BUNDESPRÄSIDIALAMT

Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the third Forum Bellevue "Fact or fake?
An important distinction for democracy"
at Schloss Bellevue
on 21 March 2018

I did not commission today's reports on Cambridge Analytica, but they do illustrate the relevance of the questions at hand and underscore the need for the debate we want to conduct today.

"It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything."

You probably think that this is the New York Times writing about Donald Trump. Possibly – but you would be wrong!

This is what Stephen Colbert, the American satirist, once said back in 2006 when George W. Bush was still President of the United States. Even then, many years before the current debate about "fake news" and "alternative facts", Colbert had the impression that the most important thing in the public debate was to present the perception that suits you right now as clearly and resolutely as possible – without any consideration for the facts.

In her famous essay "Truth and Politics" from over 50 years ago, Hannah Arendt left no doubt that we face a "political problem of the first order" when "factual reality itself" is at stake. "Freedom of opinion", she wrote at the time, "is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed".

But what are the consequences for liberal societies when public debates are no longer conducted on the basis of generally acknowledged facts, when the dividing line between facts and opinions becomes blurred and it is claimed that facts are also just a matter of perception?

We all know that facts alone do not constitute a basis for a political agenda. Factual truths are also not set in stone, but must be

verified by science and the media and revised where necessary. Incidentally, democracy is the only system of government that allows mistakes because the ability to correct them is an integral part of the political system. However, we must never cease trying to distinguish between facts and opinions. Nothing less than the future of our democracy depends on our ability to make this distinction.

For it is quite clear that a reasonable public discourse can only be successful when it is underpinned by solid, verifiable and generally accepted facts – a discourse that leads to informed decisions, which enables those exercising political responsibility to be held to account and which preserves or possibly strengthens trust in democratic institutions.

In a world that is becoming increasingly complex, what should guide our political actions if we can no longer place our trust in what is and how it is? How should we tackle the very real problems of our age, such as climate change, together if political forces simply refuse to acknowledge research results or just deny the existence of findings that contradict their own perception? And how should we peacefully balance different interests and negotiate compromises if our society splinters into irreconcilable groups that only accept their own "perceived truths"?

Organised public lying and manipulating facts to gain political advantage is, of course, not a new phenomenon, also in the history of democracies. What is new today is the epidemic dissemination of disinformation on the Internet, the tremendous power of digital media, and also the diversity of attacks on the public use of reason.

And a new departure is the fact that politicians are undermining the validity and cohesion of facts by passing off patent lies as "alternative facts" and interpreting news reported by serious media outlets as "fake news". In Europe we have witnessed isolated cases of state-run smear campaigns against journalists and infringements of the freedom of the press and academia. Here in Germany, too, institutions providing information and knowledge have come under fire – for instance when they are branded as "Lügenpresse" (lying press), mainstream media or "Staatsfunk" (state-controlled media).

Major platforms on the Internet with their hundreds of millions of users enable false information and conspiracy theories to be disseminated in no time at all and "shared" en masse. Events and scandals often arouse greater interest than serious news. Professional journalists have long since ceased to be the sole gate-keepers of public communication, and now they also have to compete against algorithms and social bots in the fight for selection and attention.

New media, which are often far from being "social" in their effect, have lowered the threshold for all forms of hate speech. With the

protection of anonymity, lack of restraint is growing and the dividing line between the utterable and the unspeakable is wearing increasingly thin.

Crucially, however, digital media are exacerbating the fragmentation of the public sphere, thereby making social dialogue more difficult. There is a danger that parallel worlds will emerge in which self-affirmation prevails through dialogue with like-minded people and everything that contradicts one's own perception is blotted out.

At the same time, trust in serious media outlets, research institutes and democratic institutions is on the wane in some parts of society, also among young people. The very sources who are able to deal with complexity and provide orientation in our increasingly complex world are those who are losing credibility. Yesterday I visited the Institute of Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Mainz. I had a discussion there with researchers and students and heard the latest figures, which show that in most recent times the downward trend has stopped and, even, that the confidence of average citizens in the traditional media has grown again – although only slightly. That would be good.

For today, more than ever before, we need media that provide verified information, that draw attention to grievances and injustices, expose lies and make political processes understandable. We need media that create a common sphere of communication for as many different people as possible – a public space in which controversial opinions can be discussed.

