

How has media policy responded to fake news?



This is the first post in our blog series on “fake news”. In this series of posts, we provide an overview of the issue of “fake news” and what can be done about it.

*Last week, the UK House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee **launched an inquiry** into ‘fake news’ which the Committee chair describes as a “threat to democracy” that “undermines confidence in the media in general.” Since November’s US presidential election, the issue of fake news stories spreading on social media has been under the spotlight, and a YouGov survey commissioned by Channel 4 in the UK found that **only 4% of people were able to correctly identify fake news**. The Media Policy Project’s **Emma Goodman** looks at how governments and companies have responded to fake news so far.*

Revelations of **Macedonian teenagers making money** by publishing fictional pro-Trump stories, and **assertions of Russian interference in the US elections** through disinformation campaigns have understandably increased fears of ‘fake news’ and its impact on politics. The CMS Committee’s inquiry focuses on the impact of fake news on public understanding, the ways that different demographics might react to it, the responsibilities that search engines and social media platforms have, what is bringing about its growth, and what is unique about the UK news media market.

There is no straightforward solution. Fake news purports to be factual, and is created by people pretending to be journalists. Nevertheless, without getting into philosophical questions about the nature of truth, it is clear that there is a fine line between curbing fake news and limiting people’s right to free speech. Whose responsibility should it be to decide which news is fake? Fake news tends to spread on social media, but the risk that Facebook and other private companies might by default become ‘arbiters’ of the truth is one that **nobody wants to take**.

Committee chair Damian Collins suggested that any likely solution would focus on social media, saying that major tech companies “need to help address the spreading of fake news on social media platforms” and that “consumers should also be given new tools to help them assess the origin and likely veracity of news stories they read online.” He also **told BuzzFeed News** that Facebook’s News Feed would be a key focus of the inquiry, and that it could “absolutely” be the case that they could ask Facebook to attach warnings to potentially inaccurate news stories in the UK.

What are other governments doing?

It is worth looking at how other countries with upcoming elections are taking action. In Germany, efforts are focused on regulating social media companies. The country will hold general elections in September and has seen a proliferation of fake news, particularly targeted at the country’s refugee population. **Lawmakers are considering legislation** to force Facebook to remove fake news and incitements to hate crimes from its pages within 24 hours or face significant fines. A German politician **interviewed by Deutsche Welle** wants to criminalise the creation of fake news sites, which he said “weaken the media landscape and the very fabric of our state.”

In the Czech Republic, however, officials are directly taking on monitoring fake news. Ahead of the country’s general election in October, the Czech government has set up a **“specialised analytical and communications unit”** within the Ministry of the Interior that, as part of its work to monitor threats to internal security, will also target “disinformation campaigns.” According to the Ministry, it will “not force the “truth” on anyone, or censor media content. A **tweet on the unit’s Twitter page**

explains that the unit will assess whether the disinformation seriously affects internal security and if so, it will respond by publicising available facts and data that disprove the fake story.

Although Italian **officials have met with Facebook** to discuss ways to limit fake news and hate speech, Italy's antitrust chief Giovanni Pitruzzella **has called for EU member states** to set up a network of independent public agencies to combat fake news, modelled on the antitrust agencies system, arguing that it is not something that should be left to private companies to regulate.

At an EU level, **extra resources have been made available to the EU's East Stratcom taskforce**, which **seeks to counter** Russian attempts to influence votes in former Soviet states through misinformation and propaganda.

Andrus Ansip, the European Commission Vice President for the Digital Single Market, has warned that if Facebook and other tech companies don't take a tougher stance on fake news, the EC might have to step in. "I really believe in self-regulatory measures but if some kind of clarifications are needed then we will be ready for that," **he told the FT**, while **stressing on Twitter** that he was not referring to a 'ministry of truth.' The EC has already pushed Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft to sign up to **a code of conduct** to tackle online hate speech which aims have the majority of potentially illegal content assessed and taken down if necessary within 24 hours.

What are the tech companies already doing?

Facebook's **current strategy** to tackle fake news in the US is testing ways for people to report hoaxes more easily, and dispute stories by flagging them. The company also recently updated its News Feed algorithm to **"better identify and rank authentic content."** It is also attempting to disrupt the financial incentives for spammers. As part of the effort to identify hoaxes, the company **has announced** that it is working with **third-party fact checking organizations**. In a move that has been seen as an attempt to fend off tougher regulation, Facebook **is rolling out these initiatives** in Germany next, and will introduce them in other countries also.

Google has started banning publishers of fake news from its AdSense network as part of an update to an existing policy that prohibits sites that mislead users with their content.

News organisations themselves are also taking steps to counter fake news. Notable examples include the BBC which has a 'reality check' feature that it set up during the EU referendum **which it will now make permanent**, and will work with social media sites such as Facebook to combat "deliberately misleading stories masquerading as news." French daily Le Monde has built **a tool called Decodex** based on a database of fake news sites that allows readers to enter a URL to check whether a story is from a reliable site or not. **There are also a growing number** of dedicated fact-checking sites across Europe.

Given that social media and news organisations are trying to tackle fake news anyway, is regulation necessary or desirable?

Freedom of expression advocates maintain that regulation that has the potential to affect free speech should be avoided at all costs. Representative on Freedom of the Media for the OSCE Dunja Mijatović **wrote that** attempts to filter out 'fake' stories "may just cause greater harm to free expression than any lie, no matter how damaging;" a sentiment which is echoed by **IFEX**. **Article 19 reminds readers** to be "mindful that prohibition of "fake" or "false" news has often served as an instrument to control the media and restrict editorial freedom."

It has also been called into question whether fake news is worthy of all the attention it has been given. **Rasmus Kleis Nielsen** highlights **research that suggests** that the effect of any one message that people are exposed to (ie a fake news story) is likely to be very limited, and people might not be fooled as often as we think. **A study by researchers at Northwestern University** found that audiences of fake news are far smaller than audiences of real news.

Fake news is considered particularly dangerous during election campaigns. But although the majority of Americans [surveyed by Pew Research in December 2016](#) believed that fake news is causing a great deal of confusion, [another Pew study](#) found that traditional broadcast media were in fact the main source of news for most during the 2016 US election campaign. Researchers from NYU and Stanford [concluded in January 2017](#) that “for fake news to have changed the outcome of the election, a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads.” [As Charlie Beckett stressed](#), when considering disruptive election results, it is important to remember that the politics of the candidates is usually the decisive factor, rather than assuming the media is ‘to blame.’

[According to BuzzFeed News](#), fake news isn’t actually as prominent in the UK as it is elsewhere, because of the country’s highly partisan press. Its analysis of UK social media habits concluded that “the most popular dubious stories on British politics were almost always the work of long-established news outlets and relied at most on exaggeration rather than fakery.”

What options might the CMS Committee recommend?

Encouraging Facebook and others to flag stories of potentially suspect origin seems to be the most likely course of action that the CMS Committee might recommend. Although this would allow social media companies to have a say in what is true and what is not, it would ultimately leave the public to decide.

Consequently, it is worth highlighting one of the most difficult but key questions that the inquiry asks: “How can we educate people in how to assess and use different sources of news?” Increased digital media literacy would effectively nullify many of the risks of fake news without a need for restrictive regulation. But achieving this is a huge challenge with no clear response.

The [second post in this series](#) will look at the business model of “fake news” and explain how they become lucrative for the online advertising industry.

This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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