AGORA DIPLOCAT 8

Technology platforms and the fight against fake news

Accountability, offering digital education and doing good journalism are part of the solution to a growing problem

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Report by Marc Vidal, who moderated the debate. He holds a degree in Information Sciences from the UAB and a postgraduate degree in Digital Journalism from the UPC. He is currently a journalist in the Politics section of Catalunya Ràdio's news services.

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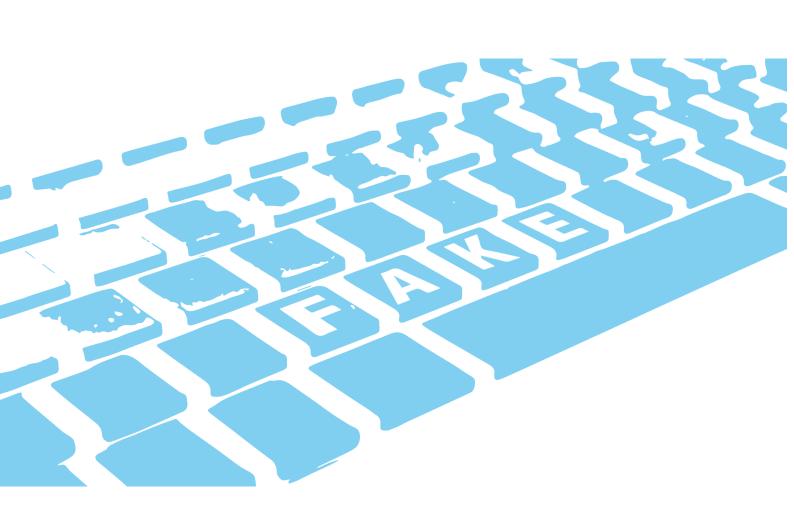+34 936 405 470
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1. Presentation

Two major reference bodies for Europeanism in Catalonia, DIPLOCAT and the Association of European Journalists of Catalonia (APEC), have joined forces to jointly organize the virtual debate "Technology platforms and the fight against fake news". The event is part of the second cycle of DIPLOCAT Digital Talks, which aims to bring Catalonia closer to the world and address the major issues on the global agenda. The Secretary General of DIPLOCAT, Laura Foraster, recalls that the two entities have been collaborating for years as part of the Ernest Udina Prize for European Spirit, the award that recognises a journalist each year for their commitment to Europe, and the current debate is "one more step towards understanding" between the two organisations.

This summary of the act maintains the chronological plot line that followed the discussion and can be seen in full here.

2. Digital platforms and fake news

There has been a lot of talk about misinformation and we could almost say that everything has already been written. Therefore, the discussion aims to focus on the role played by major digital platforms in the creation and dissemination of "fake news". This terminology is not entirely accurate, because from a strictly journalistic point of view, if a news story is false it automatically ceases to be news. The responsibility of platforms such as Twitter or Facebook and their power over the flow of informative content on networks, says Laura Foraster, at a time when the media has lost its hegemony in the distribution of news, is something that should concern everyone. And that is why it is necessary to encourage the distribution of reliable information, as pointed out by the European Commission and the European Parliament a few years ago, and to rely on the professional production of news as tools to combat misinformation. We can be sure, concludes Laura Foraster, that from this discussion will emerge strategies to deal with it.

The discussion begins with a presentation on the situation in the US, where Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election brought the impact of disinformation on the citizenry to the fore. Then, the focus shifts to the European Union and its strategy to deal with this phenomenon, which at first was seen as distant, but which soon took centre stage, with issues such as Brexit. A third contribution of the debate is about the role of the so-called 'fact-checkers', organisations that are responsible for tracking networks and pointing out the content that we can consider misinformation. In Catalonia, for example, we have Verificat, represented here by Susana Pérez-Soler. Finally, as a result of the debate and the contributions made by the speakers themselves and our online audience, some strategies are provided to combat and deal with misinformation.

