

International Institute of Communications

Telecommunications and Media Forum

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**SESSION FIVE: DISINFORMATION, ONLINE FALSEHOODS AND THE
FUTURE OF NEWS**

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SPEAKING NOTES

It is a trite observation, but we must be reminded that there is a right to lie, so long as it is not defamatory, criminal negligence, perjury, or breach of a duty, such as journalistic ethics or the violation of terms and conditions of a licence. That right to lie is encompassed in the right to free expression, save as justifiably limited.

The problem is that lies that are expressed in the global digital public square, such as social media, now trump (pun intended) the influence of traditional authoritative sources of information. The 15th most-followed blogger on Instagram in 2018 had nearly 80 million followers and earned US\$480,000 per sponsored post, while the most popular had 136 million followers and earned US\$800,000 per sponsored post. These individuals have a readership,

influence and income that is larger than all the traditional media content providers in Jamaica combined.

So, it is not good enough to say that disinformation in the global public square should be left to public disapprobation because the scale and speed with which information now circulates make it very difficult for citizens to distinguish between fake news, internet gossip and reliable sources of information. This undermines the basis of tolerance and trust which are the foundation of democratic participation in society.

The other problem is that a small group of technology companies control most aspects of the networked society, which puts them in the most powerful and privileged position in modern civilization. In less than a decade, technology companies like Google, Amazon and Facebook have captured much of the market for content. They now dwarf the traditional media companies.

As the population shifts to online sources, the traditional media have rapidly become less profitable as advertising has migrated along with the eyeballs. Many newspapers have closed, other media houses are being pushed into mergers or desperately trying to find new sources of revenue in order to survive. As their profitability has eroded, all but a few are losing much of their primary news-

gathering and fact-checking capacity, and some are now just pulling their news off the web in a process that has become self-referential.

The loss of the fact-checking gatekeepers and the increasing reliance on trending topics makes it difficult for many people to distinguish between fake news, internet gossip and reliable sources of information. This brings with it an extraordinary potential for even more serious abuse of power in future.

In spite of this dominance, the technology companies say that they are not like traditional publishers (who have legal responsibility for what they publish); they are merely providing a platform, and so should not have the same responsibilities as publishers.

Some of the key issues now are as follows:

i. **The need for media literacy**

The priority is no longer just accessibility, but also media and digital literacy. We cannot rely on traditional, paternalistic regulation to protect people. Citizens must know how to use the internet confidently and responsibly.

ii. The need for standards and controls

1. We must support the media companies in developing their capacity for fact-checking and detecting disinformation and political manipulation.
2. We need to update the provisions for political advertising to make them fit for the age of social media. In the UK, for example, a report of the House of Commons Digital, Culture and Sports Committee made recommendations for reforms that address political advertising online, social media manipulation and fake news. These include:
 - rejection of the term ‘fake news’, and substituting an agreed definition of the words ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’ with clear guidelines for companies, organisations, and the Government to follow and which can be used as the basis of regulation and enforcement across the platforms;
[I agree with this recommendation because it has now become a trend to label as ‘fake’ whatever information we do not like. The ‘truth’ is being labelled ‘fake news’; objective, journalism is being labelled ‘fake’ news. The phrase has been misappropriated and deserves to be abandoned];
 - the need for audits of the security of social networks;

- updating the rules on political campaigns to make them fit for the digital age; and
- a new tax on technology companies to fund digital literacy programs.

The Committee also recommended that existing tried-and-tested content standards for broadcasting should be the basis for setting standards for all online content.

3. OFCOM has also recommended that there should be transparency about the rules underpinning the regulatory regime, including availability of information to consumers about how platforms decide what content is shown or given prominence, and the source of specific content.

I conclude with the observation that social media is not just a global public square. The owners have become content creators, aggregators and influencers. Social media companies are therefore agents of socialisation. This gives rise to social obligations which must be defined and enforced; proportionally and as practicable.