



April 2019

Media Programme South East Europe

Regulation of Social Media – Downside and Challenge

At the international public discussion “Social Media: Blessing or Curse for Democracy?” on 11 April 2019, in Sofia, journalists and scientists from South East Europe and Germany discussed the influence of social media.

Ariane Dreisbach

“Social Media: Blessing or Curse for Democracy?” was the topic of the international conference that was organised by the South East Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Sofia Security Forum in the Bulgarian capital. Media experts from South East Europe and Germany addressed the following questions: What are the risks of social media? What responsibilities do social platforms like Facebook have? How can we improve the media literacy of the citizens?

The international conference started with a closed round table about the situation of social media in South East Europe and Germany. The exchange between the media experts and the comparisons among the different countries served as introduction for the public discussion in the afternoon. **Hendrik Sittig**, Head of the Media Programme South East Europe, emphasised the importance of the topic in his welcoming speech: „As a journalist, it makes me sad and sometimes angry that many people believe that social media posts equate to journalism. Many people read Facebook and Twitter like newspapers and watch YouTube like they watch TV. For me as a journalist – this is a major issue.” **Yordan Bozhilov**, President of the Sofia Security Forum, moderated the discussion in the morning.

According to Matej Lončarić, Head of YouTube channel and network Joomboos and Head of Video at 24sata daily, the responsibility lies with the so-called influencers, people with large number of followers and high influence on their audience. Unfortunately, influencers in Croatia are often approached by the state and told not to get involved with politics – in return they get money or more followers. **Claudia Nothelle**, Professor for Journalism at the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences, talked about the „News-WG“, a new format of the Bavarian Public Broadcaster on Instagram. It aims to spread political

news on the platform that is mostly known as a feel-good network. **Alina Radu**, Director of the Moldovan newspaper „Ziarul de Gardă daily“, and **Slobodan Georgiev**, Journalist at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), took also part in the discussion.

Loss of confidence in traditional media

Orlin Spassov, Associate Professor in Media and Communication Studies at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and Executive Director of the Foundation “Media Democracy” pointed out the importance of social media in Bulgaria. He said that the citizens have more confidence in them than in traditional media. **Hilma Unkić**, Social Media Manager at „Mediacentar Sarajevo” in Bosnia-Herzegovina reported about the positive effects of social media for minorities. For them it is the only public space where they can talk about marginalized topics – a positive kind of „bubble”. “Instagram is moving more and more away from its superficial image,” said **Vladimir Vulić**, Co-founder of Digitalizuj.Me. In Montenegro, Instagram is used by the government to combat corruption. **Rufin Zamfir**, Programme Director at Global Focus Centre in Romania, described social media in his country as the only way to get information. As a result, private channels of citizens get more important by the day. The new millionaires in Kosovo are the owners of online media,

said **Isuf Zejna**, Programme Manager at Democracy Plus(D+). The radicalization in social networks is a big issue which the government does not address and fight against; instead, it uses social media for election campaigns. **Gabriella Cseh**, Director for Public Policy for Central and Eastern Europe at Facebook, observed in the recent years the trend towards private discussions and closed groups on Facebook. In the following discussion, different questions were raised, e.g.: At which age should we start digital education for children? Is the government or the society responsible for handling hate speech in social media?

International Public Discussion about Social Media sparks huge Interest

In the afternoon, the event was opened for a larger audience and about 200 people joined the international public discussion. In his welcoming speech, Hendrik Sittig showed his concern about the latest developments in social media: "Other opinions are no longer considered and therefore no longer accepted. This is dangerous for a democracy and destroys our social basis. Democracy relies on pluralism – on a diversity of opinions that leads to a collective decision as part of a social process." **Yordan Bozhilov** finds it important to deal with this topic as „technology and social media develop faster than our knowledge about it and about how it affects the society“. At the beginning, the former Bulgarian President **Rosen Plevneliev** (2012-2017) held a keynote address. He talked about the influence of online media during his presidential term. His impression was that good news rarely get much attention while bad news spread like wildfire. Participants of the following discussion were Gabriella Cseh (Facebook), Slobodan Georgiev (BIRN), Matej Lončarić (Joomboos/24sata) and **Ognian Zlatev**, Head of Representation of the European Commission in Bulgaria. Claudia Nothelle moderated the panel. She raised the

question if today's situation was not much more democratic than in the past? In her point of view, the journalists don't decide anymore who gets which information but anyone can get any information. So the question arises, if influencers are not the new generation of journalists.

Clear Rules needed for Influencers

For Lončarić, this view is dangerous. He demands clear rules for influencers: "Other than traditional media, what they stand for changes monthly." Cseh does not see a contradiction between media and social media platforms – on the contrary: "We need to cooperate." Another important topic of the discussion was hate speech on the internet. All panellists agreed that further action is required in this regard. Nothelle sees the biggest problem in the cultural and historical differences between the social media users. For some, a picture has iconic value while for others it is just offensive. Because of this "delicate balance", how Cseh called it, Facebook is about to set up an international, independent board that would decide such cases. Zlatev expressed the opinion that society needs to create ethical standards that parents and teachers should then put into practice: „We need to be role models."

Grimme Award Winner Hans Block Guest in Sofia

It is hard to find a solution. **Hans Block**, Director of the award-winning documentary "The Cleaners" that was screened after the discussion is aware of that, too. The film shows the hard everyday life of so-called content moderators in the Philippine capital Manila. They delete offensive and improper content on social networks, get paid poorly and do not have the necessary psychological support in spite of their heavy burden. "We do need content moderators", Block said in the discussion after the film screening, „but their working conditions need to be improved."

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