

Committee: Human Rights Council

Issue: Media crisis and the rise of populism as a threat to human rights

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INTRODUCTION

Roughly 50 years ago humanity entered the information age with constantly evolving means to transmit and receive information. However, because of the abundance of mediums through which people can get information and the ease with which anyone can spontaneously share information currently, the media is facing a crisis of fake news. Websites dedicated to creating this fake news are read and often believed by viewers due to them using URLs and logos similar to those of mainstream media sources. However, the news themselves aren't the only harmful aspect. Due to the surge of fake news people have begun to lose trust in the media giving an opportunity for populists to step in and get power by presenting themselves as a trustworthy source and using the media as scapegoats to prove that the populists are needed to restore order. Then, it is the outspoken nature of populists which results in polarization of the people that prompts even more fake news, leading to an ever-growing problem. The fake news often target the matters that will cause the most polarization in order to become more likely to be shared. This, in conjunction with populist rhetoric, represents a threat to human rights. The issue is a particularly difficult one to solve as it requires control of an enormous amount of data. However, if left uncontrolled, it will grow to an unmanageable proportion and threaten human rights on a large scale and, as such, this problem must be combated quickly and thoroughly.



1Fake news headline from uspoln.com

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Fake News

Fake news are defined simply as false information under the guise of being truthful¹, or as Politifact states it²: "Fake news is made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the world." Further clarification needs to be made that the fake news refers to news that are purposely fake, not the result of misinformation.

Old/Traditional Media

Old media as defined by the Oxford Dictionaries³ are "Established or traditional means of mass communication considered collectively, especially contrasted with newer means; specifically media which are not interactive or do not involve the Internet." This includes media such as, but not limited to television, newspapers, radio and books.

New Media

New media are the form of media made available using electronic communication through the use of computer technology⁴. This includes websites, online newspapers, social media, video streaming etc.

Populism

The original meaning of populism is a political approach appealing to ordinary people whose concerns are disregarded by elite groups⁵. However its meaning is currently distorted and reflects more than just that ideology. Instead, it usually reflects three things. Firstly, it emphasizes on the virtue and wisdom of the majority, namely the "ordinary people", and on the existence of a corrupt establishment consisting of corporations, the media, politicians and intellectuals. Secondly, it is accompanied with a preference for authoritarianism and ruling through opinion polls and referenda. Finally, it emphasizes on xenophobia and racism as it assumes that the people are uniform and anyone who is not in conformity with the people should be excluded.⁶

¹<http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/F/fake-news.html>

²<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/dec/13/2016-lie-year-fake-news/>

³https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/old_media

⁴http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/N/new_media.html

⁵<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/populism>

⁶<https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/getFile.aspx?Id=1401> page 7 and 8

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The topic can be categorized in 2 categories. Firstly, there is the question of the media crisis and how it was used by populists to gain popularity and secondly, there is the question of how populism is posing a threat to human rights.

Media Crisis and the rise of populism

The media crisis has 2 parts to it. Firstly, there is the issue of trust in media and how the dwindling trust of people in it leaves an opening for populists to present themselves as trustworthy. Secondly, the issue of people becoming even more reliant on new media and thus making traditional media try to survive when they are becoming ever less popular.

The growing distrust of people towards social media has created the vacuum for alternative sources of information to flourish, thus boosting the spread of fake news. This phenomenon was particularly evident in the US Presidential Election in 2016, where fake news started playing a pivotal role. The fact that unsupported information was very easily believed, without double-checking with a source of official data, created space for political exploitation in the one or the other direction. Therefore, both individuals (supporters of or another candidate) and even members of the campaigns tried to take advantage of this new environment. This is how "juicy" topics and headlines, such as "Pope endorses Trump" or a pedophile ring run by democrats gained ever-increasing popularity. Another reason that helped fake news spread were the social media. People on the social media shared the fake news spreading them even more because people believed the fake news articles or because they wanted to create unrest. Additionally, the algorithms used by social media for suggesting news to users, suggest news that users are likely to be interested in. This results in news, for example regarding the US elections, to be more often suggested. Since there are no filters to exclude fake news, the news suggested also included the fake news. The combination of sharing by users and suggestion by the social media networks themselves led to social media becoming the prime area for spreading fake news with 41% of visits to fake news websites being in the social media era.⁷

