

Intro [0:00] Welcome to Engage, a podcast from the CIPR. In this episode, our guests talk about the impact of misinformation on democracy, the role of technological change and social media in the spread of misinformation, and the challenges institutions face in establishing trust. And while you're listening to the episode, please note the opinions and views expressed by individual guests do not necessarily reflect or represent those of other guests, the host, or the CIPR.

Melissa Fleming Hello and welcome to this special episode of Engage. Combating disinformation along with misinformation and hate speech is one of the most urgent tasks of our age. My name is Melissa Fleming and my job at the United Nations is to lead our communications response and to inform people about the state of our world and At the UN, we are seeing terrible impacts of miss and disinformation and hate all over the world. It's driving the conflicts that are raging across the globe. It's also threatening democracies during a bumper election year. And it is undermining urgent action to address the climate emergency. We live at a time when science itself is under attack and facts as well. Democracy, human rights, public health and climate action, all of them are under attack. Growing numbers of people around the world are waking up to this and to the need for a rapid and robust response that also puts human rights, freedom of expression front and centre. So, not so easy.

So, I'm really pleased to have with me here to discuss these really urgent questions about our information ecosystems. With me to discuss these urgent questions are Dr. Leon Hawthorne, a content creator specialising in AI, and Tom Southern, director of special projects at the Center for Information Resilience. So, let's dive right in. And as I said, we are in a bumper election year. Billions of voters are going to the polls in very consequential elections around the world. There has been a lot of talk about the impact of mis- and disinformation on democracies and especially with the rise of generative AI tools. So, let's dig into that a bit more. So, I'm going to ask both of our guests to respond to this question. I'll ask Leon first to answer. From your perspective, how is mis- and disinformation impacting democracy and perhaps your unique perspective given your uh role in AI? [1]

Leon Hawthorne [3:20] Thank you, Melissa. Good to be joining you and Tom. Um, well, I think the impact of miss and disinformation on democracy is quite small, minuscule and vastly exaggerated. So I do come from a news background. I used to be a news anchor for CNN and for CNBC and also the BBC. So it does concern me if there is false information floating around. But I do think it's been vastly exaggerated. It does exist, but I think there are greater pressures on democracy. And these come more often from the truth of what uh the elites do that run our institutions than they do from the falsehoods of what some people report on social media. [2]

Melissa Fleming [3:55] I think you're really one of the few people in the communication space who would say that the problem is small, minuscule, and vastly exaggerated. Um on a day-to-day basis, we're hearing about the creation of of uh deep fakes that are imitating uh politicians who are running for elections. And we're also seeing the advent of so-called pink slime uh sites which are replicating news sites pretending to be news organisations that are filled with AI generated skewed content. You don't think this is a problem? [3]

Leon Hawthorne [4:20] I said there is a problem but it's vastly exaggerated. I mean take deep fakes for example. The last authoritative piece that's been done on deep fakes showed that 96% of all deep fakes on the internet were pornography, which is bad, but it doesn't affect democracy. Less than 4% related to news. Um, it was probably closer to 1 or 2%. So, it's there. It's a problem. It is increasing, but let's just put things into perspective. I think too often there is uh the existing news media goes out of its way to look for shock value and to b ally exaggerate

everything uh instead of putting it into perspective and giving a more accurate account of how bad the problem is. So there is a problem but it is not as bad as we are led to believe [4]

Melissa Fleming [4:58] and indeed uh we did have a couple of big elections um India for example where there was um reportedly a large scale uh attempts to spread deep fakes and and yet um in the end the election was judged to have been democratic. [5]

Leon Hawthorne [5:08] Sure. Yeah. I I'm aware that my view is not the common view. Um most people like to cry fire in a crowded theatre and I'm just saying hold on a second. It's just a little spark. There are problems. We need to address them and we will discuss them no doubt in the next uh few minutes or so. But um let's just put it into perspective. I mean the the the actions and words of governments and politicians do far more to undermine democracy than a few teenage scribblers or teenage hackers in in the basement or indeed the actions of governments in North Korea or Iran or Russia or China do to affect democracy. People talk about it a lot um but uh I think it's just as I say exaggerated. [5]

