

IMAP and UPF Italy Highlight the Importance of Media Literacy with webinar

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This is a highly relevant and topical issue that involves us all, highlighting the need to acquire the skills necessary to use new media correctly as well as the importance of identifying the origin and purpose of online content so as not to be vulnerable to misinformation." With these words, Mr. Vittorio Patanella, coordinator of the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP-Italy), opened the webinar "Media Literacy: an urgent challenge to counter disinformation," held on Tuesday, July 2nd, 2024.

Organised by Universal Peace Federation (UPF-Italy) and IMAP-Italy, for the "Peace Forum" format, as part of the series of meetings "Being Builders of Peace," the webinar featured Dr. Maria Pia Rossignaud, director of Media Duemila and vice president of the TuttiMedia Observatory, as an interviewer, and Professor Antonio Stango, political scientist and president of FIDU, Italian Federation of Human Rights.

"How can the protection and information of human rights which should safeguard and make us aware that we do have rights, be intertwined within a context where machines are reaching the pinnacle of innovation?" With this question from Dr. Rossignaud, the webinar got into full swing.

Taking the floor, Professor Stango explained that "in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which took place between 1973 and 1975, the right to know one's rights and to take action to defend them was given particular attention. Even then, the role of information was quite clear." He went on to point out that with the advent of social media, many people do not care about the validity of sources, whereas traditional, more or less objective news outlets provided some check against fake news. He cautioned that if one is unable to discern whether a piece of information is based on a reliable source or not, one can fall into the trap of misinformation.

"We as FIDU have discussed misinformation and disinformation in three projects carried out in recent years, including with a grant from the European Commission. When fake news is spread without malicious intent, it is misinformation, and disinformation when it is spread with the specific intention of inducing certain behaviors in a group of people, even as large as an entire national community. Both can have very serious effects." This false data spreads around the world, he pointed out, causing behavior that can be dangerous and influences people to make decisions to the detriment of their own health and that of others, as in the case of a pandemic. "It can even go so far as to determine the outcome of political elections. For example, one can come up with very amplified, exaggerated, falsified data on migration." British voters also voted for Brexit because they were made to believe that with the UK's exit from the European Union, uncontrolled immigration from the rest of Europe would stop. "Of course that was not the case, but that slight margin in favour of the Yes vote which determined the result of the referendum was based on misinformation," the speaker explained.

Dr. Rossignaud said, "We are talking about the cognitive capital of each of us leaving the mind and entering the machine. Will we be less and less subject to making autonomous decisions?" she asks. "There is a tendency to use artificial intelligence to write texts, set up projects and more, which is perfectly fine as long as we are able to control it. However, we know that we risk getting caught in that

mechanism." We need to learn how to use artificial intelligence. Social media and the Internet should not be taken for granted. It is not a trivial thing, especially for highly vulnerable groups in society like children, people with limited general education or elderly people, who lack skills to move fluently in the digital world. She went on to explain that FIDU and its international partners have developed the Media Literacy for Democracy project, publishing booklets which focus on educating people how to look out for certain signals and key phrases and pay attention to sources, so as to make informed decisions and not be influenced by the often-uncontrolled news streams that are spread especially by authoritarian regimes to bring about a change in international relations to their advantage.

According to Professor Stango, international policy campaigns set on concepts such as 'the collective West' or 'the Global South' are aimed at implying that there would be a perfidious colonising West that would subjugate the peoples of the Global South - neglecting to say that such a 'West' is, if anything, the set of democratic states, which also includes Japan or South Korea, while the purported defenders of the 'Global South' are dictatorial or totalitarian regimes (based, moreover, in the Northern Hemisphere) such as those of Russia, China and Iran.



Dr. Rossignaud goes on to ask, "In your opinion, can something also be done with the Ministry of Education? I believe that it is crucial for schools to intervene in this context, because in the world of generative artificial intelligence, the ability to ask questions becomes fundamental in order to have answers that are more consonant and more useful to life. I certainly think so, in cooperation with the European Union," the professor said, noting that much disinformation has been systematically made precisely against the European Union, presented by many as our enemy, who would like to impose absurd things on us. For the speaker, the European Union does a lot on the issue of disinformation, as do member countries individually. There is the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), a project that helps the community fight disinformation, and DisinfoLab, an independent, non-profit organisation linked with EU institutions. "Even in Italy, we have institutes that we collaborate with that work to analyse disinformation and warn the public about this problem."

She went on to talk about the very serious things that artificial intelligence is able to do, such as replacing on video the face of a person who is committing robbery or even murder. The same thing happens with wars and conflicts where very often the aggressors release fake footage and present falsified data. "We need institutions, in our country and at the European level, to have mechanisms to study and curb this phenomenon."

Dr. Rossignaud also noted how dictators can abuse cyberspace which can hide so many dangers and where a weapon may be concealed. "Why would they tell us if it cannot be seen? How can peace be built in this increasingly difficult context of invisibility?" she asks.

Professor Stango, after reiterating that attention to all these issues must be constant, cited the Communications Guarantee Authority (AGCOM), "which has done important self-regulatory work to monitor and counter online disinformation." He went on to relate a personal experience. "I had the cell phone on a table, a couple of metres away from me while I was talking to a friend about a certain issue. At some point the cell phone started to audibly suggest readings to me regarding that issue. I have no idea how this was triggered, but I must say, it was quite disturbing. If a device were to suggest misleading readings to people who don't have the basic training on that topic, they would not notice the mistake. This can lead to a particularly serious incident. That is another element which needs to be considered."

Speaking about the relationship between control mechanisms and freedom of speech, Professor Stango noted that "we are all free to say, for example, that the earth is flat and no one wants to stop us from doing so. If, however, it becomes a disinformation campaign with the goal of misleading large categories or masses of people, I would say it needs to be countered. It can be done with information campaigns based on scientific facts and data."

When asked if there were any differences between Julian Assange's and Alexei Navalny's affairs, he said that the Australian journalist (Assange) had indeed committed crimes, endangered the lives of several people and basically carried out espionage activities forbidden in any country. "If he had carried them out in China, Russia or Iran, he would have come to a very bad end. Instead, he was able to activate all the legal mechanisms to fight extradition and finally agreeing to a limited sentence that, considered de facto already served, allowed him to be free."



To Dr. Rossignaud's remark that "Europe is always the best continent to live in, the home of rights," Professor Stango commented that "for now that is the case, but I hope that the continued attacks on Europe and ultimately on democracy will not cause us to take steps backwards." Dr. Rossignaud's reply was, "We journalists, therefore, have to be very careful and try to continue to be the bulwark and defense of democracy."

The event concluded with a session of questions from the audience. One question dealt with the invasion war waged by the Putin regime against Ukraine. The reply was that, in aggressively invading Ukraine, Russia had violated the UN Charter and had also broken international law. Furthermore, the invasion was based on unfounded propaganda campaigns one of which stated that NATO would surround Russia.....It is geographically impossible for Russia to be surrounded!

Final questions on the possibility of nuclear war were ruled out. On the use of the term 'democracy' it was explained that it is very often misused by authoritarian regimes, such as the 'People's Democratic Republic' of North Korea, the least democratic country in existence. In the proper sense 'democracy' indicates a system whereby the Parliamentary Opposition of today can peacefully become the Government with a majority of tomorrow; a system where there is balance between the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Branches of Government; a system where all civil and political rights are generally guaranteed.