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Battling fake news, hate speech and violent extremism online: Are freedom of expression and a vibrant, global Internet caught in the crossfire?

Panel I “feik nyus”

“Fake news: Wither to!”

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I would like to start by making reference to the innocent beginning of the fake news phenomenon. I am doing this because I think it is one more example of how we tend to miss the moment when an innocent, normal issue can start an important, sometimes devastating social change.

Not so long ago very few were really interested in what we call now “fake news”. In its original form, they developed in the hothouse of celebrity culture and were mostly related to producing content for the tabloids. At that stage of its development it was disturbing for some people – mostly those celebrities who were objects of often fantastic lies about their life, but it was still basically confined to a niche behavior. And we missed the moment when it started to spill over from that niche to broad social and political space.

I would link the malignant growth of this phenomenon, and then more recent explosion of the “fake news” bomb to the same processes that have given us populism. It has deep roots in social developments of last decades.

We have been observing for quite some time breaking down of unifying political narratives. Ideas that constituted backbone of discourse of liberal democracy like progress, welfare-state, rule of law – have been questioned from both left and right. This is accompanied by gradual disintegration of traditional, party-based politics based on clear programmatic affiliation. It is being replaced by the emergence of single-issue, prejudice-driven parties, concentrated on contesting the powers-that-be. In time they mutate into parties that mimic traditional ones, but are in fact still driven by “single-issue” mentality. An example can be the National Front in France. It has been doing recently an “admirable” effort to become catch-all party, but anti-immigrant and

cultural panic still forms its core.

We are confronted with new forms of political ideologies, like alt-right and alter-globalism that are rapidly changing the landscapes of political and cultural discourses on national level.

The problem is that, all over the world, there is weak cultural resistance to those impulses. Rational arguments about TTIP, TPP, GMO, immigration or climate change lose their valence with the pseudo-arguments from dubious sources. Consensual, deliberative democracy gives way to emotion-driven, impulsive, reactionary politics (reactionary not in a sense of political affiliation but behavior based on impulses.) The outgrowth of this is political trolling, one of the most toxic type of behavior in social media.

Trolling is very dangerous, because it heralds a return of totalitarian mindset in the midst of liberal culture, not only in the post-Communist countries, but also elsewhere.

Another group of root causes is related to an exponential growth in marketization of news. Serious journalism is struggling everywhere. Due to cost cuts only the toughest media organizations will survive, but not without struggle either. They will have, more and more, to count on the rich “white knights” to come to the rescue (like, for example, it happened with The Washington Post and Jeff Bezos). Smaller outlets, local news oriented media, in order to keep its readership or viewership will be evolving into partisan sheets, appealing to precisely targeted segments of public opinion. Less fact-checking, less scrutiny is an effect. On the contrary, opinionated version of journalism, politically vocal is trending, while the painstaking, factual journalism is getting truncated as reference for broad swathes of the public.

It is an unfortunate fact, that opinions, especially if they are expressive and manipulative enough, do not have to depend on the factual in order to sell better and have higher potential to mobilize for political action (again: anti-TPP, anti-TTIP, anti-immigration).

The internet, social media, in its basic usage by people tend to privatize public concerns. People care about what is close to them – here they can think rationally. On issues of a more general nature, they tend to trust whomever is the authority for them, without constantly verifying the sources of particular news. This is used by modern versions of “media highway robbers” who have constructed a sophisticated infrastructure of fake news industry.

Those “media highway robbers” can be state-supported, like RT, or Polish public national tv, for example, or privately owned, with significant resources and mainstream-access capability, like Fox News. The role of state in supporting the development of "fake news" phenomenon can be seen in its full beauty in the recent idea of Hungarian public consultation where every question starts with a lie on the European Union.

“Media robbers” of this level of sophistication in manipulating public opinion still exist in the open public sphere, but there is the whole different segment of the “dark internet”, where white supremacist, the alt-righters and other political crazies have free rein in a selective part of the internet. It is quite ironic, that RT and Fox look quite respectable when put against those purveyors of pure hate-driven fake news.

Of course, we have an example of an outlet coming from the “dark corner” into the prominent place in the political mainstream. I think, of course, of the Breitbart News and all Bannon-created universe of outrageous fake news. While fake news in the deep corner of internet thrive on anonymity, Breitbart’s “media workers” do not shy away from signing their pieces with their names. This show that the shame threshold in political discourse went significantly down.

Fox, Breitbart, or the RT are now mainstream, not out-stream of acceptable discourse. When it comes to RT, for example, it is quite surprising to me, that many quite respectable politicians or experts, former diplomats do not decline the invitation to be guests. By appearing on these platforms, they give their place to this, or similar, organization’s methods of operations. And this of course, is quite frightening.

I am afraid that gradually we are coming to a moment when communication will become a basic tool of ideological warfare. And we have to react, as free societies, accordingly.

Some responses are coming, bit by bit for now, for the phenomenon is still new and the research instruments perhaps have not reached full precision yet. Nevertheless, some proposals do exist. For example, there is a report of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation which proposes highlighting and encouraging citizens’ self-responsibility, media competence, and critical faculties. Specific recommendations in the report include promotion of school-based and non-

school-based media competency as protection against harmful media influences, encouraging critical user behavior, the use of warnings before “fake news”, appealing through these measures to the user’s own sense of responsibility, promoting and cultivating a respectful social dialogue to avoid anti- and pro-elitist stock-piling, expanding and linking of international and national research on media usage behavior.

I agree that education in media competence, starting in schools is one of the keys, of course. It should be introduced everywhere, as well as the other recommendations. Nevertheless, I think that this does not exhaust the possibilities that we have to consider.

I think, in this context, that we also need not only “counter-narrative” to fake news, but also precise tools to measure, for example, the market sweep for fake news. It would certainly, due to market size and fragmentation and its specificities, be different in Europe and in the US. Also, the educational approaches have to be different, for the US education system and its segmentation is completely different than that of the European Union member states, notwithstanding the differences among them.

There is also a fascinating area of research concerning the public opinion in various countries. Are some of them less and some more susceptible to “fake news”?

For example, how about Canada? We know that this country is different in many respects, both from its neighbor, the US, but also from Europe. How do they deal with the issue of fake news? Do they have, in the society, the same hunger for alternative universe of news that we see in Europe and the US?

I recently read that Ipsos poll, conducted on behalf of the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), found that while eight in ten Canadians feel confident that they can tell the difference between accurate and fake news, far fewer could deliver when put to the test. Ipsos showed English-speaking Canadians six images of news website front pages, and asked respondents to identify which of the six showed fake news stories. Sixty-three per cent of Canadians failed the quiz by only getting 0-3 right answers out of a possible six, and just 37 per cent passed the quiz.

So, are the Canadians too confident about their abilities in this regard? Or perhaps there is less fake news there?