

BIMR CONFERENCE GUERNSEY 2019

This year's British Islands and Mediterranean Regional (BIMR) Conference 2019 was held in Guernsey, Channel Islands. Our hosts were extremely welcoming and we were blessed with lovely weather to accompany what was a thoroughly entertaining and invigorating topic and which was especially timely and relevant to the current political environment. This topic was '*Fake News and Digital Disinformation*'.

All of the visiting delegates provided insight into how this topic was affecting the political and governmental structures in their respective legislatures and, whilst it was acknowledged this was not going to be an easy fix as fake news and propaganda has been around for centuries, delegates nevertheless suggested there can be certain remedies and actions governments can take to limit and combat misinformation.

There were excellent guest speakers invited to attend who spoke on issues emanating from the main topic, these were:

Fighting FakeNews and Digital Disinformation Vs Solving Real Problems – Prof Horst Risse

Policy Responses to Disinformation: a Public Health approach to preserving democracy - Dr Victoria Nash

Fake News and the impact on Media Freedom – Rita Payne

The importance of Quality Journalism in a World of Fake News and Social Media – Doug Wills

Fake News and No Platforming – Victoria Schofield

Many felt the Speakers were the highlight of the event as their in-depth knowledge and experience of these topics stimulated debate and provided a good platform for engagement with the delegates many of whom took the opportunity to ask thought-provoking questions.

Other Plenary sessions were divided into smaller workshops also pertaining to different aspects of the head subject, these workshops were facilitated by the delegates themselves as well as Lord Haselhurst who chaired Workshop 'A'. I was given the opportunity as a Rapporteur to report back to the wider group at the end of the workshop sessions.

Listed below are some of the key points/suggestions arising from the various discussions across all of the Topics:

There was a general feeling that the title 'Fake News' could be misleading and could be more defined as most articles might contain truth that is surrounded by false statements or exaggeration. Thus cannot be described entirely as 'fake'. Disinformation however was defined as the spread of information that is designed to cause public harm or to generate profit.

It was noted that Fake News has a long and inglorious history going back to when a newspaper in 1835 the *New York Sun*, reported that there were 'Bat Men' on the moon, much to the amusement of the delegates and also providing humour and light heartedness to the session.

Various tactics and strategies used by online perpetrators were also outlined, these included manipulation of video content, for example adding in lip movement and audio to say something that was never said, these are known as 'Deep Fakes'. The use of algorithms on Social Media sites in creating new profiles to indicate a rise in a person's number of 'followers' is an example of this. Another extension of this type of tactic that is helping to build bigger networks is the use of 'BOTS' which are automated scripts that generate and replicate Social Media content, we see these being used during election campaigns. It was felt there could be more pressure put on Social Media platforms to better regulate the content, although it was recognised this will be tedious and costly to business. Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are starting to come on board to combat the problem. WhatsApp has started to limit the amount of times you can forward a message. Many still felt there could be an arm's length regulator as opposed to government as the arbitrator as this could be problematic.

Whilst it is well known newspapers will use discretion as to what the content of a particular submission might be, this sometimes results in a distorted or favourable version with the censorship of key facts. This further emphasises the importance of quality journalism that is ethical, based in certain terms and conditions. A suggestion of self-regulation by the journalists themselves was also discussed. There was also a suggestion of an accreditation/benchmarking scheme for journalists, with the view one could assess the reliability of publications based on a star rating of credibility.

Solutions discussed included Enhancing Transparency by validation of the original content. This could be achieved by creating links within the same document or webpage that verifies the content via other publications and different networks. Other recommendations proposed were to head the articles with an appropriate definition e.g. whether it is news, opinion, investigative or a statement of fact, which allows the reader to form judgement on its credibility. It was felt more value should be placed on journalists through better pay which should reflect in quality output with more integrity.

Public funded media was a relevant similarity between a few jurisdictions. The assembly spoke about how difficult it is for the media (being government funded) to strike the balance between holding the Politicians to account with effective scrutiny Vs being perceived as being 'too hard' on them. This was particularly relevant to St Helena.

Tackling the way people respond to or believe the information was a viewpoint expressed. How we achieve this is again through education, with the acceptance that a lot is down to the individual. Why are people influenced so easily? Members agreed this is a tough time politically and some people are angry and it is this anger that makes them vulnerable and susceptible to fake news and disinformation and thus they can be exploited. They welcome information that confirms their right to be angry, overlooking if it is true or false. There was common drive for enabling mechanisms to empower people to inquire and investigate for themselves to confirm or to discredit information.

The topic of funding was an interesting one as it was acknowledged that the content of disinformation is often tailored to the objectives of the person funding the scheme. Many are designed to cause political unrest and parliamentary gain during elections. These articles can present skewed views both from government and non-

government parties. It was recognised that these digital campaigns will continue as long as there is funding support, which is a problem.

No Platforming is a strategy sometimes used by students. Its basic concept is not to allow your opponent a platform to speak, or to respond to debate. Although it is designed to reduce harm, it can sometimes add to ignorance with the concept that it is easier to hate and abuse than to argue and debate. Debate within the assembly outlined this could essentially be an infringement of the right of freedom of speech.

Members also accepted that on certain occasions fake news can stem from Parliament itself and it was suggested that there be an internal procedure established and that the facts and evidence are accurate and if not they be corrected and disseminated to the Public. Many felt it was important to first get our 'own house in order'. It was said that Constituents have a right to know that what their politicians are saying is accurate.

The group felt that the politicians themselves are also responsible for their communication strategies and thus should try and counter-act fakenews by providing authentic and timely sources of information. Key to this is the access to impartial research, which many felt could be conducted by a non-party press team from parliament to put out the facts and briefings from discussions.

"It takes two to lie.....one to listen".

Hon Cruyff Gerard Buckley
Member of St Helena Legislative Council