Melissa Fleming [5:43] Okay. Well, that's really and that's why I asked you three follow-up questions because it's a very unusual answer in these days and I really appreciate your perspective. And I wonder um what you think, Tom. [6]

Tom Southern [5:55] I think um I will probably go in the the other direction. Um so from my perspective, I I've done a lot of work um in what you know we could call counter disinformation. It's not a term that I like. I think Leon and I would probably agree um that the term is is used incorrectly a lot of the time. What I care most about actually is uh what might be called influence operations um and information operations. And so I mean we can use the term disinformation if we like. My my preference actually is probably malcontent because it is content. It's not information. Um, and it creates malcontent. So, it fits quite neatly in terms of its effect on democracies specifically. I think we've got pretty solid evidence um that it is corrosive in a pretty spectacular way. It's used in democracies to undermine democracies. And I'm not necessarily suggesting that it is just hostile states or anything like that. There are a number of reasons why somebody might perpetrate, you know, disinformation. And indeed, as Leon said, sometimes it's politicians. It's domestic politicians um pushing their own view of the world that is often not necessarily true. I think there is a problem more broadly that uh it it has instituted as a as a thing if it is even a thing. It's lots of different things obviously uh a belief and undermining in the the view that democracy is a good thing in many places and and obviously that is up for debate if people want to debate it. But fundamentally it's not pushed these messages these narratives this disinformation efforts aren't pushed for the benefit or the good of the recipients. They're pushed for the benefit and good of the perpetrator. So if that's a hostile state, it's to undermine an adversary and and sometimes it's an individual who just wants to make money because fundamentally social media is geared towards controversy. That's where the money comes from. Um and so those people can make a lot of money out of it. I think there's a couple of very very stark examples. I mean you talk about deep fakes and I would agree that deep fakes aren't a major problem at the moment except in the example that you raised. So deep fake pornography is used to target female politicians if they're seen to be uh you know stepping out of line and so that does have an impact on democracy. because it's trying to undermine um these these women's right to you know uh speak in any way whatsoever and there's a lot of examples of those and then the really obvious one is probably co I mean the co disinformation had a was massive widespread massive numbers of different actors and did have a real world effect in that many people didn't take up the covid vaccine um now some people couldn't and that's fine if they've got health reasons but others weren't taking it up because they read

something somewhere that was pushed by someone that was patently nonsense so you know on a on a personal level that be the you know the real catastrophic effect in terms of the more corrosive societal effect. It is seen in the uh you know the outcomes of of various elections over time where we've got actors standing as as politicians who are standing on disinformation platforms promoted by people both inside and indeed outside of their countries with sort of this this idea of disinformation. Um and they sometimes they get elected and again it's not because they're standing on an honest platform that they believe in. It's because they uh are pushing these disinformation narratives. [6]

Melissa Fleming [8:35] I'd like to then switch to the premise that disinformation actors have yes indeed always been there but now have a an accelerator um a distribution tool free distribution tool at their fingertips uh that they didn't have before the social media age and they're able um and some who may have had absolutely no audience at all thinking of some of the individuals or state actors a continent away are able to disrupt um in the way that Tom described. Um so when we we I mean I don't want to blame only social media because when you look in um a lot of countries um there is partisan media that has sprung up in on the airwaves. But the amplification uh with the way social media is designed with algorithms that prioritise engagement and some who study this phenomenon say not just prioritise engagement in the nice sense of the world word but prioritise outrage um and giving disinformation actors a leg up um so what would you have to say about that I'm going to ask Tom to come first and then Leon [7]