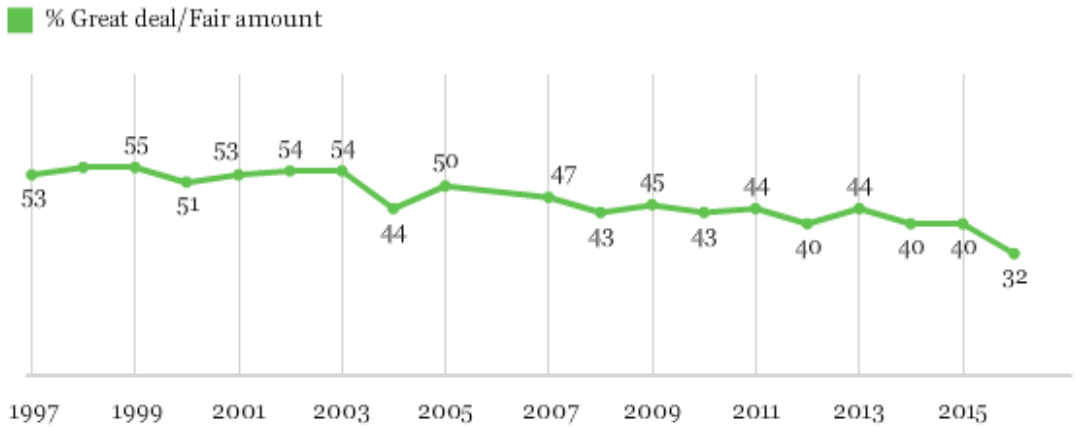
However the problem is not the fake news per se since, even when they are believed, it is only for a short period. The real problem is the distrust that they create as people begin to

⁷<https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf> page 222

doubt everything they read. Moreover, the dwindling trust in media is tied strongly with the distrust in all establishments, which is fueling populist rhetoric as populists present themselves being the saviors who will combat these corrupt establishments.

Americans' Trust in the Mass Media

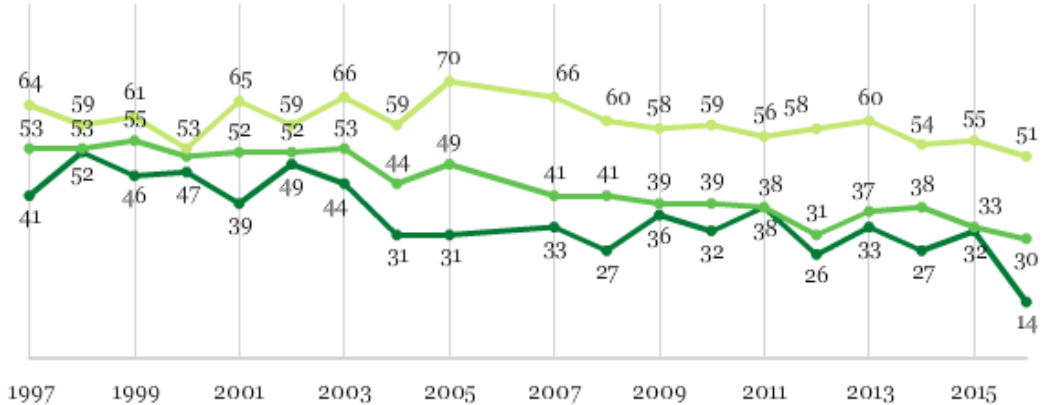
In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?