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3. Donald Trump: did it all start with him?

It is interesting to recall an anecdote from the summer of 2016, explains Gustau Alegret, from when Donald Trump had just won the Republican Party nomination and had not yet formally accepted the nomination. One of the great journalists in the United States, Lesley Stahl, who worked on the program '60 Minutes', interviewed him at the Trump Tower in New York and, outside the microphone, the journalist asked him: "Listen, Mr. Trump, this rhetoric, this insistence you have on calling us enemies and appealing to the fake news... now that you've won the nomination I guess you'll turn the page... because it's getting tired!". And the response of the then Republican candidate was very revealing and tells us a lot, according to Alegret, about the psychology of the character. He told her: "Look, do you know why I do it? I do it to discredit you and all the journalists in the world, so that when you write negative news about me, no one will believe it". In short, Trump's goal was that when the mainstream media published negative information about him, whether true or false, there would always be a shadow of doubt about the piece of news.

Gustau Alegret also points out that Donald Trump does not come from the world of commitment to the truth, he comes from the world of entertainment, which does not necessarily have to reflect the truth. He helped to accelerate and spread fake news, first as a political strategy and later beyond that area. He declared a war in which "anything goes" and digital platforms contributed to this because, just as politicians and the media need each other, populism needs social media, as it builds its narrative on the fake news circulating there. The difference is that journalism when done well, in the face of lying politicians, does its job and filters the news, but social media doesn't. Social media channels and amplifies information without contrasting it, and all this meant that when Donald Trump won the election in 2016, there was a turning point.

Why should Donald Trump's account be suspended? Why can't we say what we want? What role should users play? Do we have to believe everything we see?

Trump's victory, says Alegret, created a model for other populisms in the world, in which the goal was not to convince with political proposals but to divide, radicalise, confront and create a shadow of doubt about the opponent while appealing to our basest passions. Here they recall examples of the campaign such as "Lock her up", when Donald Trump was talking about Hillary Clinton, or when talking about Mexican immigrants Trump said: "They're bringing crime, they're bringing drugs". He added: "Maybe some of them are good". This was a model that, thanks to its electoral success, spread globally, and set off the alarms of democracies around the world. How can it be that in the United States, one of the great free nations, an ignorant populist has won, a liar, so far removed from the values of his country and even the Republican conservative values themselves? This is how the debate on the regulation or self-regulation of large technology platforms opened up. According to Alegret, the penny dropped for Silicon Valley with Trump's victory, and, sometimes more as an attempt to redeem their image than anything else, they began to get involved in that fight. Thus were born the initiatives of Facebook and Twitter to warn citizens that certain news items were fake and, as a step further and in the face of popular anger, technology platforms started to remove certain content and suspend accounts. But why should Donald Trump's account be suspended? Why can't we say what we want? What role should users play? Do we have to believe everything we see?

4. The EU: from looking on from the outside to taking action

The European Union is facing a late but mostly disorganised debate on disinformation once Donald Trump's victory in the United States is over, according to Carme Colomina's analysis. Neither the perception of the risk of misinformation nor the legislative framework for dealing with it are homogeneous between Member States. From Germany, where there is very clear legislation against hate speech, to France, where the legislation allows a media outlet to be closed if it is shown that it has disseminated misinformation with funding from overseas during the election campaign, and Sweden, where closing a media outlet is unthinkable.

In Brussels, explains Colomina, there has been an evolution since 2016, when there is an awareness of what is happening with the victory of Donald Trump, the Cambridge Analytica scandal and, above all, the Brexit campaign. the referendum that would eventually lead to the UK leaving the EU. It is also important to remember that at that time the effects of the Ukraine conflict, which erupted in 2015, and which led the Baltic states to ask Brussels to do something with the bombardment of disinformation coming from Russia, were still resonating. This is how the EU starts to take action and, in the first years, from 2016 to 2018, it defines the terminology and determines what it will do. During these two years, misinformation is a problem that is considered to come from outside, basically from Russia, but this begins to change when you see that in this hyperconnected, global world there is not an inside and an outside, but rather the ability to influence, disruption, is also internal. It is when those who replicate misinformation are platforms or political parties at a purely European level that we see the problem is not just external and the EU is forced to accelerate its plans.