Tom Southern [9:27] the platform that social media gives is what has seen the rise of what is now being called disinformation right I mean it just fundamentally wasn't available to them before dead inflammata is the old serum it's been around forever you drop leaflets, you do radio stations, that kind of thing, but you couldn't reach so many people on mass that you'd never be able to reach before. And I think the real problem is, and it's strange to think about this, but it was only about 15 years ago where Facebook changed its monetisation policy. So the ads weren't just for, you know, handbags or products or anything like that and became increasingly for opinion and people that we've now seen that sort of rise where the financial model rewards disinformation. I mean, because that's just what it's about. It's about controversy. It's about driving eyeballs and clicks. Um, and the best way to do that is usually controversy. Obviously, there's a lot of content out there that makes huge amounts of money that isn't disinformation. But it is also a fact that disinformation itself is extremely profitable. And it seems to be the trend now that social media companies, they used to at least pay lip service to countering disinformation. They sort of given up on that. They they sort of taking apart their various counter disinfo teams um and just letting it run wild because they have the power and finances of relatively small states and you know, most countries can't really do anything about it. The internet has no borders except in China. And so, you know, they they're able to sort of run with it. And I think the the real sort of danger with that is that a controversial opinion doesn't necessarily make it so. It doesn't make it true, but it does make it profitable. And so, it's really allowed these these actors who are often quite extreme. I mean, I came into the counter disinformation world having done counterterrorism for a long time because the terrorist actors were using exactly the same I mean, on a more extreme level, obviously, exactly the same tactics um as what now perpetrated as disinformation and it is just you know it is absolutely a a salve to these people. They can do whatever they want and they get paid back for it. Um so fundamentally social media companies um are probably the reason the biggest reason why disinformation is uh so prevalent today. [8]

Melissa Fleming [11:12] Leon, what would you say to that? I mean we have algorithms and a monetisation um policy that prioritises as Tom said controversy. It actually also downranks uh in the case of meta channels, meta platforms, news um in many places. It downranks uh UN content and prioritises individuals. [9]

Leon Hawthorne [11:29] Well, sure. All social media has done is to democratise news and information and personalise it. And yes, artificial intelligence has the potential to amplify these effects. Now, when you say um there are rewards for the social platforms if they um prioritise outrage. Yes, that's true. And there's quite a lot of research to say that prioritisation of rage and outrage um makes more money drives engagement, but outrage doesn't necessarily equal disinformation. You could be outraged that something which is perfectly accurate. So, um that's that's true, but you know, I I think that there is this problem about what we define as misinformation or disinformation that which is pretty central to this. You know, somebody has to make a decision about what is true and what is false if we're going to somehow try to minimise the amount of miss or disinformation. I don't think social media companies are equipped to make those kind of editorial decisions. Um, if it's an incitement to commit a crime, if it's a legal. It should be banned. But I don't think you or I or Facebook or anyone can discern what is the truth and what is the false and then seek to ban that information from getting into onto the airways. [9]

Melissa Fleming [12:30] I would like to go back to in that context to what uh Tom mentioned about uh social media platforms in recent months uh pretty much since Elon Musk took over Twitter and which is now X um having really let down their guard rails and having released I mean in on the case of X almost entirely it's whole trust and safety team I think there are few who've come back but also the other platforms kind of under that shield also reduced their staff in this area what we have seen and this has been documented by a number of groups including ADL and others a sharp rise in hate speech on the platform like anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim bigotry. You know, there might be some protection of that speech. I'm not sure. There's certainly been a huge spike in climate change denial. The guard rails there are designed to, in a way, one could argue, to protect freedom of expression in the sense that fostering an environment where people do not feel they are being attacked or hate speech is being slung at them, but they are able to express themselves freely with uh in an environment that is uh a town square in which one truly would like to hang out in. There are some who would argue that you know these platforms are publishers. Any publisher in media has an editorial policy and does not tolerate certain types of speech or endeavours at least to ensure that reliable trusted information prevails. [10]