GALLUP®
American trust in media <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>

Trust in Mass Media, by Party

% Great deal/Fair amount of trust
 ■ Republicans ■ Independents ■ Democrats



GALLUP®
Trust in media by party <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>

It is evident that the ones who distrust media the most are the republicans probably also affected by Trump's criticism of the press. And thus, populists taking advantage of this media

crisis use social media to approach the public as their ally and gain support, thus contributing to the rise of populism. Populists tend to have a much stronger engagement in social media than others, with Trump having over double the engagements (times that people interacted with posts, such as likes, shares etc.) that Clinton possesses (as of 6th November 2016)⁸ What is more, Le Pen and Melanchon have nearly double the amount of twitter followers than anyone else in France (as of 20th April 2017).⁹ This shows just how much populism gains traction through the media both due to the outspoken way with which populists express themselves and due to the people seeing them as their protectors from the “corrupt and untrustworthy” media.

The second aspect of the media crisis is the ever declining usage of traditional media such as the newspapers. Due to the advent of the new media people prefer to learn about the news on the internet and through their phones and their computers since they are more interactive, convenient and free. Since 1987 there has been a steady decline in newspaper circulation with an 8% decline just from 2015 to 2016.¹⁰ As such, traditional media are in a position where they are vying for survival. This raises the question of how much journalists should actually invest in quality journalism instead of simply providing more shocking stories, stories



that will appeal to the majority of the public by appealing to their fears, and prioritizing shocking images over facts, something not overly rare on tabloids or short news stories on the television or radio. This also further contributes to the rise of populism as people's fears are amplified and used to attract attention. Examples of news stories are The Sun's headline saying “1 in 5 Brit Muslims' sympathy for jihads” or “Rescue boats? I'd rather use gunships to stop migrants” both of which target the fear of the refugee crisis and terrorism, effectively paying the role of populists and contributing to the rise of populism. Interestingly the oxford dictionaries word of the year for 2016 was post-truth, which denotes a situation in which

⁸<https://medium.com/the-social-reader/in-the-final-hours-of-the-election-who-is-winning-on-social-media-7243016e3d7b>

⁹<http://myndset.com/2017/05/french-presidential-social-media/>

¹⁰<http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers/>

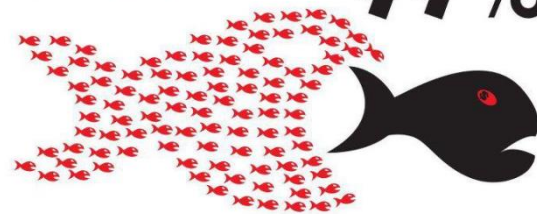
objective facts matter less than emotions and personal beliefs. This shows just how influential populist rhetoric has been over the course of the year.

Summarizing the media crisis has assisted the rise of populism in 2 ways. Firstly, because of the low trust people have in the media, populists are able to gather support portraying the media networks as corrupt and themselves as the defenders of the people through social media, where their way of speaking gathers followers for them. Secondly, many traditional media outlets, concerned by the decline in their circulation or rates, adopt a populist agenda and try to compete with populists, who are to be found especially in the web. This way, many traditional media are trying to establish a new contact line to their audience, thus forgetting however that this way of reporting the news is already being dominated and that their role is to operate according to a specific journalistic code of conduct.

Populism and the human rights

Populism is dangerous when combined with nativism. The nature of populism is that the majority is right. This, if combined with nativism, leads to racism and xenophobia. The result of this is that minorities are often excluded in order to favor majorities. One of the human rights that tends to be threatened is the right to equal pay for equal work when natives are paid more than others sometimes for no reason. Another threat is the physical security of the people. Examples of this being threatened are the attacks throughout 2016 on refugee camps in Chios and in Germany. These are not always prompted by populists but still pose a threat to human rights and can at least be reduced by combating the rise of populism. Aside from these problems caused by the rise of populism, another danger is caused by the disregarding of human rights in itself. This is because it creates the perception that human rights are not necessary, or in the worst case, they are an obstruction. This weakening of human rights could potentially lead to a chaotic situation where human rights are ignored by everyone in order to secure

WE ARE THE 99%



AND WE ARE HUNGRY

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE SOCIALISTS
AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT BECAUSE
I WAS NOT A SOCIALIST

THEN THEY CAME FOR THE TRADE UNIONISTS
AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT BECAUSE
I WAS NOT A TRADE UNIONIST

THEN THEY CAME FOR THE JEWS
AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT BECAUSE
I WAS NOT A JEW

THEN THEY CAME FOR ME AND THERE
WAS NO ONE LEFT TO SPEAK FOR ME

PASTOR MARTIN NIEMÖLLER

THE THINGS WE SAY.COM

themselves. Protesters against these phenomena are using Martin Niemollers' poem to describe the situation except if it starts stating "First they came for the Muslims and we said 'not today'".

