



MEDIA POLICY BRIEF 20

Fake News: Public Policy Responses

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The LSE Media Policy Project is funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund 5, with additional support from the Open Society Foundation.

LSE Media Policy Project Series Editors: Damian Tambini, Emma Goodman

The author would like to thank Emma Goodman, Nora Kroeger and Franco Polizzi for their valuable input.

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March 2017

LSE Media Policy Project

blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/

Suggested citation:

Tambini, D. (2017). *Fake News: Public Policy Responses*. Media Policy Brief 20. London: Media Policy Project, London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Key messages

- The term 'fake news' is ill-defined. Policymakers should be aware that the term has been used to serve the purposes of various political actors.
- Some fake news problems do require action on the part of policymakers as well as media and tech companies, but the approach must be cautious, proportionate and protect free speech.
- In a small number of cases, deliberately misleading 'news' that attempts to undermine elections could pose a threat to national security. Intermediaries such as Google and Facebook may be required to take such content down, but in most cases fact checking and monitoring will be sufficient.
- Recent studies suggest that a majority of citizens (both students and adults) lack the capacity to correctly differentiate fake news from verified content.
- Digital advertising revenue fuels fake news, and market mechanisms can be encouraged to respond to this problem.
- Legitimate news sources, including critical voices, should be protected from interference by state bodies and also from threat, intimidation and exclusion from news gathering opportunities such as news conferences.
- The appropriate policy response should be to encourage critical media literacy, self-regulation by platforms, and targeted enforcement in the very few cases that are threats to national security. New fines and changes in liability are not required, and legitimate media should be protected from accusations of 'fake news'.

Introduction

'Let truth and falsehood grapple. Who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?'

– Milton

An apparent proliferation of inaccurate and misleading news stories has led to calls for new policy interventions, from fact checking by social media companies to new laws imposing fines for posting or sharing fake news. This raises some difficult issues in media policy. Is this a new problem? Is so called 'fake news' distinct from longstanding problems with accuracy or objectivity in journalism? Is the controversy rather a response to the scale of current political changes, and their impact on various interested parties? Are there fundamental changes going on in our Western media systems which undermine traditional journalistic crafts of fact checking and verification, and incentivise more emotionally resonant content, at the expense of quality, reliable journalism?

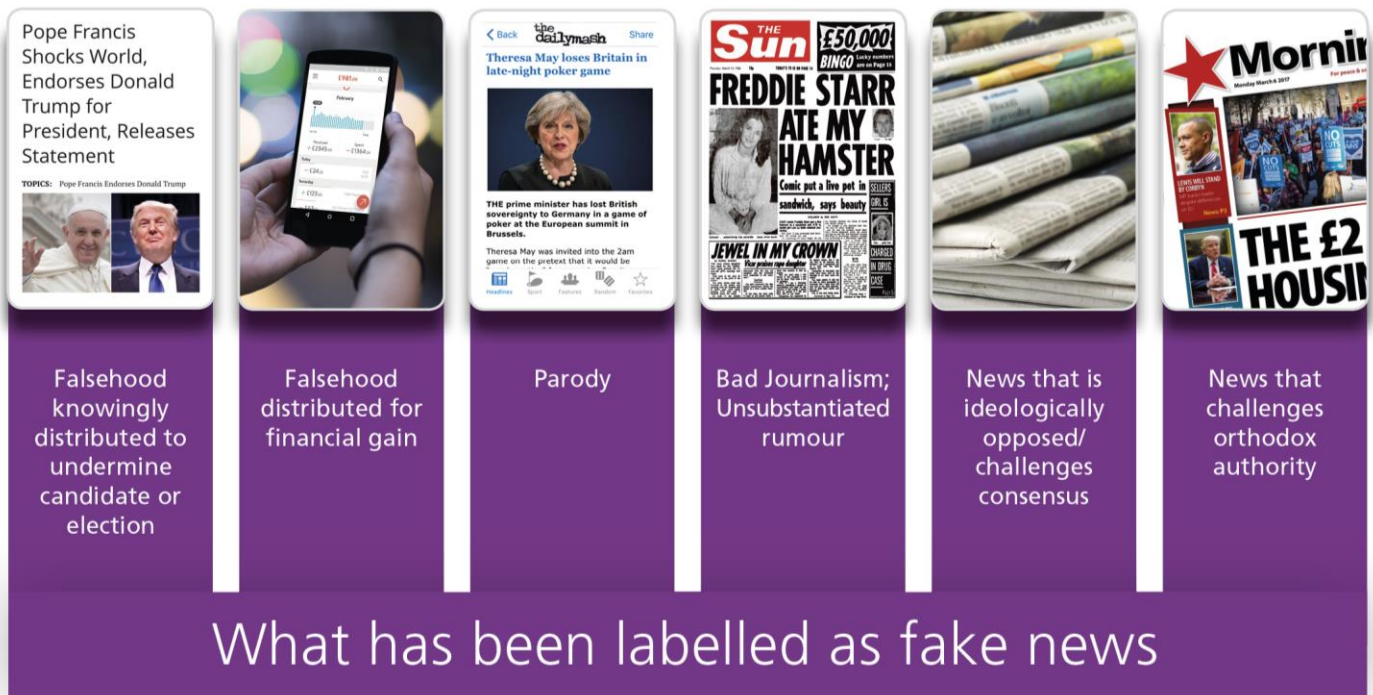
The call for new policy responses to the issue of fake news engages obvious problems of freedom of expression: decisions about the truth or falsity of a statement have tended to be left to journalists and the media themselves, and oversight of such decisions could compromise their independence and speech rights.