Leon Hawthorne [13:42] There are technology platforms just like the phone company or indeed a white wall outside my building is not make me a publisher. Right? There is a distinction between publishers like the BBC or CNN and they can absolutely can have an editorial policy and only allow certain people on and only certain views and yes should distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, truth and falsehoods. But if you are um if you are a platform, you don't have to do that. Um and that's their position. [11]

Melissa Fleming [14:07] Okay, let's pivot. Now, so Leon, you have a background as a broadcaster working for CNN and I just like to get your views on the difference. I mean, you talked about the different responsibility that traditional media has and just your views on how traditional media is fitting into the digital era and its role and how it is managing. I mean there have been huge financial struggles for some and is there a good balance between the pillar of uh you know public interest media as we would call it and other forces in digital media. [12]

Leon Hawthorne [14:33] I think traditional media is fitting into the new ecosphere very badly. I did my master's uh research on how news broadcasters can attract audiences aged 18 to 34 on digital and social media platforms. And quite frankly, they're doing it very badly, which is why um young people have deserted mainstream broadcast news. They have deserted in western world newspapers and get most of their news on social media like Tik Tok and Instagram. Uh now that can be a bad thing but you have to ask yourself how did we get here? What were we doing wrong? What was I doing wrong 20 years ago when I was working for CNN or the BBC that lost the audience? And too few journalists um asked themselves that question, you know, why does Fox News exist in the America or GB News in Britain because the mainstream media was doing something wrong, didn't engage with the audience and um often patronised them, often gave news from a certain perspective, not necessarily consciously politically biased, but were biased in their selection of stories and how they talked to the audience. So now on social media, people are getting their news from influencers who may not know as much about, you know, foreign affairs or economic affairs as an expert working for a mainstream broadcaster and yes, often get things wrong. Um, that's more misinformation than disinformation. Um, but yeah, I think we have to look at ourselves and apologise to the audience for having screwed up and created the landscape that we now live in. [13]

Melissa Fleming [15:42] Thank you. I think possibly all media would say we were a little slow to see the digital revolution and how that would impact our ability to reach our audiences. I think many media relied on social media platforms as a distributor and then quickly realised those who didn't, you know, require subscriptions and were giving out their content for free that they had just given away all of their ads uh to the social media platforms. So perhaps it's more complex than that. I would like you to comment, Tom. [14]

Tom Southern [16:03] Yeah, I I would agree. I think most of the sort of um I guess people like to call it legacy media these days um far too slow on the uptake and and remain um for various reasons either struggling to enter into that world with their sort of more factual content or probably more troublesome is sometimes they lean or they try and lean into um more sort of poppy or controversial content because it it drives engagement. I think the um the reality is that the landscape is what it is. You have to follow where people are if you want to engage them. You can't expect them um to engage with something that they don't find interesting or engaging or you know anything. Um and I think there are various ways of doing it. It's just a matter of how you tell the story and how you how you package it up. Um, and it's not impossible. I mean, the Center for Information Resilience here, but we do a lot of open source intelligence work, which could look very very dry to be honest. It could be a 100-page report or if you do it the right way, you can sort of snap it up into various vignettes. Um, show people how you did the working uh, and actually walk them through it. Bring them, you know, bring some skills along with it and it gets a lot of engagement on various platforms. It's just a different way of telling the story. And that is news. That's current affairs. That's what's going on in say Myanmar or Afghanistan. And that's what sort of needs to be done. I think the the old world media is is dying off and newspapers will always exist, radio will always exist, but the way that it is uh moving these days, they need to change um and and keep changing. I mean, there are platforms today that didn't exist 5 years ago um that are getting huge engagement and huge drive. And I think that uh it's not only might add it's not only sort of um legacy media that struggling with that. It's also the politicians. It's even the honest politicians for example or the honest policy makers who are trying to engage with audiences and I'm sure the UN with this sometimes. I know that sort of you know the likes of the EU and they try and put stuff out there and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Um and I think actually probably a lot more investment in that kind of

thing would do uh do those institutions quite a lot of good in terms of building trust rather than relying on the website. [15]

