

Preparing for the Post-Truth World

What Governments,
Corporates and Citizens
Can Do About 'Fake News'

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Date: February 2019

**WORLD
GOVERNMENT
SUMMIT 2019**

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Executive summary

"A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

Widely attributed quote¹.

'Fake news' may be characterized as a deliberate act of disinformation, a misunderstanding of facts, a work of satire and parody, or a distortion of facts to push an alternative agenda. A 2018 survey by Edelman Trust Barometer² shows that 64% of UK citizens could not differentiate good journalism from rumor or falsehood. Nearly 7 in 10 people across 28 countries worry about 'fake news' being used as a weapon.

The rise of new alternative media is a cause for concern. Social media has been fueling 'fake news' due to light regulation, the rapid spread of unverified information, and algorithms that drive confirmation bias and ultimately contribute to the polarization of societies. Without editorial balance, digital platforms feed echo chambers around a particular point of view. As a result, people are losing faith in new media and reverting to more reliable sources of news. The Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that traditional media gained 13% in popularity during 2018 as a trusted news source.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, this growing problem is not only the result of online platforms – although it is amplified by them. Artificial Intelligence accelerates the spread of information regardless of whether it's true or false. Yet, we see that 'fake news' spreads faster than real news, because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it.

Governments have started to combat disinformation through regulation. For example, Germany has passed a law that fines social media companies for failing to delete 'fake news'. Conversely, however, 'fake news' actually presents governments with the opportunity to generate greater public engagement and, with that, reverse declining citizen trust. But the situation is placing pressure on governments to introduce appropriate policy measures.

It is clear that we cannot rely solely on technology or regulation to fix the 'fake news' issue. Whether in a news, business, or health-related context, disinformation is a dangerous problem that we must all own. In addition to initiatives by technology companies and governments, we consider what roles can be played by public education, counter-narratives, journalism training, and even truth pledges.

What does 'fake news' mean?

The term 'fake news' is problematic, covering a wide scope across everything from outright lies, hoaxes and urban myths, to 'clickbait' headlines, spoofs and misunderstood satire. The most basic division in the spectrum of 'fake news' is between misinformation and disinformation, which comes down to the intent of the perpetrator.

Misinformation is the inadvertent sharing of false facts. Anyone can unwittingly share untruths which may sow the seeds of social division, influence government decisions and, by definition, promote misinformed opinion.

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and sharing of facts known to be false – often through systematic disinformation campaigns. Where once propaganda was restricted to 'one-to-many' broadcast channels, social media networks allow individuals to be targeted directly with specific messages which, once shared, can spread through the information ecosystem like wildfire.

Questions of information reliability are not restricted solely to news or politics. Disinformation is also widespread in other sectors such as business and health. Voted 'Word of the Year' in 2017 by Collins Dictionary, 'fake news' is fueling discord amongst citizens; provoking preventable disease control controversy; and inflaming relations between nations.

Moreover, 'fake news' campaigns can be commercially driven – with stories designed to generate web traffic and, as a result, advertising income – or partisan communications which support a political agenda.

Seven types of mis- and disinformation³

False connection

When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content.

False context

When genuine content is shared with false contextual information.

Manipulated content

When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.

Satire or parody

Having no intention to cause harm but with the potential to fool.

Misleading content

Using information in a misleading way to frame an issue or individual.

Imposter content

When established journalists or news sources are impersonated.

Fabricated content

When entirely false content is created in order to deceive or do harm.

It is widely agreed that sorting the real from the fake has emerged as a major challenge in public communications. 'Fake news' has become a term increasingly used to discredit journalism. In the words of UNESCO's Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development, Guy Berger, it is "an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – that is, real news".

From all this, it is clear that the information crisis is more complex than the term 'fake news' suggests.

A brief history of disinformation

Going back over 3,000 years, false or misleading information has been used to boost or quell opposition. The following timeline offers a few examples:

c.44 BC Roman propaganda

As a tactic in the Roman Republic's final war, Octavian uses slogans etched into coins to smear the reputation of Marc Antony.

c.1300 BC Egyptian Propaganda

Rameses II suggested the Battle of Kadesh was a stunning victory for the Egyptians. Archaeologists and historians later establish it was not. Yet the moniker Rameses the Great remained for millennia doing his reputation no long-term harm.

1890s Mark Twain Dying in Poverty

In June 1897 Mark Twain responded to news circulating that he was dying in poverty, with "The report of my death was an exaggeration."

1998 MMR Vaccine linked to Autism

In the UK, a paper by then-doctor Andrew Wakefield and 12 colleagues is published in The Lancet, creating widespread fear among parents that measles vaccinations can cause autism in children. He is later discredited and the paper fully retracted by the publisher. But misinformation around the case leads to lower immunization rates and as a result, even 20 years later, we see twice as many reported measles cases in Europe as in Africa.

1972-74 Watergate

A rare victory in the war between the media and 'the mighty', as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's fearless reporting for The Washington Post reveal deceit and corruption within the White House.

2016 False information affects corporate reputation

Two days after President Trump's election win, PepsiCo's CEO, Indra Nooyi, attends a conference and is falsely quoted as saying Trump supporters should "take their business elsewhere." Influencers call for a boycott of the brand. Nineteen days later, PepsiCo's stock closed at 5.7% down from its pre-election levels.

Precursor

c.1450 Printing press

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press helped spread information widely across Europe, and with it the inclusion of unverified 'facts'.

Precursor

2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal

A massive dataset drawn from millions of Facebook users is exploited by businesses under the umbrella company of 'Cambridge Analytica' to develop individual psychological profiles and micro-target political messages, propaganda and disinformation.



Expert view 1

We interviewed **Iain Bundred**, former Political Spokesperson to the British Prime Minister and Special Advisor to the Department for Work and Pensions, playing a leading role in the government's political media and strategic communications planning.

Q. How have you seen 'fake news' evolve over the past 5 years?

A. False accusations have been a feature of, and challenge to, government communications forever. What's new is the rise of disintermediated conversations, where there are no media gatekeepers responsible for reporting the news accurately.

We live in a 'post-truth world', where facts are now disputed, making it harder for public sector communicators to respond. Citizens are often not willing to listen if the facts challenge their own natural biases.

Primary academic research in the last 5 years has demonstrated the behavioural science challenges that face governments and civil society leaders who simply try to 'fact-check' in response to so-called 'fake news'. A Tulane University report found: "providing counter-information is generally ineffective at remedying misperceptions, and can, depending on the source, increase endorsements of misperceptions [among certain groups]".

Social media channels have made it easier to spread falsehoods quickly and provides enormous reach to those who wish to deliberately sow discontent. Advancements in technology are making it easier to create deliberate misrepresentations ('disinformation'), through the rise of 'hactivist' bots and the rapid growth in 'deep fakes' that use Artificial Intelligence to create incredibly believable, yet forged, videos of world leaders saying and doing things that can cause offence.

The sum total of these drivers contributes to a further erosion of citizens' trust in all authoritative sources, especially governments.

The current context

Old story, new technology

History demonstrates that “fake news” has been around for centuries – not least in the form of propaganda. What has fueled the spread of mis- and disinformation is an unprecedented exacerbation of the problem in the past decade due to new technology coupled with cognitive biases and the advent of social networks and behaviors. That new technology includes social media channels. Conceived as platforms for chat and sharing, they have developed into mass communication tools beyond the wildest dreams of any government, bypassing regulators, watchdogs and editorial control – which still govern traditional media.

From pre-internet to post-truth

C. P. Scott, one of the early twentieth-century’s most respected UK newspaper editors, understood the value of truth and credibility. “Comment is free, but facts are sacred” he wrote.⁵ The concept of ‘alternative facts’, first propounded by Trump aides, Kellyanne Conway and Sean Spicer, leaves people with no reliable facts to fall back on, particularly when government communication is viewed as unreliable or non-present on an issue. In which case, people tend to believe whatever they want to be true based on the views they already hold, a phenomenon known as ‘confirmation bias’. By virtue of it confirming an individual’s existing beliefs, ‘confirmation bias’ compounds the problem governments face in presenting citizens with verifiable facts they can trust.

Particularly challenging for people is judging the veracity of online information. Many people now rely solely on digital channels for their news – over one third of Americans, for example, according to Pew.⁶

In our ‘post-truth world’ a relatively high 61% of people trust traditional media according to the Edelman report and yet the proportion of people who have lost faith in professional journalists remains a high 39%. Globally, 56% of respondents don’t know which politicians to trust, and 59% feel unable to distinguish truth from untruth.