This paper sets out some of the groundwork for understanding and responding to the problem of 'fake news'.

Six types of fake news: Unpacking the concept

The term 'fake news', on closer inspection, turns out to refer to a range of phenomena: from deliberately misleading attempts to undermine elections or national security at one end of the continuum to any view that challenges consensus 'group think' on the other.

Each of these categories needs to be broken down further. They contain a variety of phenomena and require different responses:



1. Alleged foreign interference in domestic elections through fake news

It is claimed that Russian organisations have supported distribution of fake stories that support new populists such as Donald Trump and the Front National in France. The European Union has funded a disinformation review: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>. The aim of this review is to monitor and fact-check what appear to be deliberate attempts to spread misinformation. There seem to be relatively few examples of deliberately fake stories propagated with the aim of affecting election results that are published in the language of the target country.

2. Ad-driven invention

Fake news "boiler houses" in Macedonia target resonance and share-ability ahead of any consideration for truth. Numerous investigations confirm that new ad models open new opportunities for people to make money through the peddling of fake news, and this may have been a factor in misinformation during the US presidential elections. Social media companies are in a difficult position: they do not wish to actively engage as editors in the

process of news selection and distribution, but neither do they want to be seen as choosing to do nothing about this problem. It is of course theoretically possible for news sites or stories to fit into both categories 1 and 2.

3. Parody and satire

One of the refreshing peculiarities of social media news is a new flourishing of political satire, and in particular, parody of news genres. Since Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, it has been abundantly clear that this form of fake news is a particularly important form of political speech, and it is important to note that regulatory solutions should protect, and perhaps even encourage it. A by-product of this genre has always been that a number of people will believe these parodies to be true. However as in the case of *A Modest Proposal*, when they are believed to be true, satire and parody are at their most powerful and are most worthy of protection.

4. Bad journalism

In the history of journalism there are numerous infamous cases of journalists simply making it up. In celebrity gossip in particular, journalists have an interest in conspiring with the publicity-hungry subjects of stories to feed public hunger for stories with scant regard for truth. Journalism sourcing ethics do not deal effectively with this. Since the UK Editors' Code has been in existence, the most complained about article is consistently Article 1: Accuracy.

- i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.

Since neither industry body IPSO, nor its predecessor the PCC pro-actively policed this article of the code (they responded to complaints) and since neither body sought to adjudicate accuracy itself (they focused on journalistic processes of 'taking care'), standards of accuracy in the press have not had a strong incentive to improve: readers were left to decide what was true and what was not and the assumption was that this would lead to at least some commercial pressure to verify. The result was that readers didn't really know what to believe, and a great many people in all likelihood believe much that is fabricated. In some cases, where the subjects of stories are likely to complain, there are stronger incentives for more active verification to avoid potentially embarrassing complaints being upheld.

5. News that is ideologically opposed

Donald Trump in his infamous press conferences during the first month of his presidency devoted a good deal of time to "calling out" what he described as the fake news contained in the "mainstream media". His ire was directed at the New York Times and CNN. But similar attempts to undermine and relativise authoritative voices, or indeed any voice that challenges one's own perspective have used the phrase "fake news" as a form of insult.

6. News that challenges orthodox authority

Any political community in any political epoch is characterised by a zeitgeist or shared orthodoxy, a set of rules or civic codes, or even 'hegemony'. Attempts to present facts and events from the perspective that is not based on the shared set of assumptions would likely be dismissed as fake. This is seen most clearly in the area of business news. It is well established that business news is subject to 'pro-cyclical' group think which tends to exacerbate market corrections when they do come, as was the case during the financial crisis. In relation to all of these, it is important to reflect on the difference between statements of fact, the framing of those facts, and the decision-making process which determines the 'news value' of those facts and whether they deserve a wider audience.