Melissa Fleming [17:41] Indeed. And I you mentioned the UN but I know it it's true of all institutions and possibly corporations that we're ourselves competing. The UN has its own news UN news service but we also try to get our information out there. We were very excited when social media came onto the scene because traditionally we were just relying on, you know, journalists as a conduit to uh getting our information and news out. We still do. We believe the press is really important partner. But increasingly, we've had to really look at how we engage and communicate with people and continuously try to up our game. And I'm sure it's a struggle for our industry, our communications industry. And so I'm wondering if you can comment on that because we're seeing that this polarised information environment that we're living in. And we just recently pulled the entire world using UN offices around the world. It's not unique to the countries that we're doing this podcast from um that we're seeing polarised and and kind of toxic information ecosystems. For us at the UN, I mean, we consider ourselves um out there trying to make the world a better place, but we're also in so many places where there is absolutely no news, huge news deserts, no foreign correspondent. And so we're actually providing, I would think, a into the information vacuum, a resource of information on what is happening in war zones and refugee situations. Uh but also, you know, providing a lot of data and information that is gathered by the UN that nobody else is doing on inequalities around the world on problems that need to be solved. And obviously, you know, using communications to not just in in our communication strategy, not just inform, but also try to engage people so that they really care and want to do something about it and we can bring people on board because we do have the sense that people are the more people know the more concern they can feel for other people around the world who who are suffering. Tom, you mention mentioned COVID 19 and you know health ministries and doctors and you know struggling to deliver the kind of guidance that would keep people alive during a global pandemic and against forces of you know disinformation actors. What can institutions do better in this information environment? [16]

Tom Southern [19:23] Yeah, I think uh it's it's an interesting one, isn't it? Because I I would I mean to a degree I would agree that you know it is about it's about trust and and the way that you you do this is that you have to uh whatever it is that this institution is supposed to be doing, any any given institution needs to deliver on its on its remit and it needs to that delivery needs to be felt um by the population and whoever it is that they're trying to reach with whatever it is that they're doing from that you need to tell the story in the right way and and an engaging way. But fundamentally, if uh there isn't a delivery, then then there's no there's no point trying to claim, you know, the positives. And I think, you know, there needs to also be an honesty within a lot of institutions that that sometimes is there and sometimes isn't about failings. Um where they have failed uh in the past or or or currently. Um and as I say, this could be absolutely anything from a local health ministry all the way up to the biggest, you know, international body. I think the the health one during COVID is is probably a bit of a standout exception in the sense that um there really shouldn't have been anything controversial. Um indeed, there wasn't initially really in a health ministry trying to keep people healthy. Um but it became very quickly um jumped on and politicised in the disinformation environment again because uh driving engagement uh is the key to social media uh profitm and it was very very quickly obvious that the arguments are being pushed had been pushed by anti-vaxxers since the 1980s none of it was new what was new was the the fact that we have a mass communications environment now where everyone can reach everyone most of the people I would wager that ended up believing the co denialism wouldn't have come to that conclusion you know on their own but they saw something

