters, others more as activists or experts. For news publishers and broadcasters the chance of efficient factchecking can be increased by the existence of legal guidelines concerning transparency and accuracy. As far as the role of NGOs is concerned, the factchecking capacity within Europe is still developing rapidly, but there are already a few promising efforts being made in the larger EU member states such as France, the UK (boosted by the experiences with Brexit), and Germany (Graves & Cherubini, 2016: 8-10, 30; HLGFD, 2018: 14-15).

*Factchecking* is mainly conducted by journalists who have had more training in this area in a team. This form of checking facts by specialised journalists who know and use the calibrated methods and procedures – set up by *International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)* – occurs almost nowhere in Belgium today. That is a shortcoming with major consequences. Jan Jagers, who has been the journalist responsible for the factcheck section in *Knack* since October 2012, stated this year during his participation in *Globalfact*, – the international congress for factcheckers – that our country is lagging behind. Jan Jagers: "*In Belgium and Flanders there is not a single widely distributed medium that has obtained recognition from the IFCN, which means that real professionalisation of factchecking is currently non-existent.*"

In order to be recognised by IFCN – an organically evolved organisation that is a unit of the American *Poynter Institute*, a knowledge centre about and for journalism – the medium or action and knowledge centre must satisfy a number of conditions.<sup>61</sup> Transparency is the order of the day here. For every factcheck in which a claim is scrutinised, and there is a conclusion about whether or not the claim is true and why, as in science, there must be a rigorous indication of which sources – government statistics, research reports, academic studies, expert interviews, etc. – that argumentation rests on. Starting from the premise that independence is necessary if factchecking is to be credible, IFCN also demands transparency in funding. The meaning of the different categories of the precise rating system used must also be clear (Amazeen & Thorson e.a., 2016).<sup>62</sup> Once

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<sup>61</sup> Including signing, complying with and implementing the Code of Principles, see <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/>

<sup>62</sup> For info on the sense and nonsense of such 'rating systems', see Amazeen & Thorson E. e.a. (2016) and <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/The-Effectiveness-of-Rating-Scales.pdf>



a medium or action and knowledge centre is recognised by the IFCN, that organisation can use the knowledge and tools put at their disposal by the IFCN.<sup>63</sup> IFCN recognition can dramatically increase the credibility of the organisation that is doing the *factchecking*.

One of the actions to tackle online disinformation recently proposed by the *European Commission*, was the setting up of an independent European network of *factcheckers* that establish common working methods, exchange best practices and ensure that as many factual corrections as possible can be carried out in the whole EU.<sup>64</sup> Another example illustrating the semi-official value of recognition by IFCN is given by *Facebook*. As part of a strategy to fight fake news and to restore credibility, *Facebook* is signing contracts with 'third party factcheckers'.<sup>65</sup> For a fee, paid by Facebook, these factcheckers examine claims and news reports that are labelled as suspicious by Facebook users. Once again, a medium or action and knowledge centre is only eligible to act as a 'third-party factchecker' for Facebook if recognition is given by the IFCN.

In Belgium and Flanders, the political heart of Europe and European institutions, not a single medium or action and knowledge centre has been recognised by IFCN. The result is that both the *European Commission* and *Facebook* cannot find partners in Flanders for collaboration. Unlike our neighbouring countries, factchecking in Belgium and Flanders is currently rather ad hoc, small-scale and without an internationally recognised quality label. There is no action and knowledge centre that monitors current and technological developments in the 'factchecking' discipline, collects international expertise in the area and contributes with its own research and technological innovation. And yet there is a dire need for it.

Can't broadcasters, newspapers and/or weekly magazines take the initiative here? Yes, if they invest in it. An independent action and knowledge centre has three benefits that we would briefly like to elucidate:

1. First, this centre would make it possible to conduct systematic factchecking more easily and more frequently. The production of factchecking articles and/or items would, by analogy with for example how this is already done in a

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<sup>63</sup> Crowdtangle ([www.crowdtangle.com](http://www.crowdtangle.com)) for example, a tool for monitoring how and which (dubious?) reports go viral on social media.