What has the European Union done? What has it done given that it has no powers in this field and that it is therefore the Member States that can legislate? Among other actions, reflects Colomina, has forced technology platforms to sit at the negotiating table. It has done so with the power of persuasion that comes with representing 500 million people and negotiating with Facebook on those terms is not the same as doing it if you are a state of 15 million people, for example. So what the EU has done is create a code of best practices, which is voluntary, but which for the first time makes technology platforms sit down to talk about who is the real owner of the content they circulate. In this regard, there has been an evolution by the platforms from their initial position, when they said that they were not responsible for the content because they did not generate it, and now this idea has been completely laid to rest.

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5. The dilemma of censorship or the dictatorship of algorithms

The acceleration brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, which has led us to digitise our social lives, labour relations, public conversation, and how we get information, has put platforms back in the spotlight and this has forced them to react. This is a reaction that, for Colomina, can be seen in terms of reputation, because they have been singled out, especially by organisations such as the EU, but also the UN and the WHO, who have demanded greater commitment against infodemic, disinformation about the pandemic. It is a change of role of the platforms that raises many questions, because the immediate response of the platforms has been to monitor and remove content or close accounts. This creates a new ethical problem, because we have erected these technology platforms as gatekeepers of content. It should be remembered at this point that these platforms are sold as spaces for relationships and social interaction, when in reality they are private companies that, as such, primarily seek economic benefit. Therefore, from an academic point of view, there are many experts who consider this new role of social media in terms of content as a questionable privatisation of censorship.

Therefore, the European Union finds that when it seeks to control content to combat misinformation, it ends up jeopardising freedom of expression, one of the key values of the great Western democracies. In fact, within the EU itself, laws have been made to limit misinformation in times of Covid-19 which, in the case of Hungary, ended up serving to limit political dissent or criticism of the government. Thus, European institutions have taken a change in approach when it comes to combating misinformation, so that less emphasis is placed on the control of content, and much more thought is given to limiting the ability of social networks to disseminate misinformation, that is, their algorithms. Algorithms that, for Colomina, are responsible for amplifying the power and ability of this misinformation to penetrate society. It is here that big technology platforms are still very opaque, because they prefer to focus on content, to show that they are taking action, while keeping secret the algorithmic architecture that enhances the penetration and impact of content that has little credibility or unreliable sources.

On this specific point of algorithms, Susana Pérez-Soler agrees in demanding transparency. Facebook and Twitter should explain by what mechanisms a content becomes viral, what is the formula that makes this information spread so fast. Always keeping in mind that these platforms are designed to 'hijack' our attention and this has consequences both in terms of our political action and in our interpersonal relationships. For example, automatic playback of YouTube videos. Who gives the platform permission to do this? Or the fact that the 'reputation' of each of us on the net is so visible: the number of followers you have, how many times a message of yours is shared on Twitter and Facebook, etc. All this gives this dopamine rush to users every time they see hundreds of retweets. In fact, Instagram has started testing in which they remove this information because of the pressure it puts on young people. There are many Silicon Valley programmers who are highlighting these practices and Pérez-Soler recommends the documentary 'The Social Dilemma' on Netflix as a good example of how the designers and programmers of these technology platforms do it to capture our attention.

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6. Verificat: the Catalan network of fact-checkers

Verificat is a non-profit foundation created in 2019 in the municipal election campaign in Barcelona as a response to misinformation, which is one of the main challenges facing democracies today. Susana Pérez-Soler details that one of the main tools to curb misinformation are the platforms that verify the credibility of the information disseminated through the networks, known as 'fact-checkers', which the European Union itself has promoted. Verificat is recognised by the _International Fact-checking Network_, which we can consider the rating agency of recognised fact-checkers from the different EU member states. In Spain there are two more platforms that have this recognition, which are Maldito Bulo, another non-profit foundation like Verificat, and Newtral, a limited company owned by journalist Ana Pastor.

