

**Adrian Arena,
International Human Rights Program director,OAK Foundation**

contribution to Ariadne Forecast 2019 Roundtable

Milano, 7 February 2019

Ladies and gentlemen, I am very honored to be here as a guest of Assifero to talk to you today about some of the challenges confronting the human rights movement in the context of the 2019 Ariadne Forecast.

As a first point, however, I want to thank the Fondazione Cariplo for hosting us today in these wonderful premises. But above all, I want to congratulate the marvelous Carola Carazzone for all her work in bringing us together. Assifero has really helped place Italian philanthropy on my screen and I am very happy and grateful to her for making this possible.

I wanted to share with you some of the concerns we have at the Oak Foundation regarding not just the future of the human rights movement but about the liberal democracy which underpins so much of all our work to guarantee a better society.

In the course of my recent presentations to my own Board I have devoted a lot of time to the rise of populism and nativism manifest in Europe, Brexit and then, of course, the Trump victory. I spoke at length about what this meant for our program.

Essentially, it means that a polarizing us versus them rhetoric had moved from the political fringe to the political centre. Coupled with authoritarian trends and closing civic space, this has left the international human rights movement vulnerable.

It now faces multiple challenges including:

- the decline in the political currency of human rights in the face of rising populism, nationalism and xenophobia;
- a growing crisis of legitimacy given a lack of broad and local support compounded by closing civic space;
- diminishing traction with traditional points of influence including like-minded governments, policy and media elites; and
- declining funding from traditional donors.

So how have we responded to these threats so far?

We have made investments in more resilient organisations and supported various efforts at strategic messaging and framing. Communications- and changing the narrative- has become a critical component of our work.

Over the next 3 years, our core support should help address those challenges by influencing how partners work- how they build a base; how they communicate with and mobilise that base; and how, in turn, that base influences their revenue model. Through these efforts we aim to:

- Re-energise human rights (values) in public discourse including through improved communications and message framing;
- Build and mobilise a broad constituency in their defence including through growth in members and supporters;
- Develop new sources of funding to reduce reliance on traditional donors in the global North.

But, I fear, this may not be enough.

Liberal Democracy

I am concerned that by addressing our traditional human rights priorities, we are fixing the roof but ignoring the building's foundations. The pillars of liberal democracy risk subsiding, if not collapsing.

So how did we get here.

Given the urgency of the task at hand, I am not sure that now is the time to indulge in that historical analysis. Very briefly, however, commentators suggest that at the end of the cold war, 4 structural changes emerged to endanger the future of liberal democracy: financial instability; technological disruption; widening social and economic inequality and structural weakness in democratic politics.

Arguably, these are only getting worse.

Indeed, this summer I read a book called How Democracies Die and is an excellent study, completed by two leading Harvard academics- on precisely this issue. They studied a diverse range of countries that experienced democratic failures: Venezuela, Germany, Thailand, Turkey Uruguay etc and postulated a 4 tier test in the death of a liberal democracy.

It is important to point out that these democratic failures are not necessarily manifest through tanks in the streets and bloody coups- though this also happens. Rather it is the hollowing out of state institutions- an erosion of checks and balances and the separation of powers. It is the capture of economic interests by state cronies.

The 4 tier test is as follows:

- Rejection or weak commitment to democratic rules of the game: do political actors reject the constitution or express a willingness to violate it? do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?
- Denial of legitimacy of political opponents: do they describe their rivals as subversive or opposed to the existing constitutional order; do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals?
- Toleration or organisation of violence: is there tacit endorsement of violence by their supporters or a refusal to unambiguously condemn it? is there praise for violence in other parts of the world?
- Readiness to curtail civil liberties: are there expanded defamation or libel laws, restricting protests, legal sanctions against opponents, the closing down of civic space? Capturing or muzzling the media.