<sup>64</sup> European Commission, press release, Tackling online disinformation: Commission proposes an EU-wide Code of Practice, 28 April 2018

<sup>65</sup> See on this subject <https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/21/facebook-expands-fact-checking-program-adopts-new-technology-for-fighting-fake-news/>



number of countries<sup>66</sup>, be part of the work carried out by the proposed action and knowledge centre. That 'front desk', the visible day-to-day business, is to be considered as a concrete, up-to-date and permanent flow of reporting that consists exclusively of factchecks, made by an institution that is recognised by IFCN. These factchecks would benefit all media companies in Flanders. One possible option is that this institution, like the press agency Belga, operates on behalf of the entire media sector

2. In addition, the centre also has a coordinating academic function, namely the design and use of lines of research interwoven with that journalistic practice. Multidisciplinary research springs to mind here. What is the impact of factchecking, on the public, on the political discourse, and in editorial boardrooms?<sup>67</sup> Does factchecking contribute to the restoration of trust in traditional media and journalism, as Thorson (2013) dares to hope? Others like Graves & Glaisyer (2012) and Amazeen (2013) also agree that factchecking could have affect three social groups: the population, politicians, and the press. How a Flemish politician's supporters interpret a factcheck that says her claim is incorrect? Will there be a backfire-effect (see: Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) whereby supporters of a politician do not accept the conclusion of the journalist but rather the opposite? For those supporters the conclusion of the factcheck only reveals the prejudices of the journalist in question, who is making a judgement from a hostile partisan attitude towards 'their' politician. In other words, they regard factchecks as part of a partisan or at least non-objective press. There is some doubt about the existence of this backfire-effect because it can be refuted with experiments (see: Wood and Porter, 2016)<sup>68</sup>. Or are we to hope that the Flemish situation is much less politicised and people are still open to factual information from an independent institution (see section 4)? From a democratic perspective, the question of the impact on politicians is also an interesting, relevant and exciting line of research. A recent study by Lim<sup>69</sup> on the effect of factchecking on the rhetoric of presidential candidates in the US in 2012 and 2016 shows that factchecked presidential candidates were less inclined to repeat their incorrect claims after the factchecks were published.
3. Finally, a Flemish factcheck centre can engage in collaborations with *computer scientists and the academic world in general*. Computer scientists can help shape the future of the genre by developing artificial intelligence, technology

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<sup>66</sup> Just like *Faktisk* functions in Norway, *AfrikaCheck* in Senegal and Kenya amongst other places, or *Chequado* in Argentina. See: <https://www.faktisk.no/>; <https://africacheck.org/> <https://chequado.com/>

<sup>67</sup> See, amongst others, Nyhan & Reifler, 2015, <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Estimating-Fact-Checkings-Effect.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> See [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2819073](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2819073)

<sup>69</sup> Lim, C. (2018), Can fact-checking prevent politicians from lying?, unpublished research, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s5ubbZZ1K1oenihnsVxNDO-UhhU7v9o\\_/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s5ubbZZ1K1oenihnsVxNDO-UhhU7v9o_/view), last consulted on 14/02/2019.

and algorithms to facilitate the work of the factcheckers. If factchecking is to work, cooperation with academics is necessary, not only in their role as academics that do research about factchecking, but also as public service providers, as experts in their discipline who can be contacted by journalists for clarification and explanation without which those factchecks could not be produced. The action and knowledge centre can itself take on the task of creating a clear and searchable structure of expertise, for example with lists of academics who are in theory willing and available to help factcheckers as a source of expertise. No figures often means no factchecking. Reinforcing the connections and setting up alliances with the institutions that produce, manage, make available and elucidate government statistics is also part of the umbrella function of the *action and knowledge centre*. An example of this is, for instance, is *Statbel* and *Statistiek Vlaanderen*, but also more local institutions in cities and other government or knowledge centres.

