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BRUSSELS, 17 - 18 November 2016

Session Ib: Fostering democracy: media literacy, media ethics and an informed, multi-dimensional debate

This session will look at the expression of political views and access to political information in the digital environment from the perspective of fostering democracy. Two interlinked issues will be discussed in this context: the meaning of ethics in political information online and the responsibilities of media actors (both: the traditional media actors, such as journalists, and the new type of actors: individual citizens who become social media influencers, such as YouTubers, bloggers, etc.) in promoting a fair and pluralist political debate; and the role of media literacy in fostering critical thinking and approaches to information in citizens confronted by the polarised, heated and potentially overwhelming online political discourse and disinformation. A related practical outcome will be thoughts on how to translate the lively, thoughtful and passionate participation in social media, especially among young people, into long-term political engagement.

Respondents to the public consultation in advance of the colloquium highlighted that developments in the media environment had affected the democratic debate. While some highlighted the new opportunities for nimble journalists and 'citizen' journalists to engage in civil society more easily and thereby broaden democratic participation, many voiced caution. One prominent risk noted was the 'paradox of pluralism', namely the distortion of the debate caused by algorithms used in social media platforms which tailor the information reaching users to their individual profiles, limiting their access to a variety of views, resulting in users knowingly ('echo chambers') or inadvertently ('filter bubbles') being presented predominantly with views they agree with. Also of concern was the amount of content now generated beyond the reach of more traditional professional codes. Furthermore, several respondents mentioned that social media does not provide for quality debate because of the extent of misinformation that is circulated and the tendency to have a large quantity of superficial content rather than quality, informed discourse. In fact, five out of six respondents considered the role of platforms and social media a problem in relation to pluralism of the journalistic press- especially as regards the quality of the democratic debate and the level of engagement. This is why media literacy was seen as an important way to respond to these challenges, and respondents put forward numerous examples of options to promote media literacy in children and young people. Respondents also pointed to media ethics, self-regulation and professional standards to help safeguard the democratic debate.

The disconnect between the ethics of traditional journalism and the open public information space and its consequences will be addressed: social division, the poisoning and polarisation of debate, a 'post truth' political discourse and a disaffected electorate. We will explore how the acknowledgement of shared values and standards of ethical practice among participants in the public information space and greater critical media literacy can foster

democracy, challenge populism and promote lasting productive political engagement. We hope to elicit practical suggestions which can be taken forward in our work. This panel aims to achieve broad consensus on how media literacy and media ethics can be supported to foster an informed democratic debate and sustained engagement in politics, and we invite panellists to propose options to take these solutions forward, such as a best practices, shared ethical norms or a toolkit for the converged media environment.

Indicative questions to steer the discussions:

1 – How can the traditional and the new media provide a response to help citizens approach political information critically and uphold true pluralism? How can polarised debates be bridged?

2 – What new ethics do we need for our modern, connected world? Is there a role for government in this, or is this a matter for self-regulation? What would be concrete ways for free and pluralistic media to enhance good governance and transparency and thus foster citizens' democratic engagement (e.g. self-organisation for political purposes, participation in unions, NGOs, political parties, participation in elections)?