By any objective analysis, most of the countries in which we work from Russia to Brazil, from Hungary to Argentina, from Burma to India- not to mention the US and to a lesser extent the UK, all feature these elements. You should make your own mind up about Italy.

We are drifting towards trouble.

Our greatest challenge is not the subversion of human rights but the wholesale erosion of democracy itself.

To date, we have tangentially addressed this challenge largely through our support of independent media, notably in those countries where civil society is either demonised by or excluded from the mainstream press.

And that has been terrifically useful. But a more comprehensive engagement is now required.

As a program we are deeply troubled by the underlying conditions which render citizens susceptible to demagoguery and political manipulation; and nations easy targets for potential autocrats.

Commentators have characterised our post truth age as one in which there is:

- A continued disregard for facts;
- The displacement of reason by emotion;
- The corrosion of language and;
- The diminution of the value of truth.

These constitute formidable barriers to a healthy democracy. So what do we do? Is there an entry point in this mess?

Depending on one's appetite for risk, there are probably several. But there is one that appears consonant with a broad philanthropic interest: defending the integrity of public discourse.

This breaks down into 2 distinct but not unrelated threats: polarisation and misinformation. These twin threats are effectively poisoning the capacity of the democratic system to build a sustainable consensus around the political center.

Integrity in public discourse plays a vital role in open, democratic societies: it provides collective meaning to the political process, builds common ground and is the necessary input for evidence-based policy making.

Digitization has, however, fundamentally changed the way information is produced, distributed and consumed. The implications of these changes cannot yet be fully grasped.

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a handful of technological platforms as dominant players in a digital information ecosystem that has allowed an unprecedented outreach of news and information. Online platforms provide new opportunities for social engagement, both in the production of news and information, and in online activism and movement building.

At the same time, their rise has thrown up any number of challenges including:

- Lack of gatekeepers: Algorithms, which have replaced the human editor as information gatekeepers, are designed to help advertising succeed rather than to inform the public about matters of societal concern.
- Lack of accountability: Traditional media organizations were regulated through copyright and libel law, as well as through various professional codes and ethos which encouraged them to act according to certain professional standards. None of this is currently the case with technology platforms or their contributors.
- Lack of transparency: The lack of regulation and transparency of the algorithms used by online platforms, the role of these platforms and their interactions with the digital advertising industry and political actors, and issues related to data protection and data exploitation, make it easier to

manipulate public discourse through mis-information, dis-information and mal-information.

Let me give you an example.

Technologists recently tracked the “race riots” in Chemnitz, Germany by scraping You Tube data based on every Chemnitz related video published in 2018.

Researchers documented 650 posted videos on Chemnitz.

They found that the platform’s recommendation system based on an algorithm consistently directed people towards extremist videos of the riots and then graduated users to far right videos on other subjects.

A more neutral algorithm would most likely produce distinct clusters of videos—one of mainstream news coverage, another of conspiracy theories and another of extremist groups. Under that system, those who began in one cluster would stay there. Instead YOU TUBE bundled them all together but then led the user in only one direction.

YOU TUBE denied this saying that the system was designed to give people “video suggestions that leave them satisfied”. And it is true. The algorithm is sophisticated, constantly learning what keeps users engaged. And this recommendation system is the core of its business strategy: getting people to click on more videos means serving them with more ads.

But In the course of a recent congressional hearing on Russian meddling in the last elections, a Senator asked Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s COO how Facebook can “reconcile an incentive to create and increase user engagement when the content that generates such engagement is often inflammatory and hateful”. She had no answer. It is not unreasonable to assert that that Facebook, Twitter and You Tube pursue a business model which thrives on the outrageous and incendiary because of advertising imperatives.

In response, one might also argue that hasn’t it always been thus?

Traditional media outlets, especially the tabloid press, are also frequent and cynical manipulators of sensationalist content. But social media is better able to weaponize it. Algorithms can measure which content best engages and each user can be targeted individually in a way that not even the sleaziest tabloid editor could have imagined,

So the key question now is what to do?