The setting up of the action and knowledge centre – and the potential ‘pressure’ that results from it – may encourage the government to provide reliable figures and statistics where there is currently a shortfall or where they are insufficiently accurate and/or useable. Justice and the comparison with how, for instance, the Netherlands has figures on that policy domain, could act as a typical example here. Experts with good statistical knowledge can be of added value by clarifying complex pronouncements for the ‘*factchecking*’ institutes. In complex statements it is not always clear what the cause and consequence is, if there can or may even be said to be a causal link at all. Moreover, we also recommend that such knowledge become part of many training programmes, not least that of journalists. *For this reason we propose that the action and knowledge centre develops partnerships with educational institutions, and in particular training programmes for journalists.*<sup>70</sup>

The need for more and better factchecking, as part of a broader strategy to tackle fake news and disinformation, has now forced its way up to the highest echelons in Belgium and Flanders too. This is evidenced by the report published in July 2018 entitled *Verslag van de Belgische expertengroep inzake fake news en desinformatie* (X., 2018). ‘Tools for citizens must transcend brands and offer new forms of guidance’, the report concludes. In addition to ‘tools concerning the quality of sources’, ‘tools to unmask disinformation’ and ‘tools to promote diversity’, the experts group also recommends factchecking initiatives. (X., 2018: 9). The Flemish Minister for Media, Sven Gatz, also wants to provide funding for innovative projects on journalistic innovation and factchecking.

In short, as far as factchecking is concerned Belgium and Flanders are lagging behind historically compared to other countries both near and far. We recommend that

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<sup>70</sup> See in Flanders, for example, <https://factcheckers.ehb.be/>; see in the Netherlands, for example, initiatives such as <http://www.factory.fhj.nl/> and <http://nieuwscheckers.nl/>

the political powers do something to rectify this situation (see *recommendations* 3, 4 and 7). By acting as an external quality control, the factchecking of news reports by an external, independent institution can speed up the process towards (yet) more and better-quality reporting. The most important raw material for journalists is their credibility – it takes years to build and can be gone in moments. Assuming that journalists, media brands and companies would rather not have claims made in their reports branded as untrue by an independent institution, the establishment of a knowledge and action centre could lead to extra qualitative – i.e. accurate – reporting.

#### *Reliable automated tracking of fake news*

Partnerships with academics are recommended not only to ensure reliable *factchecking* but also to track down disinformation. In addition to calling on experts in artificial intelligence (AI), some thought should also be given to working with researchers who are proficient in the statistical analysis of large databases. Although more limited than AI as regards potential possibilities, statistical analysis methods are sufficiently developed and useable for tracking down fake news – and even providing an empirical explanation. In contrast, AI still has a way to go before it will be able to do this automatically with sufficient reliability and speed.<sup>71</sup> The most useable statistical data analysis methods work with large databases of characteristics of reports that still require a lot of human intervention before they are ready for analysis. An increasing number of computer programmes are already being used to check media reports. Those programmes normally use straightforward methods such as recognising sensational titles (*'keyword analytics'*), allocating a reliability score to webpages (with the techniques Google uses), ranking news sources according to reputation, as used when listing sources of malware to which it is compared. These kinds of programmes are still too limited in scope because they are not able to 'understand' the 'content' or the meaning of the information, as human beings can.

The *statistical approach* requires a methodology that is often used in the quantitative analysis of large amounts of data in social sciences – in particular in psychometry and sociometry, especially *Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)* with *latent variables* (Bollen, 1989).<sup>72</sup> This method can be applied to media content. In a large sample of analysis units (such as news reports), perceptible characteristics of those units are measured. If some of those 'indicators' measure the same underlying (latent) variable, then statistical parameters can be used to check whether that indirectly measured (latent) variable '*chance of fake news*' has been measured with sufficient reliability and validity with that set of indicators. If that is the case, then it can be assumed that the latent variable reflects the intended

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<sup>71</sup> See: Steels e.a. (2018).

