

Reflection by Marcia Luyten

In this Post-truth era, media have to cope with 5 new challenges:

I MOUNTING PRESSURE ON ADVERSARIAL REPORTING

Independent Media have always used this specific method to try to reach an agreement on the facts. Adversarial reporting (hoor en wederhoor) was the media's clearing mechanism in discerning the facts, in approaching the truth. It is a method of evenhanded reporting, as both, or all sides of an issue are exposed. These days it is getting harder to reach a consensus on the facts. There two reasons for that:

1. We increasingly live in our own filter bubble (see III)
2. No longer does everyone adhere to the same rules of the game. This is a part of the diminishing respect for the founding pillars of our liberal democracy. Independent judiciary, science and independent press are under mounting pressure. American president Donald Trump is leading the way. He tries to kill adversarial journalism in the sense that he discredits and delegitimises any news not favourable to him. Whatever is negative for the president, is declared 'fake news'. He undermines the facts that resulted from the clearing mechanism that good, independent reporting should be. In doing so, he also undermines adversarial reporting in it's second meaning: the journalist's aim to control the powers that be. Rocking this framework, delegitimizing the current liberal democratic order, puts the open society at risk.

*Question I: Is there still a way to arrive at an agreement on facts between **hostile** groups, groups that do not play by the same rules?*

II FAKE NEWS

Fake news is produced easily, at very little costs, for commercial or political gain. It was fake news, largely spread by social media such as Facebook, that brought us Donald Trump and Brexit. A striking example is Michael Gove, then secretary of State for Justice, in his Brexit-campaign. He claimed that weekly over 350 million Pound was 'sent to the EU'. Anchor Faisal Islam challenged him on these figures, replied that they were incorrect. Then Gove insisted, he claimed they came from the Office for National Statistics. This Office had never produce these data.

Question II Can our state can act in order to prevent fake news disrupt our democracies? Can fake news, spread with proven ill intent, become legally punishable?

This suggestion has nothing to do with censorship. This is looking for new rules in a new game, on a playfield on which we are already behind. This is about 21st century soft warfare, in which we need tools to defend ourselves. Maybe we need ict-experts, excellent prosecutors and good lawyers as much as rifles and fighter jets.

III FRAGMENTATION OF OUR WORLD VIEW

The Fragmentation of how the members of our national community regard their street, their village, their country, the world. We increasingly lack a common point of reference on how we perceive the world around us. We all live in our filter bubble, yes, also we, self-proclaimed open-minded people. Hereby the open society is closing from *within* - people locking

themselves in their own value system. We sacrifice the open debate, the confrontation with people holding other values, beliefs, perspectives. As a national community, there is ever fewer common ground in the information on which we base our world view.

Most media broadcast to and write for the likeminded. Take the political talkshow of which I'm an anchor, it appears hard to reach groups with significant different ideas and values. Like other media, we preach to the converted. Whenever we interview politicians that represent groups that do not consider themselves to be our average audience, that is easily regarded as a battle in which we try to denigrate them. Even if we deliberately try not to do this in an open manner: non-judgmental and inquisitive, sincerely curious to learn about their world view, the reactions are negative from two sides. Our regular audience wonders why we aren't more critical. The viewers on the right say: oh they are trying to nail him or her, but look how they fail.

Question III: There is a huge need for independent benchmarks that are trusted unconditionally. How do we produce them?

IV ONLINE AGRESSION

Or as Michael Ignatieff calls it: 'Virtual disinhibition'. On social media, for example Twitter, if a populist politician is criticized, immediately an aggressive online mob is mobilized - a mob composed of real persons and trolls. This aggression instills fear into other people - and the mob knows this. The consequence: progressive voices rather evade this negative treatment and withdraw from the public debate.

This aggression is actually not limited to online exchanges. The Frisian activists stopping anti-Blackface demonstrators on November 18 by blocking the motorway, threatened with violence. A rumour of heavy fireworks being brought onto the venue of the Sinterklaasintocht, made the authorities decide not to have any demonstrations at all. Fundamental rights were thus violated.

Question IV: How do we safeguard Moral Clarity in these matters?

V NEWS AS A COMMERCIAL PRODUCT

Michael Ignatieff stated: Only strong states can secure the Open Society. And strong states require strong institutions. One of those institutions is the independent press. News as a commercial product may undermine democracy. A business model driven by clicks has brought Trump to power and Brexit to Europe.

Media has also become a commercial and a digital business model. This digitalization often feeds on our most primitive animal instincts: emotion sells, what is easy sells better than what is complicated. Fundamentally man remains a lazy creature that prefers sugar and fat over vegetables and nuts. Our commercialized information environment feeds us lots of sugar and fat: hypes, scandals and emotions. It is about clicks and ratings. In the media, one of the pillars of the open society, the production of shareholder value has become a major incentive - not the production of independent news. Investigative journalism is time-consuming, it is difficult, it calls for stamina, it is often underpaid and of essential importance for democracy. If we leave the production of news to the market, we will not see sufficient investigative journalism.

Question V: Is the production of facts a public good?

If so, is state interference necessary? In The Netherlands we pay for public tv-channels. Should there also be funding for independent written journalism. Funding for investigative journalism? And how do you safeguard this is perceived as independent facts?

More on civic anger and the populist right: my coreferaat at Van der Leeuw-lezing 2017

Raison d'être van de moderne burger: <https://marcialuyten.nl/2017/11/17/raison-detre-van-de-moderne-burger/>