Forum: General Assembly

Issue: The question of regulating the distribution of fake news through media outlets

Student Officer: Abishai Murerwa

Position: Chair

Overview of the issue

In the past, concerns regarding news focussed on traditional media (typically newspapers and broadcasters) and the role they played in curating and controlling public information and sentiment. In recent months, the focus has shifted to the distribution of news on the internet and social media and the so-called 'fake news' problem.
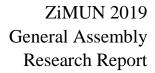
What is fake news? At its most basic, fake news is the distribution online of false information disguised as legitimate news stories. Motivations behind the publication of fake news may be financial (to attract internet traffic and/or advertising income); personal (to harm an individual/business reputation); or political (to influence the public's viewpoint/ideology). There may be other reasons.

The label "fake news" is a recent addition to the news media vocabulary. According to Google Trends it led a relatively obscure life for many years, until the US presidential elections in November 2016 when its frequency as a search term suddenly increased very sharply. Related terms such as "post-fact" and "alternative facts" also peaked in Google Trends around that time. They all refer to perceived and deliberate distortions of news with the intention to affect the political landscape and to exacerbate divisions in society. People are worried about fake news because it creates confusion. Suspicions about attempts by Russian agents to influence elections and undermine social and political coherence in several countries have contributed to these worries.

In fact, fake news is not a new phenomenon at all; it is as old as the newspaper industry. The first occurrence of fake news was reported in the 16th century through oral tradition. It is only recently however that it has surged back onto our radar screens, in the wake of the digital transformation of news from offline to online distribution and the rise of social media as a news distribution channel.

The media industry has been continuously exposed to technology-induced turbulence. Printed news used to be expensive to produce and distribute. News travelled very slowly before the invention of the telegraph, paper and printing were expensive and paper distribution costly. The printed news industry started to expand fast at the end of the 19th century as a

result of improvements in communication and printing technology and the introduction of subsidized postal rates.

There are many definitions of fake news. The UK Cambridge Dictionary defines fake news as "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke". The addition of "jokes" to this definition seems less appropriate. A small but active satirical press has always spread false stories as "jokes" but they can easily be traced back to well-identified publishers who do not hide their intentions and have customers who enjoy reading these stories.

Key Words

Propaganda- information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view

Oral Tradition- narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the history of a nation. Also a community's cultural and historical traditions passed down by word of mouth or example from one generation to another without written instruction.

Digital Transformation- Digital transformation is a major challenge and opportunity. When planning for digital

transformation, organizations must factor the cultural changes they'll confront as workers and organizational leaders adjust to adopting and relying on unfamiliar technologies.

Digital transformation is a term most often associated in the business world where companies are striving to keep up with changing business environments brought about by customer demand and technology.

Internet Traffic- Internet traffic can be very important to a website owner, who is looking to get more visitors to their site

Hence, it is the process of monitoring all incoming and outgoing data from the Internet to a device, network and environment for the purpose of administration and/or detecting any abnormalities or threats.

Countries and organizations involved:
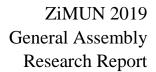
The United States of America

In the US the annual Gallup poll shows a secular decline in trust in news media over a longer period of two decades, with a deep dip in 2016. Clearly, this decline started before the birth of social media but coincides more or less with the rise of digital news media in the early 2000s. This is mainly due to the fake news being distributed in social media outlets and requests more reliable sources to provide the news

Fletcher et al.org

Fletcher et al.org further improve on this methodology by combining ***ComScore*** with ***CrowdTangle*** data. The latter provide engagement measurement inside Facebook accounts. The authors compare engagement data between 300 real and false news websites that publish verifiably false news in France and Italy. They find that none of the false news sites has a monthly reach above 3.5% while the most popular real news sites can reach 20-50% of online readers.

France

However, in **France** interactions inside Facebook for three false news sites matched or exceeded those produced by popular

news brands. These cases include a health news site, a satire site and an extreme right political site. The authors confirm that these few cases are the exception rather than the rule. Other false news outlets in their sample generated far less interactions than established news brands. In line with other studies, this study also finds considerable overlap between reading real and false news sites. For example, 45% of readers of the false health news site also used Le Figaro and 34% used Le Monde.

Italy

In **Italy** none of the false news sites comes anywhere near the consumer reach or Facebook interactions of established news outlets. The selection of websites may have affected the results. It may be more appropriate to compare interactions on a health site with the many magazines that dispense health advice rather than with mainstream newspapers.

United Kingdom

A UK parliamentary committee (the Culture, Media and Sport Committee) has commenced an enquiry into tackling the problem of fake news. In particular, the committee is interested in:

- What is 'fake news'; and when does legitimate commentary become fake news?

- The impact that fake news has had on public understanding of the world and also on the public response to traditional journalism.

- If there is a difference in the way people of different ages, social backgrounds and genders use and respond to fake news.

- Whether changes in the selling and placing of advertising have encouraged the growth of fake news, for example by making it profitable to use fake news to attract more hits to websites and therefore more income from advertisers.

- What responsibilities search engines and social media platforms should have in tackling the issue.
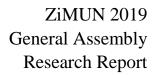
It remains to be seen what steps the UK parliamentary committee will propose to tackle the fake news problem; and whether any bespoke laws or regulations will be enacted or authorities set up to deal with the issue.

Related UN resolutions and Previous Approaches to Solving the Issue

Freedom of Expression Monitors Issue Joint Declaration on 'Fake News', Disinformation and Propaganda by the United Nations Human Rights Commission

The action was taken by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, along with his counterparts from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

Mr. Kaye of the USA says: "Fake news" has emerged as a global topic of concern and there is a risk that efforts to counter it could lead to censorship, the suppression of critical thinking and other approaches contrary to human rights law. In this Joint Declaration, we identify general principles that should apply to any efforts to deal with these issues."

The Declaration identifies the applicable human rights standards, encourages the promotion of diversity and plurality in the media, and emphasizes the particular roles played by digital intermediaries as well as journalists and media outlets.
ENDS

Committee on Information Concludes Fortieth Session with Approving 2 Draft Resolutions for General Assembly's Consideration

The Committee on Information approved two draft resolutions, the second of which emphasized the need to promote multilingualism, bridge the digital divide and maintain the use of traditional media.

'Fake news' challenges audiences to tell fact from fiction

The emergence of so-called "fake news" has created "competing versions of information and the truth," a situation which is challenging for audiences across the world; that's according to a senior journalist who is joining a panel of experts at the United Nations on Thursday the 1st of May 2018 to discuss press freedom

https://news.un.org/en/audio/2018/05/1008682

UN must lead battle against 'pandemic' of fake news & disinformation – Russian FM spokeswoman

https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.rt.com/news/386147-united-nations-fake-news-zakharova/amp/

Appendix