<sup>72</sup> See: Bechmann & Nielbo, 2018.

theoretical concept.<sup>73</sup> In order to use *SEM* to track down fake news, there has to be a large sample of news reports with relevant indicators to measure the (chance of) 'fake news' in every report, and to check how reliable and valid that measurement is. It is also possible to explain (or predict) the variance in fake news in a sufficiently large sample from a population of reports by using relevant 'external' characteristics. The limitations of this method are plain to see: there must be sufficient data to hand and the assembling such files requires time and manpower to make them useable (see *recommendation 5*).

The use of AI goes a step further in detecting the difference between reliable and unreliable information. One and another is already possible such as the recognition of relevant patterns via 'deep-learning' methods. Because the majority of the information is disseminated in human language, an algorithm for detecting fake news must be able to process natural language. Up until now 'natural language processing' (NLP) has primarily been used to translate sentences whereby the information to translate them is contained in the structure and grammar of the sentences themselves. At this point in time the AI programmes are already able to capture the semantic meaning of a web article. Evaluating the truth content of a news story is a complex and difficult task even for experienced experts. In order to reliably define the text message<sup>74</sup> the algorithm must be able to 'understand' that text and to combine information from hundreds of sources. But that involves linking concepts that are not necessarily related by exact words or semantic meaning. A first step toward tracking fake news is to understand (investigate) what other organisations are saying about that topic. If this process can be automated, that would be an important first step in a chain of AI supporting control techniques. A lot of research is still needed in the area of AI before sufficiently reliable and user-friendly tools can be developed (see *recommendation 5*). There are already various competitions and test benchmarks to stimulate progress in the use of AI for detecting fake news.<sup>75</sup> There is of course a flip side to improving tracking methods. The sources that intentionally send out fake news can also use AI methods to disguise their fake news, making it more difficult to trace. And as with doping controls, it is always a game of catch up.

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<sup>73</sup> For the terms used here, see: What Does Measurement Mean in a Survey Context? (Billiet, 2016).

<sup>74</sup> AI is expected to succeed in being able to detect fake news with a probability bordering on certainty because even 1% incorrect news can reach a very large number of people. Those who realise that the decision on what is 'true' and 'untrue' is not just a technical problem, will find this expectation a little naïve from a social perspective. The distinction between what is or is not fake news also has to do with subjective appreciation, judgement, ideology and interests.

<sup>75</sup> These include the following: SQuAD (*Stanford Question Answering Dataset*), FNC (*Fake News Challenge*) (FNC), and SemEval (*Semantic Evaluation Exercises*). Hundreds of research groups take part in these competitions and in the research into useable AI applications.

## Boosting resilience to disinformation

Measures aimed at 'empowering' the general public are a natural continuation of the above. Media experts point out that the main problem in the online community is too much information rather than too little. As described in the third section, masses of information come at users on a daily basis. They can easily lose their way, cease to make conscious choices, and be susceptible to 'darker' objectives that they aren't aware of. The wider consumer public needs resilience to counter this.

### *Teaching media literacy*

Consumers need to have sufficient 'preventive' understanding in line with their use of online information. That understanding also needs to be realistic and be backed by elementary knowledge and skills that enable them to be critical about the information. Structural measures need to create an environment that supports safe and responsible participation in activities of social media platforms (HLGFD, 2018: 16-17). As mentioned earlier, there are already online platforms that are beginning to fulfil this role. A number of magazines, radio and television channels, as well as civil society organisations are also taking on this task. It is highly recommended that this is done in close collaboration with education establishments in which training in journalism, communication and media knowledge is a priority, and that these measures are supported by research, in other words that they are 'evidence-based' wherever possible.