The European perspective

The Flash Eurobarometer 2018⁷ – which is prepared for the European Commission – polls 26,576 people across the 28 member states – explores EU citizens’ awareness of and attitudes towards the existence of ‘fake news’ and disinformation online.

The question of trust in news and information across different media shows a revealing split – with high levels of trust in radio (70%), television (66%) and print media (63%), contrasting with far lower levels of trust in websites/podcasts (27%) and social networks / messaging apps (26%).

A large majority of respondents (68%) encounter ‘fake news’ at least once every week – including the 37% who say they come across it every day. And 7 out of 10 people believe that ‘fake news’ is a problem in their country.

Even before this latest Eurobarometer, the European Commission had warned that the tide of ‘fake news’ was becoming “almost overwhelming”.⁸

A communication trends report⁹, prepared by WPP for the UK government in 2018, explains how social media is facilitating the spread of misinformation with fake content and travelling six times faster¹⁰ than traditional media, affecting issues as diverse as business, terrorism, science, entertainment and natural disasters. The result: misinformation is reaching more people than the truth¹¹. The statistics were derived from a study by data scientist Soroush Vosoughi at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which is discussed in “How ‘fake news’ spreads”.



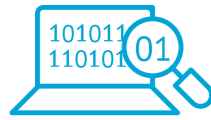
Why it is important?

We are consuming more content from more diverse sources than ever before.

Trust is being eroded across the media landscape. Members of the public already struggle to distinguish between paid, authentic and ‘clickbait’ content.

Anyone can be a creator and broadcaster of news, eroding government’s ability to deliver public information, gain share of voice, as well as the authority of traditional media.

The modes of fakery are more sophisticated than ever before and will only become more persuasive.



Identifying 'fake news'

Focusing on a website's history can help determine the people who created it, the networks of influence disseminating its information and the patterns of historic data it has been publishing. This provides analysis for the extent of its credibility. If the website's content frequently reflects ideologies, radicalization material, hosts extreme views and publishes unverified information, a full analysis of its lack of credibility begins to emerge.

A new website's credibility is usually low due to a lack of historic data, unless it is owned and led by reputable professionals – journalists, editors, publishers and authors – whose profiles are well known. Collating these profiles creates a pool of metadata on trusted sources which institutions can utilize. Authors of 'fake news' are therefore often not found in such metadata resources.

A common trait with 'fake news' is for the perpetrator to use sensational titles that are both rich and complex – albeit with misinformation. Used as click bait, the title appears attractive to a large and diverse number of people. By contrast, the body of the text in the article tends to be on the side of minimal, with poor content that is unbalanced in terms of style, information and verification.

Other behavioural patterns of 'fake news' publishers include nonfactual data; ironic or sarcastic statements; articles that include conspiracy theories; inclusion of noncredible sources; counterfeit sources and accounts; altered images; mismatching images with a text; fabricating details in order to manipulate revenues; the mobilisation of audiences for or against a political project; and reporting of only one side of a story.



How 'fake news' spreads

With digital publishing's exponential rise, the volume of consumption has helped create the phenomenon of 'influencers', shifting power from an institutional level to that of an individual. 'Influencers' do not operate under the same regulations or restrictions as traditional media, nor do they have the same training as professional journalists working in credible institutions.

Without editorial balance, alternative media outlets are promoting the rapid spread of disinformation, feeding the echo chambers of "closed system, same thinking" that many people inhabit, through 'cognitive bias', turning the digital media environment into a fertile breeding ground for fakery.

A study of 'cognitive bias' describes how i) collective beliefs are more plausible; ii) greater familiarity with information increases its apparent validity; and iii) bizarre content is often more memorable, leading it to being considered more credible than mundane content.

When people choose not to interact with content that diverges from their opinions or biases, and algorithms bring people of similar interests together, the resulting repository of content those people consume is composed of unchallenged, identical concepts and material. This in turn continues the polarization of society, unabated.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) produced some groundbreaking research published in Science magazine in March 2018, a key finding of which was how the truth struggles to compete with hoax and rumour. Analyzing 126,000 stories from almost the entire 12-year history of Twitter, data scientist Soroush Vosoughi also confirmed the spread of false information cannot be blamed solely on computer bots, which amplify true and

false stories in equal proportion. Bots can be used to manipulate popularity, promoting items in ways that make them appear to be trending, but, according to Vosoughi, the spread of 'fake news' could "have something to do with human nature". It prospers because "humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it."