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

USA

Trump is one of the first populist leaders to be elected as a leader, which prompted reactions from other populist parties around the world. Amnesty International has compiled a list of the ways he has threatened human rights which is an indication of the danger populist leaders may pose.



Ethical Journalism Network

The Ethical Journalism Network is listed as a non-profit company and charity with the goal to promote ethical journalism which prioritizes publishing the truth rather than gaining attention through unethical means. They achieve this by researching subjects such as hate speech, ethics in journalism and corruption, taking part in various ethic-related conferences and providing related education

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

Much like Amnesty International the HRW, founded in 1978, investigates and reports on human rights abuses partnering with local groups and other organizations such as the UN, the African and European Unions and others.



Politifact

Politifact is a website dedicated to fact-checking news stories and rating them



on a scale depending on how false or true they are and explaining why they are false or only half true. However, although it is very accurate and effective at discovering myths, it is only limited to the USA.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
1892	First populist party was created called the people's party in the USA
10 December 1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
4 November 1950	European Convention of Human Rights
4 January 1969	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
23 March 1976	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights enters into force
14-25 June 1993	World Conference on Human Rights
2011-present	Arab spring, disturbances in Middle East causing refugee crisis giving rise to populism

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

Drafted at the 10th of December 1948 it states the basic rights every human being is entitled to. Importantly listed are the right to seek asylum, freedom of religion and right to equal pay.

- World Conference on Human Rights

Took place in Vienna and ended with the drafting of the Vienna Declaration and programme of action, strengthening human rights and affirming the commitment of states to uphold human rights.

- Joint declaration on freedom of expression and “fake news” disinformation and propaganda

This declaration made by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression on the 3rd of March 2017 sets guidelines as to how the issue of fake news must be dealt with without threatening freedom of speech. It sets forth obligations for states, intermediaries, media outlets and journalists to that extent.

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights enters into force

According to article 20b of this covenant, any dissemination of national, religious and racial hatred inciting discrimination, violence or hostility should be prohibited by law.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

As this is an issue that has occurred very recently there have not really been many attempts to solve the issues at hand. Organizations such as HRW and Amnesty International have expressed the need for action and have researched and published reports on these issues and the Ethical Journalism Network has done likewise for the media crisis issue. Additionally, Politifact constantly works on exposing fake news and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression has set forth guidelines to combating this issue. However, a global response has yet to arise since especially in this case there are conflicting interests due to the fact it directly concerns countries' political approaches. As such other than general resolutions against discrimination, promotion of human rights etc. no action specifically against this issue has been taken.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Regarding possible solutions this is a particularly elusive topic to deal with as when combating populism and fake news the issue of freedom of speech arises. It would be impossible to either ban populist parties or completely shut down websites for any instance of fake news since that would violate freedom of speech, as clearly set forth by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression. One of the ways to address the issue of fake news would be to cooperate with journalists and media outlets in order to create a framework in the form of a website for exposing fake news on a global scale and making easy to access, for example including a browser add-on. Furthermore, social media should be prompted to make use of this website in their algorithm for suggestions, so that fake news is filtered out of these suggestions or so that users are given explicit warnings that the news are fake. Additionally, users should be prompted to check the accuracy of the news they share

before sharing it. This could be implemented in the form of the social media sites warning a user about an article that contains fake news. Moreover, incentives should be given to the traditional media outlets to promote qualitative journalism based on facts, such as grants provided for research purposes, and hate-speech should be filtered out to the extent allowed by Article 20b of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Finally, steps must be taken in order to combat racism and xenophobia as a whole through education and seminars.

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