All of these categories of phenomena are subject to the general law including for example:

- the law of defamation that would offer means to control fake news that is also defamatory,
- intellectual property law that could support prosecution of fake news deliberately passing itself off under an established news brand,
- electoral law, in some cases, could set aside the results of elections based on deliberate misinformation by a candidate.

Each of these categories faces the same challenges at a fundamental level: it is important to balance the public interest in the free flow of news and the public interest in protecting news institutions as a form of independent verification. There may also be problems of enforcement, particularly across jurisdictions. There are also important questions of responsibility to resolve: if a false claim is made by campaigner, for example on a poster or on the side of a bus, is it the campaigner, or the news report that is responsible for propagating this claim?

These difficulties explain why international defenders of free speech, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, have been outspoken regarding the dangers of regulating fake news^a. We are concerned about news because news matters. This is a debate about the commonly agreed facts upon which societal decisions – including elections – are made. The problem is that the previous gatekeeping structures that filtered news according to values of truth and objectivity – principally journalism – are being displaced.

^a See the Joint Declaration issued in March 2017 <http://www.osce.org/fom/302796?download=true>

News, truth and facts

It is helpful to understand journalism as one among several approaches to agreeing on a version of truth. Philosophy and the social sciences have recently become polarised between “relativist” or “perspectivalist” approaches on one hand, that deny the possibility of single authoritative notions of truth regarding anything but the simplest facets of physical reality, and on the other hand “universalist” approaches that stress the possibility of agreeing the “truth” of statements with certainty. Some variants, particularly in continental philosophy, have stressed the political nature of the process of agreeing truth, stressing the role of power in establishing “regimes of truth”.

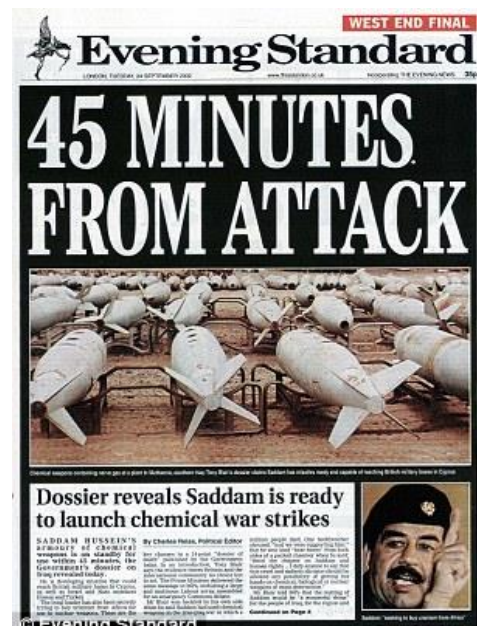
In practice, what counts as truth depends on the context. In different realms of social life we have developed various rules and practices for establishing what should be treated as truth.

Even in science, the possibility of positively establishing the truth of statements is in doubt. In his work on the philosophy of science, Karl Popper held that science progresses through seeking to falsify statements, but in the daily practice of science a variant of “verificationism” based on logical positivism underlies most applications of the scientific method. The basic premise of this approach is that only empirically verifiable statements are capable of being true. This is important, because it signals that there are different kinds of statements: part of ‘news’ consists in factual claims that are capable of empirical verification, whereas much of what is considered news, even if opinion is excluded, consists in statements that would be difficult to empirically verify, particularly statements that are “essentially contested” because they are politically consequential.

An example for the challenges of verification in journalism would be the “45 minutes” claim published in the London Evening Standard on 24 September 2003. It is empirically verifiable that a government spokesman made the claim that Saddam Hussein had the capability to launch weapons of mass destruction capable of reaching the UK. So if the ‘news’ is that such a claim was made by the government, it is relatively easy to establish a procedure for verifying/ fact-checking this. But if a claim is reported as fact, i.e. it is a fact that Saddam Hussein’s government could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes, then that claim would be much more difficult to verify, as the UK intelligence services learned.

In practice, the way news is presented makes it notoriously difficult to separate fact, opinion and value, and as the famous Evening Standard front page and the accompanying headlines make abundantly clear, there is a constant blurring between reporting the views of others and the authoritative voice of the news outlet itself. There is a grey area of value statements, or the reporting as fact of third party claims which are not conducive to verification.

