Fact Checking and Information in the Age of Covid

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed and accelerated an information crisis as well as a health one. What we discover about Covid 19, how it spreads, to whom and why and how best to mitigate it—all depend on information. The essays in this special section, which this article introduces, explore the importance of information and the fundamental role of fact checkers in understanding how information flows, why mistakes are made, and how to counteract them. Fact checking as an idea and a practice emerged in the early twenty-first century, developed as a positive beacon to counteract a growing sense that information could no longer be trusted. Now, more than a decade after its creation, fact checking sits within a far more complex and chaotic media context, and its expertise and understanding has never been so important. We need to understand what fact checkers do because they are grappling with how to tether us to reality.

Keywords: fact checking, information, transparency, Covid-19, media, misinformation

COVID-19 SPREAD lethally fast when it might have been contained because of an information failure. Right from the start, had what was known been shared, the pandemic could have been contained. Handling the crisis has been beset by models built on insufficient data and confused public health messaging. It has been accompanied by the alarming triumph of conspiracy theories which undermine understanding and dangerously impede protection and recovery, and the politicisation of public health and science. In the UK, the government's unwillingness to share complete information and to hold, costively, on to a centralised plan also left a gap for misinformation and suspicion to flood in its place. Covid-19 has posed the problem and indeed the *opportunity* of communicating intelligently about the uncertainty involved in assessing information given to the public. Uncertainty is at the heart of politics and yet, rather than including the public in a realistic conversation about risk, the UK government continued saying it knew best (when it evidently did not). Information is not some mysterious material that specialists wield to 'make' policy; rather, changes in how it is accumulated and moved around

the national and international political system are re-shaping political realities. While this collection of essays was largely written before the pandemic, the virus has revealed and accelerated an information crisis that fact checkers were already pioneering work on—which makes these essays especially timely.

'Facts', as every academic knows, are complicated things—frequently in a trivial way. But fact checkers are not simple-minded positivists because they talk about facts. Where do 'fact checkers' fit in the system of knowledge making, testing, and acceptance? They are relatively new interventions, often charitably funded, that have attempted to act in the public good within systems of knowledge creation and verification. They may take bad reporting to task, but they support good reporting; they may expose misleading government information, but they intend to improve it; they are not regulators, yet they hope to have a regulatory function. They sit beside other initiatives such as freedom of information (FOI) legislation and the Information Commissioner which had been intended to help make information more secure, available and, consequently, more

used and reliable. Yet, in the US, where there is a more extensive FOI regime than in the UK, this transparency has not improved the wider issue of public understanding. We need to examine these long-term interactions more imaginatively and urgently.[1] Fact checkers are more public-facing than these bodies. As Will Moy of Full Fact told a House of Lords committee:

> Bad information can ruin lives. It damages people's health. It promotes hate and it hurts democracy. We now see people suffering from curable diseases because they have been misled by false information about vaccines. There is false information about public health issues related, for example, to the roll-out of 5G mobile communications technology. We see terrorist attacks sometimes promoted by people who have been radicalised by false information online.[2]

What we discover about Covid-19, how it spreads, to whom and why, and how best to mitigate it—all depend on information. Yet, the virus has exploited fissures in societies and raced through vulnerabilities left by pre-existing inequality. It has exposed what we knew but had chosen to ignore. How we individually, collectively, socially, politically, and internationally cope with it depends on what we know and how we understand it. Previous pandemics were often managed by great infrastructural developments: sewers and clean water for cholera; draining marshes and living in cities for malaria; and this one will require a new infrastructure settlement, but this time it will be of information, not materials.

Good fact checkers are on the side of the public interest in this new world. We need what they do, but we need what they understand even more. They know that accuracy requires a resistance to self-deception and wishful thinking. They know how things move on the information highways. Their understanding of how corrupt information circulates has been developed by practical experiment. We need to learn, generalise (and scale up) from what they have painfully discovered in a very fast-moving situation about how information is generated, how it sticks to whom, how best to combat the malign and disruptive effects of bad information. Bernard Williams asked in 2002, 'Can the notions of truth and truthfulness be intellectually

stabilised in such a way that what we understand about truth and our chances of arriving at it can be made to fit with our need for truthfulness?'[3] The problem he believed he was addressing was the flawed allegations of some *jejune* but widely accepted claims of relativism. But it turned out that he was posing the central political problem of the first part of the twenty-first century.

Fact checkers and authority

Fact checkers fight against the contemporary tendency of all discussions to dissolve into torpid cynicism; they battle with entrenched fanatical beliefs. Febrile disputes about 'facts' have dis-orientated whole areas of knowledge.[4] There is a paradox at the centre of their work: more information and reliable ways of checking and understanding information are available than ever before and citizens ought to be (may even be) far better informed than at any time before. Yet, good information no longer drives out bad. Fact checkers began as people who wanted, for various reasons, to inoculate democratic systems against misleading information, but have found themselves willy-nilly in the middle of a bewildering new information revolution. Bad information is a now globalised problem with national consequences.

What is happening to the structure of understanding? Experimental research suggests correcting information can correct public belief in that information most of the time.[5] But it is not enough to put out fact checks. As Amy Sippett and Will Moy argue in their essay, fact checkers have found that it is more effective to work back up the supply chain and attempt to improve the quality of originated information and reduce the further spread of bad information by influencing, frightening, and setting constraints around policy makers, politicians, and others. Fact checkers understand that investigating why mistakes are made, whether they are intentional or accidental, and explaining the processes behind errors, is vital and educational—that the more everyone across the system understands the processes better, the more scepticism will be well-based (as opposed to rampant and dangerous cynicism). They begin to understand how false beliefs have got such traction.

Yet much of what they do is positive. In this way 'regulation' is not merely about stopping bad things, it is about making good things happen. For example, in the UK the regulation of broadcasting has made broadcasters serve audiences with a wider menu of quality programmes and constrained them usefully to serve audiences as citizens rather than mere commercial cash generators. It has held 'news' to a standard by widening the scope of reporting. Regulation has helped make broadcasting a public service. This is in stark contrast to the economic model of advertising in the past and social media viral advertising now. In this way fact checkers are trying to 'regulate' information in a positive way. Fact checkers are also in the forefront of exploring the new shapes of legitimacy. If authority is dispersed in the new information system, but legitimacy matters, fact checkers are mapping the new territory and looking at how good quality information is supplied and where and how trust can be built in it. Political parties, scientists, and governments interested in the public good need to understand this novel architecture. Fact checking that is well done and researched is a practical experiment in reforming how societies understand information.

Yet, as Amy Sippitt and Nic Dias also show in their important essay in this collection, academic research and fact checking could be better aligned. While behavioural science has tended to investigate micro-behaviour in the experimental tradition and reveals many important aspects of how beliefs get formed and transmitted, it is abstracted from the context of the live world of rapid change. It ignores the causes or impact of larger shifts that have taken place, even in the last hectic five years, to political systems and the parameters of political behaviour. Nor is there much useful research in this tradition, at least, on the formation of elite attitudes and beliefs. Perhaps fact checkers need to be open to historical and political analysis of shifts, and academics more adventurous methodologically.

We have barely begun to explore the necessary philosophical underpinnings to protect the public interest in information exchange and commoditisation. There is an impoverished public discussion about the legitimacy of collecting information, holding and using it—by whom, for what purposes, and with what constraints. Unthinking libertarianism clashes with unthinking centralism. Yet, there are also other kinds of well-developed understanding of the obligations and decencies of managing information that we have barely begun to use: 'old fashioned' archivists, the people that make history possible, by finding, storing, cataloguing, and making available material, have well-developed ethical and practical codes we can learn from. But then, the digital graveyard may be wrecking our capacity to use archives to establish past events. This is not a narrow 'academic' concern—for example, the Hillsborough Inquiry finally arrived at justice through revealing attempts to tamper with evidence uncovered in the archive. Of course, 'facts' as any historian, archivist, political scientist, or careful thinker knows, need interpretation and contextualising. But this is exactly what fact checkers are attempting to do. Fact checkers are another group of people who understand much about the fast-moving ways in which information can be manipulated and how it sticks. For better policy we need better principals and we need to build coalitions of actors, including fact checkers, who understand how in practice the public interest needs to be protected. Our magnificent capacity to use the vast new sources of information for good purposes will have to be fought for. Good information infrastructural change is the priority.

As Covid hit, we were already in a global pandemic of false information, inflamed feelings, widely-believed conspiracies, when the progressive view that good information would inform policy and drive out the merely stupid or wrong or bad has faltered. Fact checkers were already finding ways of operating in this developing world. Yet, Covid has accelerated the danger that science may be further subsumed in the culture wars conflict in which everything is politicised. Meanwhile, hostile foreign powers deliberately spread false information and undermine views for malign purposes. Merely destabilising knowledge and disrupting trust has an enormous impact on beliefs and behaviours—and ripples out from the first suspicion to contaminate what had previously felt like secure and reliable information. So, what fact checkers begin to understand about building trust is also vital.

