

Warsaw Dialogue for Democracy
Warsaw, Poland | 22-23 November 2018
Panel I: Social media – potential or threat?

Globalisation, the internet revolution and the ensuing digital era brought about a significant change in media consumption habits. Living in the “information age”, aided with the new technology tools, is enabling the spread of information in an unprecedented way. The reality of “many-to-many communications” has the Internet and social media platforms at the very core.

The explosion of social media has been seen as having a great potential for democratizing and increasing access to information. Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook founder, once famously concluded that “connectivity is a human right”. Today social media is omnipresent to the extent that it has become part of a human DNA, it has successfully integrated into the lives of the individuals as well as societies at large. Consequently, serving as the gateway to the internet, the social media platforms have effectively become the largest source of information.

However, every coin has two sides, and social media is a perfect manifestation of the double-edge sword. While it brings untapped opportunities, it equally carries serious risks and challenges. Indeed, as much as an improved access to information creates opportunities, it also opens the door to various form of manipulation with diverse detrimental effects, including undermining trust in media and even democracy. Why? Not least because, as evidenced by various studies, mis- and dis-information is seen as more interesting than the truth and thus spreads quicker. It is mainly because through echo chambers, filter bubbles, algorithms and other dirty techniques, social media platforms contribute to manipulation and distortion of the reality, which covertly but effectively influence public opinion across the world. The scandal around the Cambridge Analytica – a data firm employed by President Donald Trump's campaign in the lead up to the 2016 election, which abused the data of the millions of Facebook users – demonstrates the gravity of risks and threats that social media can bring to a well-established society.

In the aftermath of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data crisis, at the European Parliament hearing Mark Zuckerberg, admitted that “We didn’t take a broad enough view of our responsibility and that was a mistake. I’m sorry”. Indeed, connectivity is not only the right but first of all great responsibility. Responsibility that needs to be carefully exercised and applied while respecting the freedom of opinion and speech, privacy, data protection and, at the same time, preventing any misuse of connectivity.

Following this dark moment, the initial belief in the positive potential of social media was dealt a severe blow. Yet, it continues to be seen by many as a positive and still very potent force for good. “I’m committed to getting this right” said Mark Zuckerberg. Will the scandal serve as a catalyst to positive changes? What are the next necessary steps needed to avoid further misuse of data? What is the role of the state, corporate sector, such as tech giants, media, civil society?

Speakers

Marta Ardashelia, Editor in Chief, Sova News, Georgia

Tatjana Udovičić, Online Portal Žurnal, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Assaad Thebian, Gherbal Initiative, Lebanon

Nika Aleksejeva, Lead Digital Forensic Researcher Baltics, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council

Moderated by **Andy Pryce**, Head of Counter Disinformation and Media Development Programme, HMG Russia Unit, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Directorate, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK