

to strengthen education for human rights and to overall improve education and upbringing for democratic citizenship in schools and in society. In the final phase of the project, these views will be synthesized in order to make them easier to use for pedagogues in the teaching plans of civic education, while reinforcing the acute need to prevent hate demonstrations and create more effective education for democratic citizenship.

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# Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society

## ABSTRACT

This article explains how to respond to misinformation and disinformation when the cure risks being worse than the disease. It refers also about potential harms and threats to open societies from over-reaction but also urgent actions to protect democracy and elections. It is also important to talk about the building of public resilience and a future-proof response to changing technology.

## KEY WORDS

Disinformation. Misinformation. Open Society. Tackling.

## Introduction

This article explains the work of Full Fact staff. It is devoted to factchecking in a public debate. The original work gives a unique evidence base about how misinformation arises and spreads. It is divided into several parts. First of all, the paper points out the lack of research about the extent of the harm caused by misinformation and disinformation. The facts of it are well-established, but without evidence of the scale and impact of the problem it is harder to design some proportionate responses. An example should be set internationally. For instance, how open societies should respond. Secondly, the paper argues for two actions to protect the integrity of elections and democracy generally. That is to mandate transparency for political advertising in real time and in machine readable formats and also imprint rules to apply online.

The third part is dedicated to the fact that the UK has an array of independent public bodies capable of informing public debate. Giving quality and trusted information is an important sign of an open response. The last part referring to moves towards regulation aimed at tackling misinformation should be scrutinised anxiously and preceded by a much more careful analysis of both the players and also the principles at stake.

Talking about misinformation and disinformation, the UK and many other countries around the world are in the process of considering how they should respond to the range of harms. The actual tasks to answer are: Should we be regulating the internet? How can we protect our democracy? The Full Fact document aims to share thinking and experience of what can work, and also where the risks lie.

## Defining problem

The term 'fake news' names problems associated with misinformation and disinformation. There are voices against this claim. As well as the issues in scope being narrowing and confusing, the phrase has been effectively weaponised and subsequently made redundant by politicians. Also, by media across the globe using it as a means of dismissing inconvenient dissent. However, we should have some background to the terms before we start to talk in connection with them. In general, misinformation stands for the inadvertent spread of false or misleading information. Disinformation is the deliberate use of false or makes for misleading information to deceive audiences. However, in the Full Fact paper there is a word that covers both definitions under the overarching term 'misinformation', by which is meant the full range of issues that are captured by the UK's policy response to misinformation and disinformation. When we refer to 'disinformation', we say this with reference to known actors or intent, for example state sponsored disinformation campaigns. This allows focussing the effort on the harms that exist in the modern information environment. Misinformation has existed in various forms for a very long time. Since we have lived in the Internet era, it has only expanded this issue. It is easier than ever to hide knowledge and on the other side harder for people to know where to place their trust. This is the right time for knowing how to respond to misinformation, not only in terms of government, but also as a society.

## Harm from misinformation

It is important to understand the types of harm and the evidence of their impact before deciding whether is necessary or appropriate for the government to take action. There are four main categories of harm that may arise from misinformation:

- No Harm – people are getting things wrong online;
- Disengagement from Democracy – abuse of power and disengagement and distrust;
- Interference in Democracy – election interference and also effect on beliefs or attitudes;
- Economic Harm – includes individuals, companies and systems;
- Risk to Life – it is meant public, health and radicalisation.

Misinformation can cause harm in an open democratic society. However, the risk of harm from over-reacting is potentially much greater. Talking about open society, the people who can do most damage are the people with power. It is known that one temptation for government is often to assume that doing something is always better than doing nothing. Freedom of speech must be the principal concern of any approach to tackling misinformation. Effective regulation and freedom of speech are not incompatible, but it is important to consider the range of ways

free speech can be protected. Any step to tackle misinformation must be cautious about potential unintended consequences on free speech and civil rights. Even relatively simple choices about what content should be amplified can suppress the speech of certain groups. Even though, the Internet is spread worldwide, offline sources are still highly significant for the general population, and for companies who seek to get their attention. The Ofcom News Consumption report 2018 says that the most-used platform for news is television.<sup>1</sup> Advertisers are still putting significant resources into reaching people offline. Despite owning huge online advertising platforms, Google and Facebook still advertise on TV because they understand the role it plays in information consumption.

## Urgent steps to protect democracy

Currently, it is possible for a candidate to run a thousand different political campaigns to win the same seat, promising something different to each group they target. If we do not act, we risk undermining the principle that democracy is a shared experience. Recognising official warnings of election interference campaigns, it would not be prudent to wait for definitive evidence of the impact of this harm to update the law to ensure that longstanding principles continue to apply to the online world. An open society means transparent democratic processes and elections. Also, companies have taken several steps to improve democratic decision making. Action is now urgent in two areas. The first of them is political advertising and the second is the so-called imprint rule. When talking about transparent political advertising it is important to enable accountability by three tests:

1. There must be full information on content, targeting, reach and spend.
2. It should be in machine readable formats.
3. It must be provided in real time.

The imprint rule requires that some campaign materials state who is promoting them. Unfortunately, it still not applied online. The recommendation is to extend the current imprint rule online. This would require details of who created, paid for and promoted the campaign to appear in all online election material, allowing voters to understand the source of any material they see online. There are two more steps to protect elections and they fall under the role of the Electoral Commission. This will be crucial in implementing and enforcing changes to maintain standards in political marketing. At the moment, they are not prepared to do this because of many other responsibilities. The second is to understand the data of disengagement. The marked electoral register should show who has voted and who has not. Legislation should allow access to academics and charities seeking to promote engagement with the electoral process. That is the evidence we have of the extent to which people are being dissuaded from taking part in democracy.

## Open information can tackle misinformation

Independent public institutions should be given a mandate to inform the public. Tackling misinformation must be about more than just trying to remove or regulate it. Telling people when they are reading something that is not true will only drive us away. In isolation it can cause the fuelling of further distrust and disengagement. Nowadays, people have a harder

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<sup>1</sup> *News consumption in the UK*. [online]. [2018-02-06]. Available at: <<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/news-consumption>>.

time knowing what to trust than ever before. The main reasons are the proliferation of sources, the speed of information flow, the comparative ease of making something appear credible, and the difficulty of knowing the true source of material online. These are the reasons why public institutions urgently need to adapt to modern information needs. Providing people with unbiased and good quality information, linking to sources and setting claims in context builds a resilience and trust by providing accountability. However, we cannot expect this to happen organically. Independent public bodies have a clear role in establishing and supporting a good information framework for the UK.

The UK is an open society and already has many of the tools it needs to tackle misinformation. It only needs to learn how to harness them more effectively. Also important is to have a number of high quality and structurally independent institutions, with staff who are skilled and required to provide the public with unbiased information. It is also mentioned that the government needs to provide a research function to support and evaluate the provision of high-quality information in public debate and provide a clear understanding of the spectrum of misinformation. They have to be able to do three things. Firstly, to understand the potential target audiences for misinformation, correct information and the extent of any harm. Secondly, establish and share evidence on best practice and lastly, they have to evaluate public information communication, including public trust and public understanding.

## How to respond without fighting the last war

We can already say that tackling misinformation online will require a more wide-ranging response than the actions which have been identified so far. As well as considering what the response should be, we also need to think about how to ensure it is fit for the future. Even though internet regulation belongs to those sensitive issues the world should deal with, misinformation needs to be treated with great caution. Any proposal for such a regulator to be tasked with tackling misinformation should be scrutinised carefully. A necessary first step towards a proportionate policy framework for internet companies is a more sophisticated understanding of how they work and the policy issues they raise. There is an urgent need for a more future-proof approach. It is important that we can use the window of opportunity available to us. Before the political debate and news shifts entirely online, we have to have this debate properly. We need to construct lasting solutions based on principles the public respects and which will survive changes in technology.

## Summary

To sum up, this issue is really complicated to generalise. First of all, handling this problem should consist of a reaction that starts by not overreacting. Later, we should recognise that the biggest risk is that of government overreaction and we should put the protection of free speech at the forefront of every discussion about tackling misinformation in its many forms. We should take advantage of the window of opportunity we have to consider and deliver a proportionate response. Improving transparency is achieved by updating election law. It means creating a public database of online political adverts, provided in real time, in machine readable format and with full information on content, targeting, reach and spend. Once the planned public consultation has ended, the government should act quickly to extend the current imprint rule from print to online. It is also necessary to review funding for and refocus the role of the Electoral Commission and to secure the implementation and enforcement of democratic protections in a digital world. After that, pass legislation to enable access to the marked electoral register for academics and charities seeking to promote engagement with the electoral process.

Another step is to build resilience through strong public institutions. First of all, invest in communication skills across government and public bodies to ensure that the public has access to, understands and trusts the evidence that is used to make decisions. Then, give public institutions a clear mandate to inform the public, and consider the roles of other bodies. It is also very important to establish a public-facing Centre of Excellence to provide a research function that can support and evaluate the provision of high-quality information in a public debate and provide a clear understanding of the scale of the problem of misinformation.

Work connected with future-proof misinformation policy needs to be done. Mainly for setting a clear intellectual framework for understanding the harms, players and functionalities, but also the principles at stake before any attempt is made to introduce regulation.

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# Report of Pew Research Center about How Teens and Parents Navigate Screen Time and Device Distractions

## ABSTRACT

54% of U.S. teens say they spend too much time on their cellphones and two-thirds of parents express concern over their teen's screen time. However parents face their own challenges of device-related distraction. Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. The Center studies U.S. politics and policy; journalism and media; internet, science and technology; religion and public life; Hispanic trends; global attitudes and trends; and U.S. social and demographic trends. Amid rolling debates about the impact of screen time on teenagers, roughly half of those ages 13 to 17 are themselves worried they spend too much time on their cellphones. Some 52% of U.S. teens report taking steps to cut back on their mobile phone use, and a similar percentage have tried to limit their use of social media (57%) or video games (58%), a new Pew Research Center survey finds.

## KEY WORDS

Teens. Parents. Cellphones. Report. Time.