In law, different areas of legislation and case law establish different standards and approaches to truth. Our adversarial legal system involves a process of contestation and a series of standards and legal processes for establishing substantive legal truth and agreeing the “facts” of the case and the balance of probabilities relevant to the dispute. For example, the standard “beyond reasonable doubt” applies in most



criminal cases in Anglo-Saxon countries, but it is notoriously difficult to define and apply consistently. Memorably, when asked what it meant, the judge in the Vicky Pryce case which involved a driving offence by a politician, said “a reasonable doubt is a doubt that is reasonable”. In practice, standards and rules of thumb are used, such as the idea that ‘in the mind of any reasonable person there should be no doubt that could be described as reasonable’. There remains a dispute within the law about whether judicial findings of fact need to be distinguished from substantive truth because of practical difficulties, for example the absence of evidence. Legal conditions of perfect evidence, like economic conditions of perfect information, rarely apply, and court proceedings could be characterised as agreeing a version of the truth acceptable to the parties rather than the truth in any scientific sense.^b

In journalism these epistemological questions are bypassed by professional practices of verification, and norms in particular of sourcing and fact checking. The practices of source verification in journalism differ from country to country and from title to title. The “gold standard” of two named sources applies only in the most important stories, and in the elite titles that have the resources to source and check stories to a very high standard. However, in the daily practice of journalism, particularly tabloid newspaper journalism, standards of verification have been applied in a patchy way.

Broadcasters, which have been regulated by Ofcom and the BBC Trust, have more exacting standards. Particularly since broadcasting became the principal source of news in the mid-20th century, various forms of verification have applied, due to journalistic commitments to truth, sourcing and fact checking. Broadcasters are required to meet higher journalistic standards, including tougher sanctions for inaccuracy, but they face no pre-publication censorship. Article 5 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code for example demands that: “News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality”; and that “Significant mistakes in news should normally be acknowledged and corrected on air quickly.”

In this sense, media systems, whilst not bias free, did act as a filter that encouraged distribution of statements that had passed various professional tests of truth. Media systems also incorporated clear “fact-value” distinctions, as captured in the famous dictum attributed to CP Scott of the Guardian: “comment is free, but facts are sacred.” Opinion was discouraged in the powerful medium of broadcasting, and segregated from news reporting in print. Some aspects of news can and does aspire to high standards of factual claims making that are conducive to falsification and fact checking whilst others essentially comprise value statements. Contrast “Trump is not a US citizen” and “Boris Johnson had an extramarital affair” with “Trump is effective” and “Boris Johnson is an idiot”. The latter statements, as value statements or opinions are not capable of falsification, even though many will argue against the sentiment.

It is of course the case that a great deal of news consists in factual claims such as the notorious claim in the Sun newspaper that the TV comedian “Freddie Starr ate my Hamster”. The hamster herself might not be available to testify, but we may well be able to assemble witnesses to take part in a process that supports establishing ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ whether or not he did. The problem is that, as was revealed during the Leveson Inquiry, it is often in nobody’s interest to do this. Particularly where facts and values are essentially contested, and politically consequential, the resources required to do so would be huge. The current environment, where what is classed as ‘news’ is growing and a much looser term than it once was this is becoming more difficult. It is difficult to hold to such a high standard of truth in the Daily Mill of 24-hour news, and would be

^b <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2388&context=facpub>

impossible if we include citizen journalism and social media posts.

In summary: journalism and the law involve pragmatic practices for establishing the truth and falsity of statements appropriate to context. In legal cases, adversarial contestation establishes not substantive truth, but a version of events that the participants in a legal case can agree upon. In journalism, professional journalistic standards of sourcing determine what can be published. Much of what is considered news includes value statements that are in any case not capable of verification or falsification. Until now, these approaches have continued in relative stability. But profound changes, both in the media and in politics, have undermined existing institutions.

In some (but by no means all) online journalism, the approach has been to 'publish now, correct later,' the idea being that the 'wisdom of crowds' or crowdsourced fact checking can easily correct errors in this medium. The argument against this approach, of course, is that an error may have gone half way around the world before it is retracted, and errors can prove difficult to correct once they have taken hold. As the BBC found in a study of online rumours: 'the number of followers of people who tweeted the rumour was much larger than the number of followers of those who corrected it'.^c

^c <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170301-lies-propaganda-and-fake-news-a-grand-challenge-of-our-age>

Fake news. Why now? Who benefits?