What does Verificat do? It uses a fixed methodology to contextualise the information circulating on the Internet. In fact, it is a methodology that is quite similar to that of journalism, as the basic idea is to go to the primary source, identify it, try to contact it, look at databases to contrast the information, and so on. And it does so in a reactive way, that is, unlike what traditional media does, where a journalist on their own initiative proposes to make a news piece or an in-depth report, fact-checkers act from what they see on social networks, be it on Twitter or Instagram, or what they see circulating as mass-spread message chains on WhatsApp. Another difference with journalism is that fact-checkers work on any content that goes viral. It is never assumed that information is not relevant enough to be fact-checked. Verificat has even worked on news items that say coronavirus is cured with bleach, for example, as not everyone has access to the primary sources and contextualisation.

Why is Verificat necessary? According to Pérez-Soler, we are experiencing a paradigm shift from traditional communication to digital communication and, in this new scenario, there is an excess of information, infoxication. We do not have the ability to consume and digest all the content that comes to us through the digital environment. In addition, journalists have lost their monopoly on information and no longer create, produce or disseminate exclusive content. And it should also be noted that there is a serious crisis of credibility behind misinformation, as professionals who acted as intermediaries in the field of information have entered a crisis with the advent of the internet. If we no longer go to the doctor and prefer to discuss our health problems with Dr. Google, the same thing happens with information: we no longer consult reputable newspaper headlines, but we go to Twitter or Facebook. And we no longer look at what the source of information is, but we immediately have our finger on the retweet button and share information that has motivated some kind of emotion inside us, often negative, anger or rage.

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7. Ways to tackle misinformation

Susana Pérez-Soler points out that there are no easy solutions to problems that are very complex, but whatever the answer, it must be shared. First of all, there is a responsibility on the part of the legislator, so it is necessary to start regulating in some way, even if it is very minimal. Given, as Carme Colomina pointed out, above, that these technological platforms we have agreed represent online public opinion but are really private companies. And so, can a private company censor? Isn't that a power should correspond only to the states? These new circumstances should be clarified.

A share of responsibility goes to the technology platforms themselves, which we have seen have changed tack since 2016, when they were accused of promoting misinformation and helping Donald Trump in his rise to power. However, we must be very careful, as we only value the negative part of social networks, when in fact they have a very positive side as they help give a voice to many movements that were previously invisible, in the old paradigm of traditional communication. We are talking about movements such as for gender equality, which are now more visible thanks to hashtags like #MeToo, or the fight against racism in the United States with #BlackLivesMatter, or the movement against climate change. So we must be careful when we charge digital platforms with the responsibility for content moderation.

Carme Colomina also agrees that we should not fall into the criminalisation of social networks. Despite being critical of the role of social media, with the lack of transparency of algorithms, it is true that they are an opportunity to ensure a plurality of voices in the public sphere, especially for less socially represented communities and groups, can exert pressure, have a presence which they had not been able to access when the monopolies of information emanated from certain powers or from certain media. The clearest example is that whenever there are riots or social unrest in certain countries, the first thing governments do is

Journalism is part of the solution and the media must also help citizens to distinguish what is a lie and what is true.

shut down Twitter. We have examples in Egypt or Turkey, where President Erdogan is very quick to cut Twitter when he senses that there is some social unrest. This brings an added reflection that we see the internet as if it were one thing, but there are many internets in the world, and many ways of conceiving the web. Not everyone conceives of the internet as an open space, there is also a controlled internet and there are social networks under the control of digital autocracies. And all this is evident, for example, in meetings such as the one held by the UN in December 2019 to regulate cybercrime, and it became clear that these illicit practices were related, for the great Western democracies, to the hacking of bank accounts, while for countries such as Russia it was a matter of political dissent.