To quote the departing chairman of the KNAW, José van Dijck:

*"Academics will to some extent have to rediscover themselves in the digital society. Furthermore, society expects them to set a good example and help shape the future. Universities will have to invest fully in the digital innovation that makes the public domain of knowledge open, transparent and accessible and keeps it as such. Education too – from primary school to university – will have to discover new ways of getting its pupils and students to continue to think critically"* (Van Dijck, 2018b: 5; 2018a: 5-6).

Media literacy can be defined as the ability to access communication messages in a broad variety of forms, and to analyse, evaluate and communicate them (Aufderheide, 1993). This term is increasingly being used in the digital society by education experts and educators to refer to the process of the critical use, analysis and even creation of messages in any form.<sup>76</sup> An essential feature of promoting online media and information literacy is that it is a form of lifelong learning. You cannot start too early and it is not over when formal education is completed. That is because of the speed with which the technical and social changes in this

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<sup>76</sup> For an historical overview of the *Media Literacy Movement*, see: Hobbs & Jensen, 2009.

area are taking place. Adults, teachers, and media professionals themselves are a target group for *continuous education* in the area of online media and information literacy. This is already a crucial action point with a view to maintaining a healthy media landscape in a digital environment (HLGFD, 2018: 25). Media literacy in a digital environment is more than just passing on knowledge and information, including the concepts of reliability. Given the social and ideological nature of all forms of proposals in digital media, the teaching of critical reflection is an essential part of that (Buckingham, 2007: 43), and could definitely reduce the risk of disinformation (HLGFD, 2018: 26; see Buckingham, 2007; 2014).

There are a few important considerations when promoting digital media literacy as a measure for limiting fake news or disinformation. Fostering a critical mindset among users must be accompanied by the teaching of the necessary research skills with which to evaluate the credibility of media messages. In this respect we refer to the importance of statistical insight as described in the part about 'factchecking'. In addition to teaching what is incorrect and what is correct using examples, an attitude of curiosity and research should also be imparted. Media literacy also means that, in addition to being able to think critically and evaluate sources, users must also understand the emotional mechanisms of recipients and senders of media messages. An understanding of the political backgrounds that play out here is also important. Users will then be in a better position to understand the possibly distorted presentation of the facts in the communications on, for example, Facebook and Twitter. They need to be able to distinguish fact from fiction and be able to recognise hate messages (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 69-70). It is necessary but not sufficient to teach pupils and students only some of the digital skills such as developing and using algorithms. The authors of "Information Disorder" go a step further when drawing up the curriculum for media literacy. This must include a number of additional specific skills (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 70) that would have a place in further education:

*"(i) traditional news literacy skills; (ii) forensic social media verification skills; (iii) information about the power of algorithms to shape what is presented to us; (iv) the possibilities but also the ethical implications offered by artificial intelligence; (v) techniques for developing emotional scepticism to override our brain's tendency to be less critical of content that provokes an emotional response; and (vi) statistical numeracy."*

A recent study shows that all is not well with media literacy in the Flemish population (Picone & Vandenplas, 2018).<sup>77</sup> This is another reason for giving digital

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<sup>77</sup> Less than 20% of the surveyed news users – i.e. people in Flanders with internet access – know that news reports on Facebook are selected by algorithms. That is 9 percentage points lower than the average in the 37 participating countries. The research was conducted by *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* (Oxford University). SMIT, which published the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of *Digital News Report* as Policy Brief #16 in the Netherlands, is the Flemish partner at the VUB.

intelligence a higher place in the education curricula (see *recommendations 6 and 8*). The intention is there at least. 'Digital skills and media literacy' are included in discussions about the revision of the final attainment targets in secondary education. They are called 'key competencies' in a memo of 13 July 2018 on the website of Education Minister Hilde Crevits.<sup>78</sup> The proposal is to slot this into a domain called 'Education and society', a learning package in which citizenship and financial literacy would also be included. As far as providing media literacy is concerned, there is a clear reference to teaching digital knowledge and skills, which include some overlap with STEM. There is a feeling that the understanding and critical thinking about social processes in the digital society is still insufficiently elucidated. There is still a great deal of work to be done in order to fulfil the socio-cultural component of media literacy as outlined in the previous sections. KVAB subscribes to the idea of setting up a 'task force' with a view to realising realistic and adequate substantial final attainment targets concerning media literacy (see *recommendation 6*). The focus on secondary education for media literacy does not mean that efforts should be restricted to this area. Media intelligence can also be developed outside these boundaries: in the first instance, primary school education and higher education, but also other groups, such as adult education colleges and media organisations.