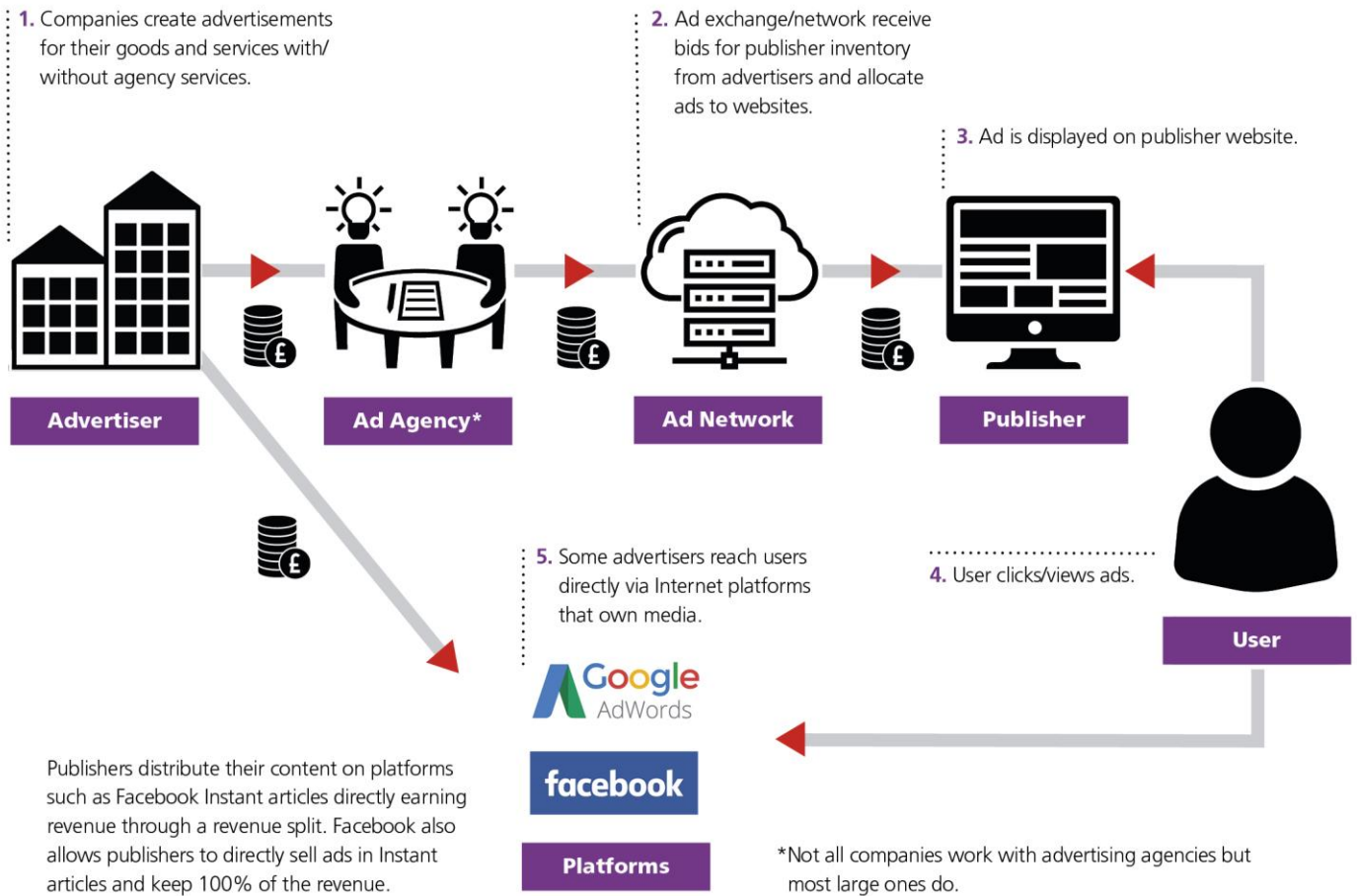
Why have politicians and the media suddenly started talking about fake news? It is worth asking who benefits from using this concept. I would say there are three main beneficiaries:

- The new populists benefit because they use the notion of “fake news” to undermine legitimate opposition, and resist fourth estate accountability. The Trump administration in the US uses the term fake news in a blanket way to describe news content it disagrees with. This approach becomes particularly serious and alarming when it is used to justify new forms of media regulation, including restricting access of certain media to news events and information.
- Historical losers. Those on the wrong side of recent historical events claim that political changes result from misinformation. Both the EU referendum vote in the UK and the Trump victory in the US have been blamed on ‘fake news’. Some even go so far as to suggest that a result based on misinformation is not legitimate.
- Legacy media. At the very least, the established “mainstream media” want to discredit the ‘wisdom of crowds’ and aim for a return to trusted news brands. The media benefit from the “fake news crisis” in their long-term battle with the new tech intermediaries. By claiming that the intermediaries (mainly Facebook and Google) are in fact acting as media, and doing so irresponsibly, with none of the obligations that traditional media have taken on, they can seek to get them regulated as such, and recoup lost ad revenue.

All three of these constituencies have a claim to a grain of truth about fake news, and have forced it onto the agenda. It should also be acknowledged that the historical circumstances of 2016-2017 have been rather particular: a US election and an EU referendum involving very polarized choices in the context of a collapse of deference. So many promoting the concept of fake news have an axe to grind, but at the same time it cannot be denied that structural changes in media systems are transforming the procedures for verifying and distributing news.