Returning to the question of how to deal with misinformation, we should examine the role that the media and the public must play. Susana Pérez-Soler attributes to the media and new platforms, such as Verificat, the work of contrasting and fact-checking the information that spreads via networks, but she also believes that citizens should be involved in a new digital media literacy. We need to be wary of information that generates contradictory feelings, be wary of a screenshot coming via WhatsApp, know that not all information should be shared without even reading it. Citizens should also participate in this verification process by looking for sources of news and determining whether it is trustworthy, and discerning between reliable and unreliable sources. Gustau Alegret claims the role of education, an education understood as a process and not as something that is imposed on society in a homogeneous way. Because a teenager born in the digital age is not the same as a 40-year-old or a 60-year-old. The internet is also consumed differently: some consume digitally and others still tend to prefer physical versions.

Carme Colomina values journalism as a solution to misinformation, good journalism. Because in this process of misinformation many different degrees of confusion can be created. That is why in English we make this distinction between 'disinformation', 'misinformation' and 'mal-information'. Precariousness and decontextualisation when the pace of information never stops and the lack of means does not allow to go to the sources of information, can end up leading journalism into confusion, sometimes without even knowing it. In this sense, the pandemic has been an opportunity for good journalism, because there has been more need for information than ever before, especially from credible and reliable sources, just at a time when we have had a lot of overexposure to misinformation.

It should be borne in mind that the media and journalists do the job of fact-checkers dozens of times a day. From his experience, Gustau Alegret explains that he is fed up with taking news that is popular on the networks to put it in context and discredit a political leader who falsifies or hides part of reality. "We have built a great wall," Donald Trump often repeated, when in reality only 8 kilometres of wall have been rebuilt in 4 years, on a border of some 3,000 kilometres. That's the reality and that's the fact that can't hide Trump's failure to keep his election promise.

Alegret also draws attention to the fake news that takes advantage of the aesthetics and presentation of traditional media. For example, a domain is created that could be "tarragonanoticies.com", presented as a news site, but fake news is published in the guise of a news story built on journalistic criteria. Alegret agrees with Carme Colomina that it is clear that journalism is part of the solution and that the media must also help citizens to distinguish what is a lie and what is true. Susana Pérez-Soler confirms that there is a lot of misinformation that takes the form of journalistic news and also insists that the key is to provide citizens with their own tools. If we see a headline called "tarragonanoticies.com", all we need to do is search Google or Wikipedia for what it says about this source to see if it exists. It is this small digital media education that needs to be demanded so that all citizens, not just journalists, are able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources and give more credibility to traditional media.

The debate was open to public participation, which provided questions and reflections on some of the ideas that had emerged. Among them, this need to involve journalism and citizenship in the fight against misinformation, but also governments and supranational authorities. The battle, it is clear, is on different fronts and takes different forms and circumstances, as exemplified during the debate, which ends by thanking the speakers, the audience and the co-organising bodies, DIPLOCAT and APEC.

Annex. Participants

Technology platforms and the fight against fake news
Accountability, offering digital education and doing good journalism are part
of the solution to a growing problem

> GUSTAU ALEGRET

Journalist. He works in the United States on the international news channel NTN24. He is the director and presenter of Club de Prensa and Cuestión de Poder, two daily television programmes for analysis, interviews and information. He is the winner of three Emmy Awards, an expert in political and corporate communication, and Media Leader of the World Economic Forum (WEF). He has more than 20 years of experience working in various media outlets in Spain and the USA. He was a RAC1 correspondent in Washington from 2007 to 2017. He had previously worked as a journalist for Ràdio Intereconomia, Ona Catalana Ràdio, the Europa Press agency, COM Ràdio, Plataforma Digital (Canal +) and Catalunya Ràdio, among other media. He was director of communications at the Department of Trade, Tourism and Consumer Affairs of the Government of Catalonia and advisor in strategic communication at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the GdC Intermediate Corporate Communications Office. He holds a degree in Journalism from Pompeu Fabra University (1997), the ESADE Executive Program in Strategic Communication Management (2006) and the Executive Certificate Program in *Business Administration and Professional English* from Georgetown University (2008).