I believe that the democratic discourse in Germany is still functioning better than elsewhere. For that we have to thank, among others, the many dedicated journalists who work every day in the service of truth and quality in the press and on the Internet, as well as on the radio and television. And I would just like to say in passing that I personally hope that we are spared a debate about the abolition of public service broadcasting similar to that being conducted in other places. I firmly believe that we still need public service broadcasting. Its mandate is vital for democracy. However, this means that we have to keep on discussing within society how this remit can best be fulfilled under changing circumstances.

Ultimately, this democracy is made up of responsible citizens who want to be able to form their own opinions in a complex world. Education and media literacy are vital for this. However, not every citizen can be an investigative journalist. Rather, we all need guidance in navigating the daily flood of information. We need beacons of reliability. These beacons must be media which we trust, on whose reporting we can base our judgements.

What can politicians, the media and academia do to combat disinformation? How can they win back credibility and trust? How can we continue to make possible a sensible public discourse based on facts? We want to discuss these issues this morning at the third Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy. I am delighted to have as my guests today three journalists and an academic who deal with the question of "fact or fake" in very different ways.

Jeff Mason, my first guest, is very well-known in Germany and works directly in the White House as a correspondent for the news agency Reuters. He has the interesting task of reporting on the American President and his policies. Of course, we are also keen to hear what you have to report about the White House's new approach to the media. Hopefully you can explain to us something which we sometimes find difficult to understand.

In his daily work, he has witnessed in a quite unique way that even in established democracies we have to fight for the rights of journalists. As President of the White House Correspondents' Association, he reminded everyone last spring what the task of journalists is when he said, "It is our job to report on facts and to hold leaders accountable. That is who we are. We are not fake news. We are not failing news organisations. And we are not the enemy of the American people."

I am looking forward to hearing what he has to say today about the state of play in the United States with regard to facts. Welcome, Jeff Mason!

My second guest today also represents public service broadcasting, which is vilified by some as the epitome of "state-controlled" mainstream media. Julia Stein heads the Politics and Research Editorial Department at the Schleswig-Holstein Broadcasting House and, in her capacity as chairperson of Netzwerk Recherche, she campaigns to ensure that journalists check facts, evaluate data and uncover lies.

Roger Cohen from the New York Times once said, "Facts are journalism's foundation; the pursuit of them, without fear or favour, is its main objective". I am looking forward to hearing an investigative journalist – I am thinking here of the Panama Papers, Luxembourg Leaks and others – who personifies this opinion in a very special manner. Please welcome Julia Stein!

My third guest today represents the free press and the print media in our country. Ulf Poschardt is the editor-in-chief of Die Welt newspaper and he campaigned tirelessly for the release of Deniz Yücel. Along with many others, he is continuing to fight for the release of all journalists held in Turkish prisons. I believe that deserves our continued support.

Referring to the debate about fake news and filter bubbles, he called for a more relaxed attitude: "For centuries", he said, "people have been discussing rumours in town squares and in pubs. Now it is happening on Facebook and Twitter. No problem. We [journalists] counter all of this with research and substance."

I tend not to be alarmist and, as you know, I often recommend that we take a relaxed approach. However, today we want to discuss whether this is the right attitude given the changes in the media landscape and use of the media, as well as the consequences thereof.

The media researcher Stephan Ruß-Mohl wrote in his latest book that disinformation is the blight of the digital society. It is not only spreading like an epidemic but also changing our perception of what we believe to be true. Combating this blight is increasingly the central challenge for serious media outlets, indeed for democracy and for liberal societies.

I am pleased that we are talking today about whether and how journalists can live up to this lofty aspiration. A warm welcome to Ulf Poschardt!

That brings me to the academic on our panel. Michael Butter is professor of American studies at the University of Tübingen and for several years now he has been examining conspiracy theories – for example the "big exchange" theory circulating online during the refugee crisis. Its proponents claim that a global "financial oligarchy" is trying to erase Germany from the map with the help of the "migration weapon".

His new book, which has just been published, has the apt title "Nichts ist, wie es scheint" – nothing is as it seems. Michael Butter writes that the belief in conspiracy theories is a symptom of a deeper-lying crisis in democratic societies.

Later, he will explain to us himself what is fuelling this crisis. Please welcome Michael Butter!

The fight against disinformation is one of the great challenges of our time. Perhaps we can at least make a small contribution towards shedding some light on this problem this morning. At any rate, I am looking forward to our discussion here on the platform and subsequently with our audience. I would like to bid you all a very warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue!