

Evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee 'Fake news' inquiry presented by members of the Centre for Politics & Media Research, Faculty for Media & Communication, Bournemouth University, UK.

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### **Executive summary and rationale**

The concept of fake news is problematic. It is a catch-all term with multiple definitions that has the capacity to undermine the role of media as the fourth estate as well as the civic attitudes that underpin democratic culture. Our report outlines the definitions and underlying practices captured by the term, demonstrating how fake news is used to confirm existing biases and beliefs. Our contention is, however, that confirmation bias can only be relied upon where facts, and the sources of facts, are contested and so lack credibility. In other words citizens will rely on their beliefs when they are unable to believe alternative accounts.

To combat the post-truth environment that nurtures fake news we propose four recommendations:

1. Ensure the inclusion into education of a media literacy programme that can prepare people to be citizens of a digital world;
2. Ensure that established media outlets adhere to the basic standards of journalism when constructing news;
3. Put pressure on, through regulation if necessary, the major players in the digital environment to at a minimum accredit verified news providers;
4. Challenge the use of the phrase fake news in order to create an environment that is more supportive of media.

As researchers with a track record for investigating the role of media within society and its importance for pluralist democracy, particularly given the rise of a post-truth, spin culture, we propose that the concept of fake news – terminologically and practically – is highly damaging. Our combined expertise offers an informed appraisal of the nature of the problem, its potential negative impacts but offer research-led solutions that can combat media distrust and an attendant reliance on fake stories designed to manipulate.

## Understanding fake news, the nature of the problem and potential solutions

### What is 'fake news'?

There are at least four definitions of "fake news" in contemporary public circulation:

- 1) Deliberate falsehoods to attract visitors as clickbait;
- 2) Satirical news that is designed to be humorous and overtly fake, and thus not intended to mislead as the first category is<sup>1</sup>;
- 3) Public relations, spin or biased reporting which exaggerates certain facts, obscuring others;
- 4) The dismissal of reports as fake by an individual or organisation (such as Donald Trump or Emily Thornberry) because they present a challenge to their own or their party's narrative.

The borders and boundaries between these four types are highly permeable. The notion of fake news is not new per se, as the extensive literature around propaganda and spin demonstrates; yet the problem is perhaps increasing and certainly the term has gained traction after President Trump's frequent usage. Newspapers have a record for publishing stories with limited evidence and of questionable veracity<sup>2</sup>. Public awareness of dubious practices including the use of the infamous 'fake sheikh', the phone hacking scandal and various celebrities winning cases against news organisations must contribute to the low public perception of journalists; only 25% say they believe journalists tell the truth, a rating shared with estate agents, although they beat government ministers and politicians<sup>3</sup>. Arguably cynicism towards the media has also been cultivated by the long-standing academic critique of the media for their failures to 'hold power to account'<sup>4</sup>. Media mistrust provides for an environment where truth, and trustworthiness, is perceptual and where information presented as fact is treated with cynicism: an environment characterised as being 'post-truth' but one that might lead to a diminution of, or 'death', of mainstream news<sup>5</sup>.

The current anxiety about "fake news" in the UK appears to have been sparked in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and President Trump's election in the US. In some senses this anxiety can be understood as a moral panic or at least as a crisis story about a much larger issue which is (in part) about fact-checking in the digital age. Such anxieties have mounted, particularly as some forms of "citizen journalism", "user generated content" and "new model" news websites, from The Canary to Breitbart, challenge the boundaries of the journalistic profession.

In order to develop a broad definition we argue that fake news is the deliberate spread of misinformation, be it via traditional news media or through social media. Often such news is generated with the intent to mislead in order to gain financially or politically<sup>6</sup>. In some cases fake news employs eye-catching headlines or entirely fabricated news-stories in order to increase readership and online sharing. Profit is made in a similar fashion to 'clickbait' which relies on revenue from advertisers generated through clicks. People are encouraged to read or view a story in order to earn revenue for the host organisation through clicks regardless of the veracity of the published stories. Easy access to ad-revenue, increased political polarization and the ubiquity of social media, primarily the Facebook newsfeed, have been

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<sup>1</sup> Comedy shows such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS) and The Colbert Report (TCR) have been referred to as "fake news" in the past, since they satirise news bulletins and indeed current affairs. Others include The Onion in the US, and [News Thump](#) or [The Daily Mash](#) in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> Independent academic studies include Martin Conboy, (2006). *Tabloid Britain*, Routledge or Kevin Williams, (2009). *Get Me a Murder a Day!: A History of Media and Communication in Britain*. A&C Black.

<sup>3</sup> IpsosMORI Veracity Index, 2016, [https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3685/Politicians-are-still-trusted-less-than-estate-agents-journalists-and-bankers.aspx#gallery\[m\]/1/](https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3685/Politicians-are-still-trusted-less-than-estate-agents-journalists-and-bankers.aspx#gallery[m]/1/)

<sup>4</sup> Fore example see James Curran & Jean Seaton, (2009). *Power without responsibility: press, broadcasting and the internet in Britain*. Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercer-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel Farage>

<sup>6</sup> Elle Hunt, (December 17, 2016). "What is fake news? How to spot it and what you can do to stop it". *The Guardian*. ISSN 0261-3077.

implicated in the spread of fake news. Anonymously hosted websites with no known publishers have also been implicated, particularly because they make it difficult to prosecute sources of fake news for libel or slander<sup>7</sup>.

Yet theoretically any individual or organisation can create fake news. Cultures of spin and public relations, which accentuate positives and bury bad news, have been pervasive within the political and corporate world over the last two decades<sup>8</sup>, with many public institutions generating news items which are instantly published with little editorial scrutiny<sup>9</sup>. While we might not wish to classify every piece of public relations, created by a state, corporation, government, political party or campaign organisation as fake news, there are key elements of public relations which elide with the concept of fake news. Public relations practices produce news that is generated in order to influence the reader, shape their attitudes and behaviours, and so advantage the source; news outlets equally accentuate elements of stories in order to fit an ideological bias. In both these cases there might be elements of truth but exaggeration is used to cause an emotional response from the reader. The ordinary citizen is therefore free to decide what to believe and what to discount, but may not have the information or capacity to arrive at an informed answer. In extremis they may also choose to ignore news they understand to be fake or inaccurate, since their faith in the source is greater than that who attacks them for being fake. Therefore, at the heart of the 'fake news' problem is the challenge that is posed to democratic citizenship when decisions are taken based upon emotional responses engendered by inaccurate information.

#### **Confirmation bias: why fake news gains traction**

An investigation by Craig Silverman and Lawrence Alexander found over 100 sites purporting to provide news of US politics were in fact hosted by a number of individuals residing within the Macedonian town of Veles. Each news site had a Facebook page with thousands of followers<sup>10</sup>. The individuals creating these sites had experimented with content, discovering pro-Trump news earned the most in click-thru revenue. These sites all provided fake stories, 'revealing' proof Obama was not American, 'providing' exclusive footage from Bill Clinton sex tapes and 'quoting' Hillary Clinton saying Trump was 'honest and can't be bought'. Despite being untrue, they were read and shared via the Facebook newsfeed, maybe appearing true to many readers.

Aside from the eye-catching style of headlines, the stories also have plausibility to their intended audience. Humans tend to seek information that fits with their existing belief systems<sup>11</sup>. They like to hear negative news about people they do not like and vice versa. The above stories confirmed anti-Obama and anti-Clinton biases, some particularly reinforcing the 'crooked Hillary' narrative; others confirmed the honesty and accuracy of Trump's take on the world. Pro-Clinton or pro-Sanders narratives gained were less attractive for clickbait sites, but they were no less prevalent. This was echoed in another investigation by Silverman, exposing how two opposing so-called 'hyperpartisan' news websites were both owned by the same company<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, their news copy was in places near identical – with adjectives and hyperbole adjusted to suit the respective liberal or conservative audiences. Thus truth became blurred and contested, a feature of many election campaigns.

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Shafer, (22 November 2016). "The Cure for Fake News Is Worse Than the Disease". Politico.

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/the-cure-for-fake-news-is-worse-than-the-disease-214477>

<sup>8</sup> Aeron Davis, (2002). *Public relations democracy: Politics, public relations and the mass media in Britain*. Manchester University Press. Kevin Moloney, (2006). *Rethinking public relations: PR, propaganda and democracy*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Lewis, Andrew Williams & Bob Franklin, (2008). A compromised fourth estate? UK news journalism, public relations and news sources. *Journalism studies*, 9(1), 1-20. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700701767974>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm\\_term=.lteaM80XO#.tiK9kPoOM](https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm_term=.lteaM80XO#.tiK9kPoOM)

<sup>11</sup> Philip E. Converse, (1962). *The nature of belief systems in mass publics*. Ann Arbor Press.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-the-hyperpartisan-sausage-is-made?utm\\_term=.poV3enQ2M#.imy4DqNQ](https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-the-hyperpartisan-sausage-is-made?utm_term=.poV3enQ2M#.imy4DqNQ)

In a pluralist media system fake news is contested and challenged. However research on media habits show that many people *choose* not to enjoy a pluralist diet of information. News sources are chosen because they confirm existing biases and beliefs. This phenomenon is particularly problematic within the online environment. Cass Sunstein observed the construction of filter systems, whereby news feeds, sources of news and information and online social networks becoming increasingly homogenous ideologically<sup>13</sup>. Put simply some people are most likely to connect with peers or organisations with whom they agree already, filtering out information that they disagree with or that challenges their existing biases or beliefs. Moreover the majority of people who do not use anti-tracking software, cookie data which allows websites such as Google and Facebook to know what other sites are visited, what products are viewed etc., are likely to have products and viewpoints tailored according to their interests<sup>14</sup>. A person who scours Amazon and LiveNation (a concert promoter) for heavy metal music, may only see promotions for more heavy metal music; a person who likes pro-Trump news stories may only see further pro-Trump news stories. The filter bubbles created through algorithms based on online behavioural patterns may have even further implications for those who seek out, read and like more extremist or anti-democratic political views. There is conflicting evidence on how hermetically sealed these filter bubbles created by social media users or algorithms are, but arguably they can present significant problems even if the majority of sources exposed to offer a one-sided narrative around a more emotionally resonant message<sup>15</sup>.

Confirmation bias may not be seen as a huge problem, as it suggests that the only people reached and affected are those with an existing propensity to believe a particular story. However there are two important ramifications for democratic society.

Firstly there are degrees of bias. Having a latent bias against a particular social group can be nurtured and made more extreme through exposure to fake news, due to the emotive arguments made, particularly when similar peers share that news with their own supportive, emotionally engaging, comment<sup>16</sup>. The more that peers support a given viewpoint or perspective, the more likely an individual will absorb that into their belief system<sup>17</sup> due to the emotional connection to the peers, their strength of feelings and the perceived veracity of the argument. Greater exposure to fake news that reinforces a particular set of beliefs is found to have a particularly powerful impact on those who consume little 'real' news and rely heavily on information discovered through their social networks<sup>18</sup>. Hence fake news can be a force for increased emotional and extreme attachments to an idea, both of which can translate into extreme, emotionally-driven behaviour.

Secondly there are degrees of untruth. In 2016 it may not have mattered how many Americans believed Obama was also an American citizen. An anonymously-produced and widely-circulated map of incidents of crimes purportedly committed by refugees in Germany may have far-reaching implications for the forthcoming election in that nation. Despite this being contested by one independent online website as being based on inaccurate data, and being hosted by a Russian exponent of alt-right (the new far right) propaganda, Germany's *Bild* newspaper and UK *Daily Mail* both used the map to attack Merkel's policy on refugees<sup>19</sup>. The map hosted by XYE, the challenge by The Bureau of

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<sup>13</sup> Cass Sunstein, (2009). *Republic. com 2.0*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/277351>

<sup>15</sup> For an alternative perspective see Margetts et al's research <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/of-course-social-media-is-transforming-politics-but-it-s-not-to-blame-for-brex-it-and-trump> or the recent Reuters' study <https://rasmuskleisnielsen.net/2016/11/25/is-social-media-use-associated-with-more-or-less-diverse-news-use/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://edc-connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/108723202/negative-feelings-their-role-word-of-mouth-disclosure-social-media>

<sup>17</sup> Elsie M. Botha, (2014). Contagious Communications: The role of emotion in viral marketing (Doctoral dissertation, KTH Royal Institute of Technology). <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:745835/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Meital Balmas, (2014). When Fake News Becomes Real: Combined Exposure to Multiple News Sources and Political Attitudes of Inefficacy, Alienation, and Cynicism. *Communication Research*, 41(3), 430-454.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-02-27/the-future-of-fake-news>

Investigative Journalism, or both could be fake<sup>20</sup>. Once in the public consciousness it is immaterial, German citizens with latent concerns regarding absorbing a refugee community will become more concerned, and possibly encouraged to vote a particular way; pro-refugee groups will be forced to be refugee crime deniers; society becomes polarised over perceptions of truth.

Contestations of fact can therefore have important ramifications that go beyond questions of how well-informed people are, they can also inform a range of behavioural choices from how to vote to whether to participate in actions which exacerbate social tensions; so explaining the rise of hate crimes. The impact of fake news has already resulted in Edgar Welsh attempting to 'do the right thing' by firing an assault rifle in a Washington Pizzeria believing the story that it was the headquarters of a child-sex ring patronised by Clinton's campaign chief John Podesta; the evidence being that certain topping styles were code words. One concerned citizen believed a fake news story sufficiently, and had sufficient concern for the welfare of children, to take the law into their own hands. While one extreme and isolated correlation between fake news and violent action, the fact there were up to ten attacks against migrants in Germany during 2016 may relate to the increase in anti-migrant news stories by domestic and international alt-right groups<sup>21</sup>. It is therefore important to consider viable means by which to combat the spread and acceptance of fake news.

### **Combating fake news**

Critiques of the media have proved vulnerable to appropriation. Donald Trump's presidential brand as the 'outsider' allows him to reinforce the perception that in the age of social media electoral popularity does not have to rest on support from a substantial section of mainstream media. The term is becoming more widely popularised, not only by news sites which claim 'independence', combat the alt-right, and expose 'fake news', but by any politician who wishes to challenge the veracity of news reports<sup>22</sup>. While reactions to the term will vary across different audience segments, an underlying and widespread effect is likely to be a still deeper and broader suspicion of any 'news' sources which challenge the existing views of an audience. Unchecked, this process will undermine the kind of public sphere – a space for rational dialogue – on which democratic politics depends. The collapse of a national public into a number of different and polarised truth-tribes is becoming an imaginable scenario. Thus we propose four ways by which this should be arrested.

### *Media Literacy*

Firstly we recommend a renewed focus on media literacy in schools, particularly around emotional self-management and digital 'emotional self-care'. While applied mostly to the work of activists or researchers<sup>23</sup>, the ability to distance oneself emotionally from material online, personal or political is important in constructing a better understanding of how to be a good digital citizen. Simple lessons relating to thinking before liking or sharing, how to avoid filter bubbles and understanding the threats posed by exposure to information are required now from a young age. Media literacy also needs to provide a basis for assessing the validity of sources, source bias, the role of journalism in society and how to differentiate between different forms of journalism: investigative, editorial or propagandistic. These are issues that predate and transcend fake news, but are no less important because of that.

### *Media standards*

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<sup>20</sup> There are a plethora of sites which claim to combat fake news, for example <http://www.stopfake.org/en/news/> which have not more claim to veracity and credibility than the sites they attack exacerbating the polarisation of online discourse.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39096833>

<sup>22</sup> For example see [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/emily-thornberry-says-it-is-fake-news-to-claim-jeremy-corbyn-opposed-nuclear-power-even-though-he-did\\_uk\\_58b02796e4b060480e06dc3f](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/emily-thornberry-says-it-is-fake-news-to-claim-jeremy-corbyn-opposed-nuclear-power-even-though-he-did_uk_58b02796e4b060480e06dc3f)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ch-ramsdon/self-care-in-digital-space>

Media literacy must also work in tandem with better regulation of the standards of news production and the pluralism of views. A starting point would be admission that the phenomenon of fake news has its roots in mainstream media failure. Issues of partisanship and bias, ethical standards in journalism, and unhealthy levels of ownership concentration have created an environment in which trust in journalists is at an all-time low. The concern here is that well documented and long-term public distrust in sections of the news media (typically tabloid journalists in the UK) will become contagious, and citizens will begin to see all of their news as of questionable veracity (which Trump is actively encouraging in the US); an environment in which real and fake become indistinguishable. It is therefore incumbent on our news media to raise journalistic standards and to reform. But reform is something the newspaper press has for decades proven itself incapable of, and thus the onus on leading this process must lie with government. Therefore the implementation of the recommendations of the Leveson enquiry remains crucial. Implementation would help improve ethical standards of journalism, yet ownership concentration remains a problem, and regulation should be pursued that prevents monopoly ownership of news organisations which make them susceptible to disseminating a single ideological argument.

#### *Regulating the digital environment*

The response by Facebook to criticisms, the creation of a Journalism Project<sup>24</sup>, may be seen as a small step in the right direction, in particular the pledge to collaborate with news corporations in order to produce a newsfeed that cannot be contaminated by less credible sources. However this does not prevent fake news outlets creating spaces within social media platforms, creating attractive fake news headlines, and encourage sharing of this content. At a minimum political pressure should be put upon on social media platforms to strengthen their actions in relation to combating hate speech, a component of some fake news. Platforms are currently struggling to deal with content that is reported as inappropriate<sup>25</sup>, therefore this might present challenges despite the German government attempts to sanction Facebook if they do not comply. Perhaps a better solution, however, is stronger regulation of how news outlets are labelled (consider variations to the verified tick on Twitter). If they do not comply with recognised standards of journalism they must be classed as political, not news.

#### *Creating an environment that supports media.*

The above can go some way to ensuring citizens are able to make mature and reality-based judgments of who to trust while not being exposed to manipulation online. The final recommendation focuses on political actors. The argument being that they should always offer evidence and analysis based arguments, not simply negating arguments as fake if they do not agree or when reports challenge their narrative, and citizens need to be encouraged to judge their arguments on that basis. Moreover, the mainstream news media must be openly supported, by politicians and all other potential opinion-leaders, therefore retaining its position at the heart of democratic culture. The media cannot be protected from criticism, as there are significant problems with media production of fake news; however criticisms of news coverage should avoid using the phrase 'fake news' in a tit-for-tat fashion. Challenges to news must also be challenged, for their evidence base and their veracity, in order that citizens do not just seek validity through confirmation bias but can employ more informed judgment.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.fastcompany.com/3067148/most-innovative-companies/facebook-finally-admits-its-a-giant-media-company-almost>

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.fair-im-netz.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Artikel/09262016\\_Testergebnisse\\_jugendschutz\\_net\\_Hasskriminalitaet.pdf;jsessionid=F742D7DC6FF0FE4673CF297A34EFA8AD.1\\_cid297?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=1](http://www.fair-im-netz.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Artikel/09262016_Testergebnisse_jugendschutz_net_Hasskriminalitaet.pdf;jsessionid=F742D7DC6FF0FE4673CF297A34EFA8AD.1_cid297?_blob=publicationFile&v=1)