#### *Developing 'tools' to tackle fake news and disinformation*

Increasing media literacy will help empower users indirectly and in the long term. It can also directly boost resilience among journalists and users. The aim therefore is to arm various segments of the population against the various forms of disinformation.

This can be done primarily by making available 'tools' that flag up suspicious messages with a quality indicator via 'source transparency indicators'. It is also possible to make it easier or more difficult to find information depending on the level of reliability. In short, quality diversity parameters are being developed that can (or have to) use the services of media platforms to manage the navigation (HLGFD, 2018: 27) without censoring or blocking. The use of such tools – once they are available – could then be included as one of the skills taught in schools and universities. But for users who are no longer in school, other channels of education must be found. It seems appropriate that colleges where professional Masters in media, communication and journalism are offered, would be allotted an area of applied research for this.

All of this concerns the users. As for the professionals (journalists, etc.) in the media sector, there is evidence that they are becoming increasingly dependent on a greater variety of an increasing number of actors that are spreading

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<sup>78</sup> See: <http://www.hildecrevits.be/fr/nieuwe-eindtermen-ambitieu-duitelijk-en-coherent>



information even faster through a multitude of channels. In line with the part about factchecking, the availability of tools for automated verification of media content will contribute indirectly to increasing resilience to disinformation among the users of online information (see *recommendation 7*).

*Evidence-based research into the implementation and effect of measures to tackle disinformation*

The countless measures proposed to fight disinformation vary according to their degree of practicality. Some are at the level of supranational institutions while they concern national or regional entities. We need to be aware that measures that are possible within a specific political and media context and have proven to be useful, cannot always be rolled out to other contexts. Which is why a systematic evaluation of the implementation and the expected effect of those measures is necessary. This requires empirical evaluation research whereby both the process evaluation and the outcomes are investigated. This kind of research design in which both process evaluation and product evaluation take place must surely also look at the occurrence of unintended consequences (see Swanborn 1999). The latter is typically more difficult than tracking (still) unrealised intended consequences.

An evaluation of the process is necessary to acquire an understanding of the factors of success or failure. Often, but not always, a process evaluation is relatively small in scope and explorative in nature. So-called '*qualitative*' research methods are normally used here (Swanborn, 1999). However, anyone looking at the body of proposals that have to date been formulated for implementing the goals as regards countering disinformation (see HLGFD, 2018: 22-34; X., 2018: 12-14; HC 363, 2018: 64-73), will understand that these cannot always be reduced to small-scale process evaluations. Quite the contrary, in fact, because the suggestion of a structured framework of implementation that is, for example, put forward by the expert group of the European Commission (EC) is a real multi-step plan that comprises short- and long-term measures, and that presumes the cooperation of several interdisciplinary research groups at the academic level.

The report by the *Council of Europe* also contains numerous suggestions for activities that 'could be taken' by technology companies, national governments, media organisations, civil society, the education minister, and funding organisations, in order to tackle disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 80-85). This is inspiring but also a non-binding overview. The proposals in the report of the expert group of the European Commission focus on the supporting task of the EC and the EU member states concerning the cooperation between media organisations, platforms, academic researchers, organisations of fact- and source-checkers, the world of advertising, and civil society organisations. The recommendations relate to the above-mentioned objectives, in addition to care



for diversity and sustainability of the media landscape (HLGFD, 2018: 22-33). The measures are classified according to whether they are to be achieved in the short or long term (HLGFD, 2018: 36-38). An appended 'roadmap' provides concrete data for the period from July 2018 to July 2019. According to observers, there is a lot of talk at the European level, but relatively little is being done (Morganti & Ranaivoson, 2018). Evaluation may reveal this anomaly between intention, word and deed. (see recommendation 8)

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** Given the lack of transparency in the online media world, *policy-backed research concerning various aspects of the functioning of online media platforms is strongly recommended.* We therefore advocate that this topic be included in research proposals launched by governments.