Advertising and fake news

The graphic below summarises the money-go-round that incentivises distribution of any content that is “shareable” and resonant, in contrast to the previous ad model that tended to support news that goes through an (expensive) process of verification or meets a quality standard.



Here’s how it works:

1. *Programmatic* advertising is sold automatically on the basis not of which outlet or news brand it will appear in, but on the basis of how many ‘clicks’ or views it will receive from a target demographic, is bought by an advertiser. This is important: the advertiser now pays for clicks and views, not news.
2. The ad agency, usually through an intermediary, an ad network or a platform such as Google or Facebook, operates a real-time auction that is entirely automated. It serves ads to end users, charging advertisers and transferring payments for each view from advertisers to publishers while taking a commission. In case where the intermediary also owns the media space, such as Google or Facebook, they get to keep the whole fee.

3. The publisher, which could be either a legitimate news company, or a bogus fake news boiler house operating out of Macedonia or Moscow, also contract their inventory with the ad network, and with intermediaries such as Facebook and YouTube, thereby receiving revenue from a number of platforms proportionately to the number of views and shares they receive. It is in the interests of the publisher, the intermediary, and sometimes - but not always - the advertiser, to maximise the views of any article. More views equal more clicks, more clicks equal more revenue for publisher and intermediary and more web traffic or brand exposure for the advertisers. In some cases, it is not in the advertiser's interest to appear next to questionable content.
4. In a hypothetical example, a publisher who uses Facebook instant articles to distribute their content could choose to put ads next to the content. A video ad, for example, is reported to have a 55:45 revenue split^d in favour of the publisher. If the article was to achieve a reach of 500,000 users with a cost per thousand impression^e of \$7.19 (the average cost every time the ad was seen by 1,000 people), this would mean \$1,977 for the publisher and \$1,617 for Facebook.

Who wins?

Arguably, publishers who perfect the art of distraction are the biggest winners in this system.

It could of course be argued that it was always the case that cheap, vivid-if-dubious content paid, which is why newspapers published 'fake news' that would attract idle consumers standing at supermarket checkouts. But the new system bypasses the checks and ethical balances that had evolved in most Western press systems: freedom of the press was always subject to balancing rights, and self-regulation and professional ethics which encouraged accuracy and responsible journalism.

The platforms also benefit. They are dependent on consumers spending more time with sticky content, and have a lot to gain from the current power shift away from traditional news publishers. Ad agencies, ad networks, and internet service providers all benefit.

There is a reason that the impacts are being felt globally and have even been linked to 'post truth' politics^f more generally: This shift in advertising models is not something that is happening at the margins: it is a massive structural change that is transforming media systems everywhere.

We are no longer talking about garish front pages of the National Enquirer or the Sun. The Sun does at least operate within some semblance of ethical self-restraint, however flawed the PCC and IPSO may be. The new publishers can be anywhere in the world, perhaps including countries that have a foreign policy interest in using fake news to undermine national security or delegitimise democracy.

Like the notorious "50 cent" bloggers in China^g, these proliferate fastest when a multi-sided

^d <http://www.recode.net/2017/1/9/14211466/facebook-video-advertising-midroll>

^e <https://adespresso.com/academy/blog/facebook-ads-cost/>

^f <http://www.lse.ac.uk/website-archive/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=3704>

^g https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/19/the-chinese-government-fakes-nearly-450-million-social-media-comments-a-year-this-is-why/?utm_term=.4cfcf403e21

market can be established. If publishers are not only able to access revenues from advertisers and platforms, but also from government clients of one kind or another. From a democratic point of view, the sad thing about the new ecology is that it feeds on the civic trust that it destroys: duping consumers into sharing content, by harnessing their civic emotions and polarising political ideologies. The most shareable news is that which confirms our prejudices and those of our networks.

In sum, what this new advertising ecosystem does is establish a much more direct economic link between the resonance and share-ability of individual articles and economic reward. It also enables smaller publishers to thrive outside the ethical and self-regulatory constraints which in the past tightly reinforced an ethics of truth-seeking.

Policy responses to fake news

The policy response to fake news: China as a comparative case

The example of China's crackdown on "online rumours" since 2013 is a useful illustration of the dangers of (i) establishing structures of prepublication regulation and (ii) having too wide definition of what constitutes unverified fake news or "rumour".

