D6. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE HIGH LEVEL EXPERTS - CYPRUS
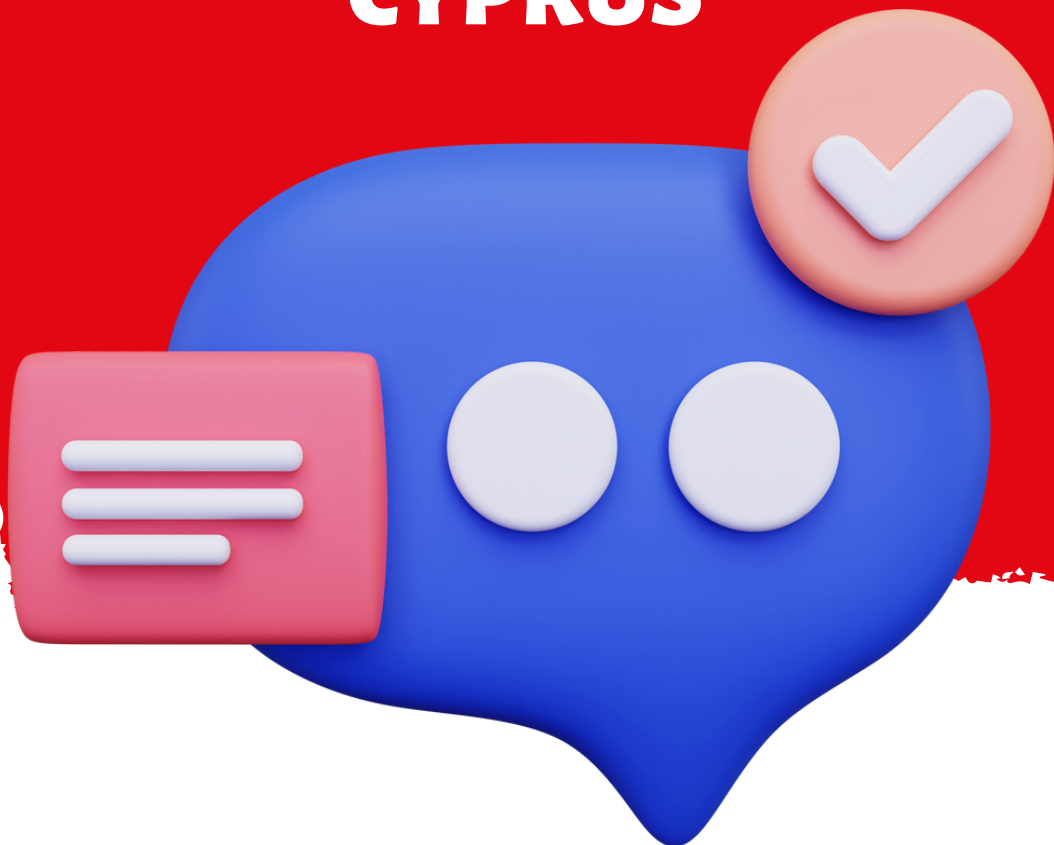
THIS DELIVERABLE HAS BEEN REALISED WITH THE CONTRIBUTION OF

Introduction

The National High Level Experts Meeting took place in the form of an open discussion which explored and shed light on key issues concerning the evolution of public debate and the media in Cyprus. The discussion centerer around four (4) key thematic areas namely: I. Journalism, Media Pluralism and Democracy, II. The Facts and Challenges of Media and Journalists in the Modern Era, III. The Presentation of Migrants in the Media and the Public Sphere and IV. The Phenomenon and Examples of Disinformation Campaigns in Cyprus. Four (4) panelists-speakers who are experts in the abovementioned themes led the discussion through the presentation of their findings and analysis. Participants had the opportunity to engage in a fruitful discussion with the panellists, exchanging perspectives and experiences from their own fields and unique areas of expertise. Through these discussions a set of recommendations was ultimately produced.

The overarching conclusion of the Meeting was that Cyprus is presently experiencing, maybe more profoundly than ever, the adverse effect(s) of disinformation and fake news on the democratic society and is in urgent need or reforming and reshaping this narrative. The following section presents in more detail the key concepts explored during the National High Level Experts Meeting and introduces the set of recommendations which were deducted from the discussion that followed.

Journalism, Media Pluralism and Democracy

The National High Level Experts Meeting discussion was initiated with a presentation by the Director of the Cypriot Media Institute. Mr. Karides presented the key results of the Survey (2022) conducted by the Union of Cyprus Journalists. The Survey concludes that a total of thirty-six percent (36%) of the respondents have no trust towards the media whereas an additional thirty-one percent (31%) of the respondents have no trust towards journalists. Although a significant percentage, about one third (1/3) of the respondents, have no trust towards the media and journalists, this result was of surprise to the Meeting participants who predicted even greater distrust. Nonetheless, the Survey (2023) which will soon be published foresees a further diminished trust in the media and media figures. The panellist then proceeded with presenting the Media Pluralism in the Digital Era Findings. The findings place Cyprus in high risk in terms of I. Media Pluralism, II. Media Transparency, III. Media Viability and IV. Media Independence. In fact, one of the most crucial and prolific challenges the Cypriot media have to face is the involvement of political figures-parties in media composition.

The Facts and Challenges of Media and Journalists in the Modern Era

The second panel endeavoured to define the enemies of journalism. The presentation was led by the Director of one of the leading newspapers in the country - Ms. Oikonomidou. The overall narrative supported by this presentation is that traditional media must not be friends with authority but controlling authority.