But of equal importance the question of WHO should do it? Who will fight back against manipulation? Whose responsibility is it? Whose job is it to bridge these partisan divides and rebut misinformation?

And here there is a black hole. Because there is no- one. As Anne Applebaum from the Arena project (one of our partners) states:

- Democratic governments do not censor the internet and we do not want them to.
- Democratic governments do not fund independent media and, if they did, that media would cease to be independent.
- The militaries of democratic governments are not designed to fight information wars. They have no mandate to get involved in social media battles in their own countries, notwithstanding the arguable national security implications of doing nothing.
- For this same reason, the intelligence services of democratic states have no role in meddling in the domestic politics of their own country unless in a very, circumscribed way. We cannot expect nor want them to take part in that domestic role.
- And tech companies? What of their role? Well, much of this appears inconsistent with their own business model. And let's be frank. Censorship by face book or google is arguably as concerning as one performed by government.

So whose job is it to counter conspiracy theories? Enter echo chambers? Restore trust in democratic institutions or even help direct a national conversation?

I am not sure there is any one answer. But philanthropy and civil society must be part of the solution.

My initial reaction to that is “Hang on, this is not the role of philanthropy and neither is it even in its gift. We can hardly change these HUGE systemic big picture issues.

Well, yes and no.

I think there has to be humility but history also teaches us that when a certain scale of ambition is envisioned, things are possible. I am struck by philanthropy’s role in once nurturing, championing and then entrenching certain

economic paradigms. I recently read of the seminal role of conservative foundation- William Volker Foundation, John Olin Foundation, to be replaced by the Koch brothers, Bradley, Smith-Richardson and Scaife Foundations- in promoting the Friedman and Hayek school of economics, the neo liberal agenda in preference to the then prevailing Keynesian consensus. They worked together for over 60 years on a deliberate campaign; establishing think tanks, funding influential journals, privileging certain research etc. And the result is plain to see. The triumph of that neo liberal model. And that experience is arguably instructive for the influence philanthropy can wield.

We have already made some preliminary investments and we are on a very, very steep learning curve.

But a citizen's information diet and the ensuing public discourse are issues which we ignore at our own peril. It will undermine the very advances we seek to make in so many areas.

Time is now running out and I do not have time to talk about what we have done so far. But let me give you an example:

In one key EU country, we have supported a unique partnership between a centre right newspaper, technologists and journalists. Together they have been seeking to change the tenor of debate on divisive issues including migration. Through algorithm analysis and an emerging trend in journalism- called constructive or solutions based journalism, they are seeking to depolarise the debate. Within their respective competencies, they variously:

- Monitor and analyze social media;
- Segment audiences
- Create bespoke content using constructive journalism or human interest frames
- Distribute that content
- Measure audience reactions
- Continue to adjust content to emerging hypotheses.

For the moment, it is too early to tell what this has delivered but it is an interesting experiment. To be clear we have NO position on migration. But we also do not believe that discourse on this topic should be defined by the extremes nor by a tone of fear and panic.

We have also established the Civitates Fund in cooperation with 15 other European foundations to tackle these issues. As a collective of foundations, we

all understand these challenges. It has been a huge pleasure to work with colleagues from all over Europe including Germany, France, Austria, Poland, Switzerland and Norway.

My big regret is that there are no Italian peers. I have always greatly valued the expertise and creativity of Italian colleagues. I hope some of you can join us. I am happy to talk to you. We need you.

<https://civitates-eu.org/>

Our collective thinking has prompted really fascinating discussions on a range of issues: support for independent media; stronger regulation of social media including a code of conduct; an algorithm ombudsman; more transparency in political advertising on line; safeguards on anonymity and identity; digital media literacy.

We are still grappling with all of this. It will be a long haul but we are actively engaged. I hope that we can work collectively to ensure that the democratic institutions and discourse on which we all rely to pursue our work can be protected.

Watch this space.