WHO IS HE?

A Paris-based lawyer, Mr Dan Shefet is the founding President of the Association for Accountability and Internet Democracy (AAID), established in 2014. Earlier that year, he famously obtained judgement against Google France, forcing Google to take down links to defamatory online content about him not only on its French site but from its entire global network. He won the case on the basis of Europe's "right to be forgotten" ruling, which allows an individual to request that search engines remove harmful information about one's self if the content is manifestly illicit or has the potential to devastate one's life.

A SAFE SPACE ONLINE

Mr Dan Shefet hopes to protect the integrity of people online through responsible usage of the Internet.

BY WANDA TAN

With the word "Google" — as a noun or a verb — now part of our everyday vernacular, it goes without saying that the Internet has had a far-reaching impact on people's lives. "The Internet has become so much a part of our daily lives that we really can't live without it," said Mr Dan Shefet. On the one hand, there are benefits to be gained by having such open access to information. On the other hand, the prevalence of cyber bullying shows how easy it is for an individual to be a victim, or a perpetrator, of Internet abuse.

Mr Shefet identified three types of toxic online content, each having dramatic real-life consequences:

>>> **Effect on the individual.** *This includes defamation or hate speech directed against an individual. It impedes one's ability to lead a normal life.*

>>> **Effect on societal values.** *The dissemination of fake news impacted the United States 2016 presidential election, posing a threat to democracy. Businesses that engage in false or misleading marketing practices also fall into this category.*

>>> **Effect on regional or global stability.** *Discriminating against a particular group on the grounds of race, colour, descent, nationality or ethnic origin could lead to destabilisation of world peace.*

Having been himself a target of spurious accusations on the Internet that sought to tarnish his reputation, including being linked to the Serbian mafia, Mr Shefet founded the Association for Accountability and Internet Democracy (AAID) in 2014. AAID's objective is to make Internet infrastructure providers such as Google and Facebook legally accountable for removing hateful content posted by untraceable online users.

ACCOUNTABILITY ON THE WEB

"Most of the time, Internet infrastructure providers face situations where they have to make a difficult judgement call," acknowledged Mr Shefet. For example, Facebook recently took down photos of a white supremacist rally in Poland, only to later realise that the photos had actually been posted by a journalist who was simply covering the news and not by someone endorsing neo-fascism. To prevent such excessive censorship, as well as to provide government oversight over the process, AAID proposes creating the new position of an "Internet ombudsman".

"The work we are doing at AAID may lead to a European Parliament resolution in May 2018 to start preparing a treaty under which an Internet ombudsman would be appointed in each country [in Europe]," said Mr Shefet. Once malicious content is flagged by a user, the Internet infrastructure provider would report it to the ombudsman, who would then review the online material and recommend whether or not to take it down.

AAID also advocates setting up an "international Internet ombudsman" agency to deal with instances where one country's recommendation to take down online content worldwide may be opposed by another. In fact, AAID will hold its inaugural global conference on this matter at the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2018. "The problem is complicated, but we have to solve it. Otherwise, we will have a 'Balkanised' or splintered Internet," said Mr Shefet. Already in China, the government's strict firewalls and cyber sovereignty laws have produced an Internet that looks different than elsewhere.

U@live moderator Mr Viswa Sadasivan (Arts and Social Sciences '83), who is on the AAID Board, wondered what the office of an Internet ombudsman would look like. "The term 'ombudsman' typically refers to an institution rather than a person," explained Mr Shefet. In this case, the position could be held by one person or a group, as long as they possess moral clout. "I don't know

" The abuse of free speech is not protected in any international treaty on human rights.

Moderator Mr Viswa Sadasivan (seated left) and speaker Mr Shefet (right) engaging the audience at the last U@live session.

who the individual would be — for example, a Supreme Court judge or an ethics professor — but he or she must be a highly-renowned individual whom people trust to represent the moral opinion of the population."

Other questions raised by the audience ranged from the debate over free speech to extra protection for children and women, who are usually subjected to more online — and offline — harassment and hate speech than men. Citing the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as similar regional treaties, Mr Shefet said, "Each convention has caveats; free speech is not absolute. The abuse of free speech is not protected in any international treaty on human rights."

He also mentioned that AAID has developed an Enhanced Accountability Standard applicable to "certain exposed groups in society", especially women and children. "AAID believes that a special standard of diligence is required by Internet infrastructure providers when the users are children or women," said Mr Shefet. A

MR SHEFET SPOKE ON 22 NOVEMBER 2017 AT THE SHAW FOUNDATION ALUMNI HOUSE IN NUS.

AU REVOIR!

This session was the last in the *U@live* series. Mr Bernard Toh (Architecture '84), Director of the NUS Office of Alumni Relations, made the announcement at the end of Mr Shefet's talk, noting that "now is the time to take pause and reflect" on the diverse viewpoints brought by the various guest speakers. "We will be getting in touch with you to get your thoughts and feedback on what the future equivalent of *U@live* should look like," Mr Toh told the audience.

U@live was launched on 27 January 2011 and featured prominent NUS alumni. In 2016, the series underwent a revamp to showcase global thought leaders. Its tagline thus changed from "Passion · Action · Inspiration" to "Lifting Thought Leadership".

7 YEARS OF U@LIVE

56 SESSIONS

MORE THAN **8,500** AUDIENCE MEMBERS

59 speakers, of whom **48** were NUS alumni

1 MODERATOR
Mr Viswa Sadasivan (Arts and Social Sciences '83), NUS Alumni Advisory Board Member and founding Chairman of *U@live* Organising Committee