> CARME COLOMINA

Principal investigator specialising in the European Union, misinformation and global policy at CIDOB (*Barcelona Center for International Affairs*), as well as editor and member of the Editorial Board. She is also an associate professor at the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, where she teaches a course on communication management in the European Union, and at Pompeu Fabra University. A graduate in Information Sciences from the Autonomous University of Barcelona with a postgraduate in European Union studies from the Catalan Open University, she has been a correspondent in Brussels and, later, head of the international section at Catalunya Ràdio and the newspaper NOW. In addition, she is a regular contributor to various media outlets. As a special envoy, she has covered international summits and political conflicts in some twenty countries, and has worked as a consultant on various communication projects in Europe and the Euro-Mediterranean. Prior to joining CIDOB, she was also responsible for interregional cooperation at the Catalan Government's Secretariat for Foreign Affairs. She is the president of the Association of European Journalists of Catalonia (APEC) and a member of the DIPLOCAT Advisory Board.

> SUSANA PÉREZ-SOLER

Journalist and PhD in Communication from Ramon Llull University. She studies the way in which technology transforms journalism, mainly its practice but also its consumption. Professor of Digital Journalism at the Blanquerna

Faculty of Communication, she writes about the digital transformation of the media in specialized publications and in the blog Tecnología Humana of the La Vanguardia newspaper. Coordinator of Education at Verificat, the first fact-checker in Catalonia. Published '*Journalism and social media. Keys to digital content management*' (UOC, 2017).

> MARC VIDAL
Moderator and speaker

Degree in Information Sciences from the UAB and a postgraduate degree in Digital Journalism from the UPC. He The a journalist in the Politics section of Catalunya Ràdio's news services. He had previously been head of the International section of the newspaper ARA and correspondent for Catalunya Ràdio in Brussels. He has directed several daily news programmes at this station, such as Informatiu del Migdia, or specialised programmes, such as Economia i Empresa. He is a member of the Association of European Journalists of Catalonia (APEC).

DIPLOCAT

The member entities of the consortium

≫ Public institutions and municipal entities

- Government of Catalonia
- Barcelona City Council
- Tarragona City Council
- Girona City Council
- Lleida City Council
- Vielha e Mijaran City Council
- Barcelona Provincial Council

- Tarragona Provincial Council
- Girona Provincial Council
- Lleida Provincial Council
- Conselh Generau d'Aran
- Catalan Association of Municipalities and Counties
- Federation of Municipalities of Catalonia

≫ Entities of the business sector

- General Council of the Official Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Catalonia
- Entrepreneurs association Foment del Treball Nacional
- Association of Micro-, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises of Catalonia (PIMEC)

- Confederation of Cooperatives of Catalonia
- Multi-Sector Business Association (AMEC)
- Private Foundation of Entrepreneurs (FemCAT)

≫ Entities of the social, trade union and sports sector

- The Group of Entities of the Voluntary Sector of Catalonia
- Trade union Unió General de Treballadors de Catalunya (UGT)

- Trade union Comissions Obreres de Catalunya (CCOO)
- Football Club Barcelona

≫ Universities, business schools and academic institutions

- University of Barcelona (UB)
- Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)
- Technical University of Catalonia (UPC)
- Pompeu Fabra University (UPF)
- University of Lleida (UdL)
- University of Girona (UdG)
- Rovira i Virgili University (URV)
- Ramon Llull University (URL)
- Open University of Catalonia (UOC)

- University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC)
- International University of Catalonia (UIC)
- Abat Oliba CEU University (UAO CEU)
- Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI)
- EADA Business School
- Barcelona Graduate School of Economics (Barcelona GSE)

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