**Recommendation 2.** We underline the need for support for applied research in which the spread of fake news is researched comparatively – both geopolitically and longitudinally.

**Recommendation 3.** Given the importance of *factchecking* for promoting transparency

and increasing resilience to disinformation, we advocate the establishment, on a Flemish level, of *an independent knowledge and action centre that puts factchecking in Flanders on the map, then rolls it out and develops it with a view to future developments.* We envisage such an institution as a collaboration of academics (universities, KVAB, *Jonge Academie*), higher education institutes, journalists and the media sector.

**Recommendation 4.** Since the development of such an institution is a long-term project, we propose maximum support for short-term partnerships between media companies themselves and between media and research institutes.

**Recommendation 5.** We underline the need to stimulate and support multidisciplinary research projects with a view to collating and developing relevant indicators that can evaluate the factuality and reliability of media reports. In the case of *AI* projects, partnerships with industry are recommended.

**Recommendation 6.** By including ‘media literacy’ in the final attainment targets, the Minister of Education together with the education networks, and in partnership with experts on media literacy, must ensure that clear objectives are included in the final attainment targets for secondary education.

**Recommendation 7.** With a view to rapid factchecking, journalists must be able to access available online resources with *relevant* context information. This should be an important component in courses and training for journalists.

**Recommendation 8.** A monitoring system is necessary for the regular evaluation of the effect of the measures for advancing media literacy. As far as education is concerned, there needs to be an analysis of whether this can be done via the *PISA rankings*, in which Flemish schools are involved.

**Recommendation 9.** With a view to understanding the socio-political changes and the mass-psychological factors that make the population receptive to picking up and passing on disinformation, extensive mass-psychology and socio-political population research is recommended.

## Epilogue

After completing the above *Standpunt*, the authors took a critical look at their work. The focus was mainly on what was brought to and discussed at the meetings but not included in the recommendations. This reflective process brought into sharp focus the fact that the recommendations in both the published government reports and in our own text focus predominantly on the supply of disinformation and fake news. The problem with the digital dissemination of online information is looked at chiefly from the supply side, i.e. the creation and mass dissemination of disinformation. Most of the proposals endeavour to do something about that. For example, by establishing rules and codes that the media platforms must adhere to, or by arming citizens against the influx of disinformation. This would be done to teach them to deal more critically with this influx and to give them the 'tools' to help them distinguish 'false' from 'true'. Increasing media wisdom or 'literacy' is also part of the proposed measures. However, there is far less attention paid to why that disinformation and fake news is received, 'liked' and shared on such a large scale in certain segments of the population. We only looked briefly at the factors that make some people more willing than others to share fake news and contestable information intentionally or otherwise. The multiple studies that handle this topic (especially in the US) were not discussed in detail, primarily because their focus was not primarily directed at policy recommendations and measures for counteracting the spread of fake news and disinformation.

During the discussions it was pointed out that the recipients are not passive 'victims' but that in some population groups fake news is eagerly 'tried', 'tasted' and frequently shared via social media (Hindman & Barash, 2018: 4). Why is that? Which segments of society are we talking about here and how can they best be typified? Is it because some layers of the population have lost confidence in the established political parties and traditional communication media? Do many of them feel alienated from the official culturally-correct discourse, for example in the case of migration? Is it because the political decision-making levels are too far removed from the real-life experiences of a large part of the population? And who are these people? Which segments of the population are we talking about? Are these the lower social classes in society, or is the category irrelevant when looking for an explanation? To what extent does the breakdown of *social capital* offered and passed on by the associational life play a role? Is it mainly about 'detached' individuals who are merely customers of services instead of involved 'members' who 'belong' to something (see Billiet 1988). It is not easy to find an explanation of this phenomenon and why it seems to be more prevalent in the US and UK. In order to understand the phenomenon of online disinformation it is important to find answers to these questions.