During 2013-2014 it was reported that the Chinese authorities had intensified their policy of deleting posts on Chinese social media such as Wechat. Chinese authorities claimed that these were "necessary to safeguard citizens' rights and interests, and promote the healthy development of the internet". The Chinese approach is to make operators of social networks responsible for removing a widely defined category of content considered to be 'rumours' and jail terms of up to 3 years for those responsible. Service providers are required to suspend the accounts of those found to be responsible for spreading "irresponsible rumours". A number of categories of such rumours are identified: these include undermining morality, the socialist system, and the authenticity of information. Discretion for deciding what fits into these categories lies with the social networks, but these are periodically reviewed under the terms of their licences. In China, social networks must be in receipt of several different licences from central government.^h Anecdotal evidence suggests that incentivising intermediary filtering and blocking through the threat of strong penalties leads to intermediaries developing automated blocking and filtering, together with expensive human-led programs of deletion. Due to the lack of transparency it is impossible to know precisely what is blocked, but the evidence reported by Western journalists suggests that over blocking is rife.

The new Italian draft law on fake news

In February 2017 a draft law was introduced to the Italian Parliament in response to the issue of 'Fake News'. This attempted to criminalise the posting or sharing of 'false, exaggerated or tendentious news', imposing fines of up to 5000 Euros on those responsible. In addition, the law proposed imprisonment for the most serious forms of fake news such as those that might incite crime or violence, and also imposed an obligation on social media platforms to monitor their services for such news. The law was expected to meet with significant resistance in Parliament in part because of the difficulties in agreeing definitions of some of the key terms such as 'false, exaggerated or tendentious' news, which could include a wide variety of forms of news, including satire and public interest journalism, and because it appeared to challenge accepted standards of freedom of expression under Art. 10 ECHR. One of the key proposals of the law was to promote media literacy.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-10-06/chinas-rumor-mill>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/10/china-social-media-jail-rumours>

<http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1313153/why-china-needs-new-internet-laws-fight-online-rumour>

What is to be done?

The UK will not follow the example of China. The Chinese approach, like the proposed Italian law, does not meet established standards of free speech. But neither should the UK fall into the trap of relativist perspectivism and do nothing.

Given the incoherence of the category of “fake news” and the wide variation of interests underlying calls for its regulation, it is necessary to offer different solutions for the different categories along the fake speech continuum. Different recommendations apply to the different categories: deliberate falsehood with a national security implications; fake news for financial gain; and other categories such as satire and critical journalism.

The only category where there may be an argument for statutory regulation is the category of **deliberate falsehood with intent to compromise national security**. Under the European Convention on Human Rights there is a legitimate justification for restricting free speech on national security grounds. From a regulatory point of view the difficulty is in establishing the appropriate standard (for example distinguishing genuine threats that have consequences to security from communication that is merely embarrassing)ⁱ. The main way governments have responded thus far is through monitoring, but the next stage would be requiring takedown of such messages.

The category of **falsehood for financial gain** requires a different response that goes with the grain of financial incentives in the emerging industry of online advertising. The problem with this category is that we do not yet know what the consequences are of the deep structural shift in the political economy of media systems in the West. We do not yet know whether the impact on funding of journalism and the intensification of economic incentives to promote truth-blind shareability will be subject to a systemic reaction through the market (people will pay for more trusted news; and advertisers will bring pressure to bear) or whether a legal and policy intervention might be required in the long-term.