Where fact checking came from

The emergence of fact checkers was a response to the sense that information could no longer be relied on. There was a new, grinding, disjunction between the model of a democratic public—relatively well-informed and relatively capable of arriving at relatively good judgements about its interests and the collective good—and what seemed to be happening, that the very basis of democratic opportunity, the capacity to make independent judgments on a fairly informed basis, was being eroded. By the early 2000s, sections of the media (in the UK the tabloid press, in the US tabloid radio and TV, in India and Pakistan raucous TV, in Latin America and many other places, a media that was in effect the propaganda arm of business and political groups) were behaving as if they could make and break anybody, say anything, make anything up, with impunity. Fact checkers originally emerged as a corrective to what, then, looked like a smaller-scale political problem. Some politicians, some in public life, and some media were distorting evidence more flagrantly than in the recent past. This, in turn, had the capacity to undermine the independence of regulatory authorities from statistical to legal.

Fact checking as an idea and a practice has a history: these organisations emerged more or less at the same time in the first decade of the twenty-first century (although there has been a recent explosion of them). Each national fact checker was an intervention into the particular settlement of media, politics, and information in that country. This collection of papers demonstrates some of that variety. They largely believed that voters and citizens could be trusted to make responsible judgements of their own interests if they had access to accurate information.

In the UK at least, the launch of fact checking was part of a wider uneasiness that launched a series of organisations (from The Media Standards Trust, to Channel 4 Fact Check, to Full Fact and that ultimately lead to the Leveson Inquiry). Some of the most important parts of the new system appeared at a similar time: fact checking, FOI and the monitoring site Theyworkforyou.com were all created or implemented in 2005. Fascinatingly, they came about because the individuals who set the organisations going sensed a perturbing shift in mores that they also believed could be corrected. This was an interesting example of generational experience: although fact checking organisations are inevitably led by younger people, they were launched by an older, experienced generation. Who, observing a new dis-inhibition in parts of the press and a damaging impact on policy, felt a decline from some previous expectation of habits and standards. These pioneers were acutely aware, perhaps, of the unwritten lines in the sand that were the most significant pillar of the UK's unwritten constitution. Peter Hennessy had said that 'The British Constitution is a state of mind ... It requires a sense of restraint all round to make it work'.[6] This flotilla of tiny organisations was launched to re-enforce such informal, but critical, lines in the sand.

In the UK Full Fact learnt from American fact checkers, but also started from a premise that politicians and public servants would prefer to be accurate. There was a kind of innocent naivety in the approach which has been: 'Why did you get that wrong?', and to the public who needed to understand how evidence was constructed: 'Why is it sometimes hard to see what is wrong?'. As recently as the early 2000s, at least in the UK and the US, there was also strong residual belief in the power of shame, that there would be penalties, dishonour, and loss of power if you were to be shown to be deliberately altering facts, and this would correct the system. In the UK fact checking has been corrective and instructive, not accusative in tone. Fact checking processes were seen as having both a prophylactic and disinfectant effect. Yet, it soon became clear that fact checking was inadequate—that it was necessary to seek action, correction, and to address the systematic causes, not just the episodic symptom of a 'wrong' fact. In the UK Full Fact, for example, looked up the political system to bring a novel kind of direct accountability.

Fact checkers have seen this human scale of intervention blown away by the internet and social media—as well as the exploitation of the manipulation of information by

political players in new ways. The social media make information networks apparently intimate and personal, the possibilities for organisation far larger, and the potential for believing far more complex. The whole ecology has shifted. Fact checkers are now grappling with far larger structural problems in information alongside the more topical ones. They are also dealing with the world's largest companies ever—Facebook and Google, while Twitter now fact checks the American president. The issue is the capacity to bring public interest policies to bear on such vast, secretive and powerful commercial firms, and to identify what the systemic solutions need to be.

Information politics

Fact checkers are one set of players in a rapidly changing environment, which potentially challenges the 'uneasy' relationship between truth and democracy.[7] The 'watchdogs' can be formal bodies or informal groups of activists, loose groups or what Michael Schudsen calls 'political observatories'.[8] In the UK, these can be statutory bodies, such as the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the Information Commissioner, journalistic groups, such as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, or new kinds of campaigning organisations such as Citizens UK or 38 Degrees. Indeed, they are closely related (although uncomfortably) to the public interest media. Their motives are similarly varied: they can be partisan or objective; draw on various data; and act as gatekeepers for information or as activist facilitators. But although fact checkers can be advocates for the public interest up the political system, they have a clear public face. The public knows what they do.

Fact checking nevertheless emerged in different places and in enormously different information systems: the notion of 'fact checking' (which sounds unitary) is very varied. In some places there was no access to 'clean' information. In Africa, commercial development is simply impossible in a corrupted information ecology, and one task was to make such information accessible, as Peter Cunliffe-Jones shows in his piece. In Argentina, Chequeado emerged when the media and the government information systems were overrun by political partisan allegiances (and where really fundamental economic data were missing). Its vision and success have become a beacon across Latin America as the essay in this collection demonstrates. Of course, there are major information providers and sellers with no fact checking at all.

Fact checking organisations also understand (and this is surely part of the uncomfortable complexity of the new information settlement) how deliberate, malign (and foreign) attempts to interfere in public understanding and trust in information work. What started out as domestic reforming organisations have become willy-nilly international operators.

Where next for fact checking?

Many components of the information system have been under sustained pressure for some time. Much of what goes under the name of 'journalism' is mendacious and mere propaganda. The long-running collapse of the economic basis for quality investigative reporting has accelerated during the Covid pandemic. Everywhere, journalists have been sacked and reporting engines shut down for lack of revenue. Yet, without the investigative capacity of proper journalism and the testing of information that goes with it, we will become even more stupid. Fact checkers and public interest investigative reporting are complementary.

The vast tech companies first stole content, then the advertising, and then the attention of audiences. Their deceitful slights of hand, passing themselves off for commercial advantage as 'neutral' conduits, when they were maximising traffic in ways that have undermined democracy, was not inevitable. On the one hand, there was a political and administrative failure to recognise what was happening. On the other, a public compliance with things that became indispensably useful. This refusal to see them as publishers with responsibilities has damaged our capacity to know ourselves or even understand what information systems are doing to us. This makes it easier for politicians simply to deny reality or call it 'fake'. In the new political settlement that is emerging, 'authority' is dispersed (except in authoritarian systems).

A far longer engrained suspicion of all of this has huge effects for our political systems, and those are playing out in front of our eyes.

Fact checkers, by attempting to intervene effectively in this territory, came to understand the systematic pressures on understanding and knowledge. Indeed, there are some signs that there are shifts: Twitter and Facebook are now working to take down or demote false or dangerous material (if only for reasons of economic pressure). Facebook has a third party fact-checking scheme, working with independent fact checkers to check content on the platform and to down-rank it when it is false so that fewer users come across it. But we need a new international information settlement (one not merely decreed by the tech firms). We need local legislation, transparency requirements, better public education, and we need bigger and more ambitious policy that helps us use, not be used and sold by, the new wonders of information plenty. Fact checkers are grappling with questions of how to scale up their work in this new age, how to respond at the speed required, and how to manage the increasingly internationalised information system.

Like much else during Covid, the opportunity to have a frank public conversation about information has not been used as well as it might. Slightly bewilderingly, after the deceptions in campaigns of the last four years, the British public have been treated to earnest, but snappily produced government adverts everywhere, warning us about false rumours and incorrect information. This must have been refreshing work for British public servants, a reminder of older ways. In the wider sphere of the attempt to manage the virus, sadly the familiar pattern of blame, lack of frankness, and distortion, have re-emerged. Yet, the only way to live with the virus and not die from it is to use and understand information, and there has been a surge in public interest in fact checking. If fact checking needs international standards (because such an attractive idea can also be stolen and corrupted), and it needs better relationships with academic research, perhaps it also needs to build coalitions of the interested, for it probably needs better policy making to assist it.

Fact checkers, in all of their variety and capacity, have been in one information front-line for some time: they understand the nasty underside of contemporary political structures. Their work is not over there, not narrow, not specialised; it is about the most fundamental building blocks of political systems today. They are concerned with telling the true from the false, with sincerity—largely a matter of will and morality—and accuracy. But above all, they are exploring how complicated evidence is, how beliefs are now structured, how fabulations take hold, and they want to understand how the truth can be convincingly told. They are trying to understand how to tether us to reality.

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Notes

1 P. Hennessy, 'The less secret state', *History Today*, vol. 62, no. 10, 2012; https://www.historytoday.com/archive/less-secret-state (accessed 21 August 2020).

2 UK Parliament, Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies**, *Digital Technology and the Resurrection of Trust*, Report of Session 2019–21, 29 June 2020, HL Paper 77;** https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5801/ldselect/lddemdigi/77/7706.htm (accessed 21 August 2020).

3 B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness,* Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 7.

4 India, for example has over a hundred fact checkers. Many are fronts for misinformation peddling, and few of them have been prepared to confront significant abuses by powerful corporations or the government. However, a couple are doing significant work in an increasingly tough environment. This is why the creation of an international standard and approval body is so important: to provide a 'kite mark' of legitimacy.

5 N. Walter and R. Tukachinsky, 'A meta-analytic examination of the continued influence of misinformation in the face of correction: how powerful is it, why does it happen, and how to stop it?', *Communication Research*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2020, pp. 155–177; N. Walter and S. T. Murphy, 'How to unring the bell: a meta-analytic approach to correction of misinformation', *Communication Monographs*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2018, pp. 423–41.

6 P. Hennessy, 'Britain's good-chap model of government is coming apart', *The Economist*, 18 December 2018.

7 See B. Worthy, *The Politics of the Freedom of Information*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017.

8 M. Schudsen, *The Rise of the Right to Know*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University/Belknap Press, 2015, ch. 6.