completely made up by a often sock puppet account and for some reason that was that was effective and I think we need to think about that and you know coming back to what institutions can do fundamentally if we're looking at disinformation we're talking about psychology and even though it's an old problem that's been going on forever we don't understand our own psychology we don't know how it works and it's actually a salient thing because we're not just talking about as I say old school deseratia we're talking about this disinformation in the current 21st century landscape we don't understand how the communications work we don't understand how our brains receive this kind of thing or why certain things the better not we also don't understand how from a psychological perspective um we can build any kind of resilience to it. I've not seen that much certainly nothing at scale um from a scientific perspective that actually shows how it can be built and I think I imagine we'll get on to this in terms of sort of solutions but um fundamentally I don't think there are that many that exist um at a scale that that might be needed particularly because people turn to sort of older world um solutions like critical thinking and media literacy which don't really mean anything in the current environment. I mean, critical thinking is a a fun one because an awful lot of people um are thinking in a different way critically, perhaps paradoxically critically. They think when they're looking at something like the BBC that they feel because they've been disinformed that it is some agent of the deep state and it's an anti-conservative bias, whatever, that they're not going to trust it. They are thinking critically in their own mind. So, the idea of critical thinking doesn't really work. And media literacy, I mean, what media are we talking about? Everything is media now. Everything is social media. So, trying to, you know, tell people to be a bit more careful with what they're looking at isn't going to cut it, I think. [17]

Melissa Fleming [22:16] Interesting. Leon, what do you think about that? I mean, I know there are a number of countries actually that have started introducing into their curricula for young kids media literacy and that leads also may perhaps to the question of, you know, protecting children. I think if that's there's one thing that most policy makers agree on is that children are not being protected enough in the online space and parents are deeply worried about about their well-being. Would it help if children were better educated on this information environment that they're having to navigate? [18]

Leon Hawthorne [22:43] Yes, but I think they are pretty much I mean obviously we all agree that children are not adults and they must be protected. So there's a different set of rules for adults than there than there is for children. The only problem is that every child has a has a smart wall. Quite a lot of children have smartphones and therefore it's very difficult to um put a put a fence between what adult get and what children get. And parents often know less about how to navigate their child's iPhone than the than the child does. Um, but I I do think there is a role for, you know, there is a there is a problem. I'm saying it's just not as big as everybody says it is. But how you can create a solution to some of the problems that do exist um is not to ban content and to uh you know force social media companies to take down material and Uh often it could be as simple as um letting uh consumers give a star rating to content in terms of its um truthfulness or accuracy and other consumers are able to see your star rating and thereby make a judgment of that website or that um influencer as to whether or not he gives true or false information. That seems to be a much more kind of groundup solution to a problem. [19]

Melissa Fleming [23:42] Well, on ex there are community notes but yet those who study the platform have said that they've continuously seen a rise in what's most worrying is hate speech on the platform what tools in your view Tom I mean Leon has very been expressed that there

should be no guard rails what could the solution be in your view for a a healthier social media ecosystem. [20]

Tom Southern [24:01] I I think fundamentally um legislation is never going to keep up with technology. Uh and I I know that some people are are keen for legislation. I I can't really see it working. Um it's to the point where you know we particularly see it with social media actually because a lot of it was created in the US uh it sort of seems to sit under this US framework but globally. So this this sort of US version of free speech doesn't exist at least in the law in the UK. We have a version but it's not the same version. Um and yet that seems to be sort of the you know the the standard that goes across everything. I I don't think um that that's going to work, but at the same time, there has to be some kind of common uh agreement across, you know, social media about what they can and can't do. I mean, so Leon's point of having a, you know, a kite mark or a scoring system, well, if you have to mandate it, they're going to push back. They're going to lobby hard. Um they're going to take down whichever government's pushing it. I wouldn't I wouldn't I wouldn't trust them to implement something unless it's really really forced on them. I think one of the things that was quite interesting actually to see um was, and it's not related to this specifically, but was how effective GDPR was. So, as an EU law, but because uh all the information flows you know are international go through um the EU many many many international websites have to comply with it even though they have nothing to do with the EU. So if you actually have some kind of um uh effective mechanism for you know blunting disinformation then having that kind of international sort of agreement or law could be quite effective but I I struggle to see at the moment um without really forcing and cracking down the social media companies uh to do something about this but there's no incentive whatsoever for social media companies um to do that and so somebody needs to come up with some kind of incentive. Um I would say that an awful lot of disinformation that I have to deal with is to do with um the perpetration of conflict and so in Ukraine, in Myanmar, in Afghanistan, in a number of other countries, disinformation is used as a weapon effectively. [20]