Her presentation centred around two controversial political scandals that instead of being brought to light by the local media were rather exposed by third external parties. These incidents left the media exposed and portrayed them as authorities who not only are incapable of exposing the truth - but have been actively involved in convening the truth. Hence it is only reasonable to question: Who is serving the truth? Journalism should not be limited to the mere reporting and republishing but must delve into the discovery of the truth. The rather passive stance of the media was perfectly captured during the 2012-2013 Cypriot financial crisis where the media once again observed the financial collapse instead of being active agents of the truth.

Ms. Oikonomidou presented the picture of the media and journalism following the financial collapse. Quality journalism suffered even more greatly with journalists' working hours and income severely being undermined. As a result, experienced journalists and advocates of the truth opted for different career paths. In the meantime, for those remaining in the field the goal has become securing as many clicks as possible whereas critical thinking and investigative journalism has become of secondary importance. Ms. Oikonomidou described the burden journalists often face when reporting on sensitive issues and the dilemma they encounter when coming across national errors whilst wishing to preserve national reputation and credibility.

This panel discussion came to an end with a set of recommendations that are briefly presented below:

- There should be a demand for a full media transparency. Media Board of Directors' ownership status and assets should be made public. Furthermore, Board of Directors' affiliations with political parties should also be made known to the public.
- A commitment and investment to investigative journalism should be made by Boards of Directors if there is any hope for spreading the truth. This comes with the realization that quick new are neither reliable not viable long-term. // Nonetheless, the consideration the audience shared was that existing media cannot recover its liability even if that change of character is pursued - which leads to the next point.
- There is an urgent need for new actors and new journalists in the field. This change should involve individuals who do not view journalism as a vehicle or a stepping stone for a different, more prolific and glamorous, pathway.

The Presentation of Migrants in the Media and the Public Sphere

The third panel focused on a 'hot topic' within the Cypriot context - asylum and migration. Dr Peristianis was the panellist and key speaker for this topic. Fake news is false information that is presented as true. A long-standing narrative withing the Cypriot context is that Turkey is presently the most prominent enemy. Within this context a conspiracy theory was developed and normalized over the past years - namely the Theory of the Third Attila. This theory centres around the mobilisation of migrants and asylum seekers by Turkey in order to alter the national demographic, cause political destabilisation and ultimately take over.

The prevalence of this conspiracy theory led to a series of attacks against people and properties in two (2) different locations in the country over the past month. During that time, a series of fake news was disseminated framing migrant in these regions as a threat to the public safety. This conspiracy theory was further reinforced by political figures who maintained that Turkey is the driving force for the migration and asylum influx in the country. Even though this news were confirmed to be fake they formed the basis of this narrative - which still prevails.

The Phenomenon and Examples of Disinformation Campaigns in Cyprus

The final panel was led by the political analyst Ms. Sophocleous. Her presentation followed up that of Dr Peristianis - which explored how low quality journalism has affected the overall management of migration in the country. The Cypriot legal framework on disinformation was explored - which for traditional media - involves punishment for up to two (2) years of imprisonment. There is presently a bill under debate on criminalizing the dissemination on fake news through the digital media. Nonetheless, there are significant considerations regarding a potential fake news bill - which involve freedom of speech considerations and applicability considerations.

Whilst the legal future of disinformation and fake news remains unknown participants came up with the following set of recommendations:

- There is an urgency to strengthen the resilience of citizens against disinformation phenomena by promoting education on critical thinking and training on media literacy.
- There is a need to develop fact checking tools that are readily available to the public. // Nonetheless, the consideration the audience shared was that even though such tools do exist it is unclear whether they will ever be utilised and assembled against government authorities. An additional consideration is that disinformation in the country is so well embedded that is linked to deep political issues. Even when the truth is being spread, it still fails to erase the country's political narrative.
- The involvement of digital and media companies should be encouraged. These stakeholders possess the understanding and expertise which can ultimately foster safeguarding against disinformation.
- There is a need for more powerful voices when it comes to the mobilisation of the Cyprus political issue, and the continuation of the spread of disinformation for people in North Cyprus can go a long way in rebirthing violence among communities.
- There is a need for more event(s) similar to this event where realities and challenges are being explored and discussed openly.

- In order to maintain responsible journalism a responsible democracy needs to be maintained which involves citizens responsibility. This recommendation was met with disapproval as it should not be up to the people to develop critical thinking. Participants referred to the less privileged individuals who do not possess this skillset. The ultimately the duty lies on journalists and media to protect people.

Questions Explored During the Meeting:

Participants had the opportunity to discuss with the panellists and exchange perspectives and considerations. Below are some of the key considerations that arose from the meeting and are worth exploring further:

1. What if fact checking for online media does become readily available to the public? Do actors responsible for disinformation face any consequences as a result of their practices? How will that be achieved in the absence of a legislative framework?

2. Is disinformation really the issue in the context of Cyprus? Oftentimes the public is being presented with the true narrative yet they choose to stick to false realities. Can disinformation be tackled or are we rather facing a more deeply rooted problem as a society?

3. There is talk about the responsibility of citizens to develop their critical thinking competencies in order to shield themselves from these waves of disinformation and fake news. Should this be the case? What about less intellectually privileged citizens who might not be able to gain that capacity? Shouldn't the media function as a protector of those people and as an advocate of the truth?

4. There has been a Bill proposed for the criminalisation of online fake news. This proposal came right from the President of the Cypriot House of Representatives after being herself a target of such practices. Does this proposal not entail any risks for the right of freedom of expression? Furthermore, why are political figures so prompt to act when their reputation is at stake and why is this not the case for instances of threats to public cohesion and public safety?

5. It was highlighted that there is a need for existing stakeholders to invest in investigative journalism instead of fostering a culture of fast news. Even so, can existing 'players' reverse their unreliability and ever regain people's trust? Is there rather a need for a different approach to information receiving?