Sociologists refer in this respect to the 'losers' of modernisation, globalisation, and the economic and technical progress that fits easily with a populist discourse. What are the socio-psychological processes and sociological developments in the 'recipient' population that make fake news so popular? Is it because this is a better match for the preferences and emotional disposition of a considerable part of the population? There are empirical studies that seem to provide provisional proof for some of the answers to these questions. The volume of empirical material is increasing exponentially. There are now unprecedented masses of data that are permanently online and labelled '*big data*'. To what extent does this sort of data provide adequate answers to some of these questions? At what level can relevant connections be found? A critical evaluation of the research corresponds to what was written here about trust in science: there has been a critical evaluation of our own findings and conclusions. To what extent is there available data, in the literature and in published research about the breeding ground for fake news, allowing for the answers to some of those questions not to be rejected for the time being?

In this *Standpunt* interference with the democratic system came up explicitly in some places, more especially in the fourth section where the events surrounding the 2016 US election campaign were put under the microscope. It is not just elections or referenda, in which the population is supposed to independently appoint its representatives or to make opinions known, that are profoundly disrupted by activities made possible by the media platforms. Mass influencing of the population also takes place due to the targeted spread of prejudices among the population, setting these population groups against each other. That is also a serious threat to democracy in a political environment that is increasingly characterised by cultural and ethnic diversity. During its activities the workgroup had the impression that the problem is not yet that serious in Belgium. That, however, is no reason to remain complacent. Forms of systematic disinformation can be confirmed here and there. For instance, the 'fake' reporting by the car industry in response to questions about emission norms. Some government reports about environmental pollution in and around major cities are also guilty of being misleading. Political framing and misleading has occurred through the ages, but there are limits.

Anyone looking at the questions posed in the critical self-reflection of this prologue and some of which were already discussed at the end of the second section, will realise that credible answers require further reflection and targeted research. That is beyond the scope of a KVAB *Standpunt*. There is another KVAB task more suitable for the job, namely a *Thinkers Programme*. This kind of programme consists of inviting one or two international experts for short periods of time to look for answers that may hone their understanding, in study and dialogue with the relevant expertise and 'stakeholders' present in Flanders. For this reason we would like to advocate the organisation of a Thinkers'

Programme for the issues that concern us here. Broadly speaking, these relate to the functioning of democracy in an online media environment that is a catalyst for the rapid dissemination of disinformation (see recommendation 9). The KVAB has already acted on this recommendation and started a Thinkers' Programme in 2019 about 'Disinformation & Democracy' with thinkers Anja Bechmann (Aarhus University) and Ben O'Loughlin (Royal Holloway, University of London).

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Since the 2016 US election campaign and the unexpected outcome of the Brexit referendum in the UK, the term ‘fake news’ has become an integral part of public debate. Disinformation has always been around, but its dissemination in the digital media world is very targeted and is also increasing exponentially in speed and scope. Fake news is greedily ‘consumed’, spread, and frenetically shared via social media in some sections of society and by some of its leaders. It is now easy to dismiss an opponent’s narrative without further debate by qualifying facts and interpretations as ‘fake’. There is a very real risk that these mechanisms will have disastrous consequences for the functioning of a full democratic society.

This position paper provides insight into the societal debate, the background of the digital ecosystem, and the many initiatives doing the rounds. The text concludes with a number of policy recommendations. These recommendations are mainly concerned with more scientific research into the various aspects of disinformation, and investments in fact-checking and media wisdom.

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