Melissa Fleming [25:53] Thank you, Tom. And I I think uh we at the UN would agree with you uh from the perspective of being in in the front lines of those conflicts. Uh we are absolutely seeing the same thing. And I'm just finally I just like to come back to the advertising and PR industries and their role in the information environment. But I do know that advertisers mostly don't want to be put next to hate speech or misogynist content or anti-Semitic content. And yet they have very little control over where their ads are placed. And there are some organisations that actually uncover it in the murky world of very little transparency on the part of the platforms. But many say the solution would be if advertisers had more control over where they could place their content, then we would have a a healthier platform. [21]

Leon Hawthorne [26:33] Sure. Of course. Uh if you are a brand, you have money and if Facebook or Twitter or or whoever X I should say, if they want your money, then they have to do what you want them to do or you pull through advertising. Um, but advertisers um want to buy programmatic advertising, which is when an AI searches for the cheapest uh spots available. And when you do that, then you lose control. You can have complete control if you want to and just sponsor specific brands, specific programs, and have, you know, honesty or the right type of content uh associated with your brand. But if you want to buy it cheap, then you take a risk. [22]

Melissa Fleming [27:03] I think many many are and I think that we could have a whole podcast episode on that. But I just like to also I mean we just the secretary general of the UN just recently in a seminal speech that he just gave on on climate change and climate action as being existential for our world called for a global ban on fossil fuel advertising. He called on on

countries to ban it much like they ban tobacco advertising but also media companies not to take it and advertise users and PR companies not to be in the business of of creating deceptive content for fossil fuel companies. Tom, do you think this is an answer? [23]

Tom Southern [27:35] I I think it's an answer if those companies want want to do it. Certainly, I think the the challenge is that there will always be other companies that will uh happily take up those contracts. It's in the same vein as um perhaps there are certain states that one shouldn't ever work with given what they're doing to the rest of the world, but they'll find another company um that that does it. I think it's a starting point and I think you know as industry you know there are PR bodies that go on if they want to collectively come to a position where they don't want to work with or advertise um on those uh platforms or on those subjects then I respect that and I would support it um but I think that yeah as you say that would need to be um somewhat industry-led and and it's it's not going to be a complete solution but I think it would lead to um a better potentially information environment in in individual countries uh where those where those companies no longer advertise with those actors. [24]

Melissa Fleming [28:21] Okay, thank you very much. And it is a I have to say a very fascinating conversation that probably reflects the divergent views of of many when looking at solutions for our digital information ecosystem. On one hand finding it fine uh and on the other we have the view that it is toxic and needs uh a lot of cleaning up. Thank you very much for joining us. Uh I think it gives us plenty to think about. We have spoken about the role of social media. We've spoken about the decline of public interest media for various reasons, different views there and the potential threats to democracy and some trust uh issues uh particularly trust in institutions, how institutional bodies uh public interest bodies need to step up uh to communicate better in this environment. We and we have tried to speak about about solutions. Um, different views there. On one hand, holding tech companies and AI actors to account for the content they distribute. On the other hand, let them be and let the people decide. So, we've also touched on how PR uh and communicators can be part of the solution. And so, I thank you for enjoying joining us in this debate. And I have no doubt that these questions are going to be with us for some time to come. They're going to evolve as rapidly the communications environment. So, I'd like to thank my fellow guests, Dr. Leon Hawthorne and Tom Southern. I'm Melissa Fleming, and thanks very much for listening.

Outro: Thank you for tuning in to this episode of Engage. We'll share links to training and other resources in the episode show notes. And if you have any tips, insight, or guidance on the topic that you want to share with other practitioners, you can continue the conversation on LinkedIn using the hashtag engage. [25]