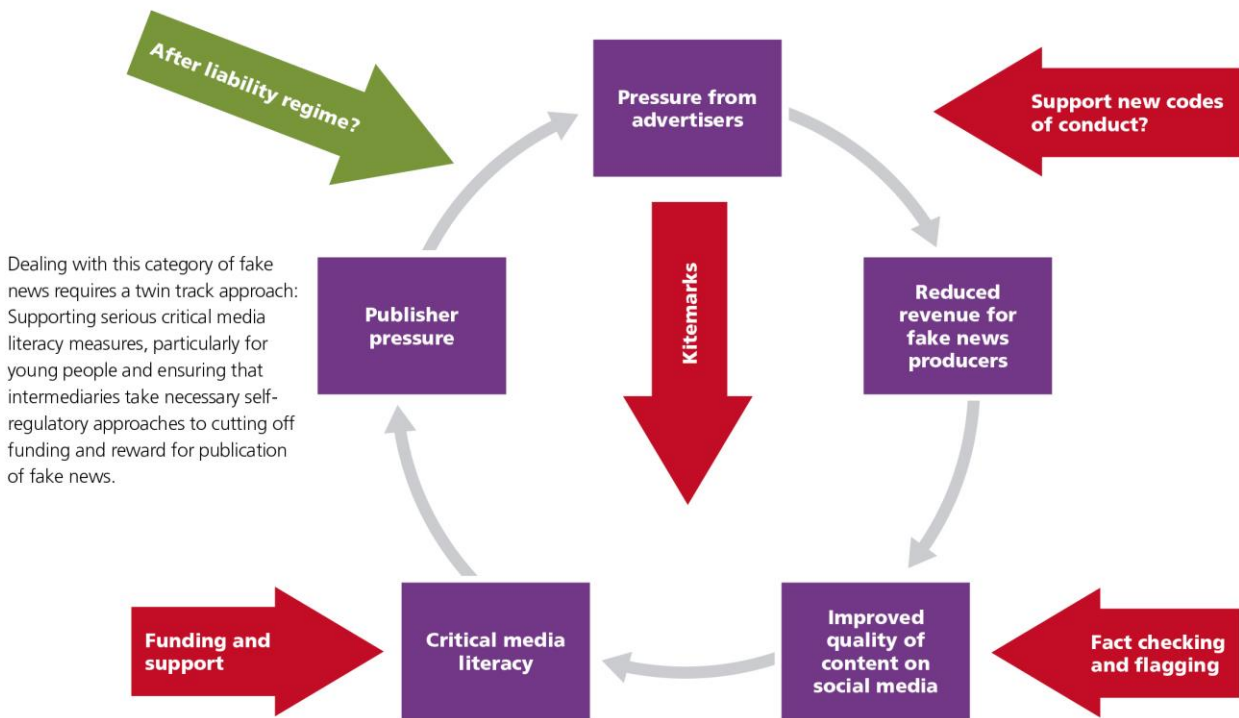
As Damian Collins MP pointed out in his speech to the Oxford Media Convention in 2017, there is already some evidence of a systemic correction. Advertisers want more control over the content that their messages are associated with. They want to put more pressure on those that sell advertising to ensure that they are not inadvertently funding or rewarding fake news. So there is some evidence that the system is building in checks and balances. However we are at a very early stage in this process: it is worth noting that the proposal that advertisers should be able to have an impact on content is of course the opposite of traditional media ethics which demanded separation of advertiser control from editorial content. What is being proposed here is an introduction of a new form of editorial control which if successful will require further oversight and transparency and ethical reflection.

There are a number of areas where recommendations could be made for nudges and incentives to encourage the market-driven response. There is a role for government and Parliament as conveners, and triggers for action in this field, but for obvious reasons of freedom of expression, both government and parliament should be cautious in their approach, and very cautious of any actions that could chill free speech or undermine the autonomy of media institutions.

As the diagram on the next page shows there are at least five types of actions that could be encouraged:

ⁱ This has been discussed for example with reference to WikiLeaks publication of sensitive US intelligence.

Tackling fake news which distribute falsehood for financial gain



- The natural tendency for advertisers to require better guarantees of what their products will be associated with could be encoded in more transparent **codes of conduct** for the interactive and advertising industry; this could be triggered and encouraged by Parliamentary recommendations.
- Existing and new projects in **fact checking and verification** could be facilitated, for example through funding, if principles of independence of funding are implemented.
- Industry could be encouraged to develop **trust marks** or warning flags that show both where independent verification indicates sources should be trusted, and also where questions have been raised with regard to individual stories and sources of news.
- Government can encourage the teaching of **critical media literacy** to encourage a culture shift in the credulity of citizens.
- All of the above actions can be conducted within the scope of moral exhortation rather than the direct threat of sanctions. However it can be made clear that the obvious next stage, should the new digital media industries fail to deal with the threat of fake news, is that the **liability regime for intermediaries** such as social media should be reviewed.

Parody and Critical Voices

The remaining categories of what has been described as fake news require a radically different approach, because they represent content that far from being damaging, is oriented towards the public interest, provides a valuable form of accountability, and is a natural check on group think. Critical perspectives in journalism and news face huge threats, not least a concerted campaign to describe them as 'fake news'. This category of content would benefit from a strong reaffirmation of established principles of freedom of the media, as well as a renewed commitment to public support for such enterprises for example through tax breaks, distribution privileges and where appropriate subsidies.

Closing remarks

The problem of fake news is not in fact a single problem. It is several symptoms of the ongoing transformation of news and journalism and wider political and social changes. These require action, but not actions that are controlled by governments, because governments may succumb to the temptation to create media systems that suit their political interests. An additional recommendation underpins all the others therefore: the setting up of a permanent, civil society led forum for discussion of these problems, and ensure that they are entirely protected from any risk of government interference or capture by other interests.

LSE MEDIA POLICY PROJECT

ABOUT:

The Media Policy Project aims to establish a deliberative relationship between policy makers, civil society actors, media professionals and relevant media research. We want policy makers to have timely access to the best policy-relevant research and better access to the views of civil society. We also hope to engage the policy community with research on the policy making process itself.

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