A perfect storm from a) bots generating streams of content, b) everyone being able to publish content, and c) the lightning speed of internet coverage, means we are no longer in a situation where information can be checked by traditional human fact-checkers. Respected newspapers hire professionals who investigate and verify material before publishing. This system is not replicated across all content publishers in the online world, and few platforms require content to be corroborated before publishing.

Therefore, despite the well-known maxim that truth can be stranger than fiction, the reality is, untrue stories are usually more novel, exciting or spectacular than authentic ones, and more likely to entertain our friends. Tackling the rise of 'fake news' will require governments to develop a process that taps into changing human behaviour as well as developing policies and initiatives that address challenging disinformation campaigns directly.



Expert view 2

With WPP's Iain Bundred.

Q. Do different countries tackle the problem in the same way?

A. Many governments are looking at 'upstream' responses, which look to build long-term resilience against online falsehoods. Initiatives include educational programmes, evaluation of citizens and vulnerable groups at risk from being exposed to disinformation, and investing in advertising that reminds all citizens to have a healthy scepticism to news they are seeing online.

Some governments have focused 'downstream', responding to examples of disinformation where they see it by building analytic systems that can track and flag concerted campaigns which demand a response.

There is also a growing regulatory response, with certain governments stepping in to pressurize platforms such as major social media channels into taking action. These governments are implementing oversight programmes that see regulators fine organizations which spread news that has been proven to be untrue.

Threats and dangers

Adding to the perfect storm of disinformation spread, an even greater danger in the form of 'deep fakes' looms on the horizon. A combination of Artificial Intelligence and face-mapping technology has made it possible to synchronize a person's face and lips with someone else's voice. In effect, anyone can be made to appear to say anything that the creators of these videos want them to 'say'.

The motive is often not power or influence, but profit. People are now making a living from the fabrication of fraudulent material designed to go viral on social media. Click baits create traffic on the social networks, and therefore generate money from online advertisements. And even for content-creators with greater integrity, the commercialization of the media has produced a tension within journalism, between providing a public service and selling a commodity.

Attempts to remove 'fake news' however, may also be counter-productive, only serving to focus attention on it. A recent survey¹² by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore described how, in certain countries, "aggressive attempts to censor social media posts...reinforced some netizens' belief that the censored posts represent the true state of the matter, while dismissing officially sanctioned newspapers as government propaganda". This makes them "more likely to seek and trust news from alternative sources".

Cognitive Bias

Bizarreness effect: Bizarre material is better remembered than common material.

Availability cascade: A self-reinforcing process in which a collective belief gains more and more plausibility through its increasing repetition in public discourse (or "repeat something long enough and it will become true").

Shared information bias: Known as the tendency for group members to spend more time and energy discussing information that all members are already familiar with (i.e., shared information), and less time and energy discussing information that only some members are aware of (i.e., unshared information).

Illusion of truth effect: That people are more likely to identify as true statements those they have previously heard (even if they cannot consciously remember having heard them), regardless of the actual validity of the statement. In other words, a person is more likely to believe a familiar statement than an unfamiliar one.



The evolving disinformation crisis is now threatening open societies around the world and creating real-world victims. A BBC World News report from Nigeria in November 2018 illustrated this point: "Nigerian police say false information and incendiary images on Facebook have contributed to more than a dozen recent killings in Plateau State – an area already torn by ethnic violence."¹³

Beyond politics: the dangers of 'medical disinformation'

The rise of mis- and disinformation extends beyond the world of politics. It is also having a serious effect on public health for example, contributing to the spread of scientifically unverified stories in areas ranging from vaccines to heart pills, and diet to cancer drugs.

"Fake health news", says Professor Heidi Larson, a public health expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, "is often spread by those who capitalize on doubts over standard therapies to make a profit from books, supplements and alternative services."

Mentioned earlier, the MMR scandal of 1998 saw a paper in the respected UK medical journal The Lancet suggest a link between the Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccine, and autism in children. The authors were later discredited and the paper was retracted as being misleading, incorrect and partially falsified.

But misinformation on this subject has persisted and the damage has been done – with a number of British parents unwilling to have their child vaccinated, according to a study conducted by King's College, University of London.¹⁴ "In England," wrote Professor Larson in The Lancet¹⁵, "by the end of October 2018, there were 913 measles cases, largely among teenagers and young adults who missed their childhood measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination because of parental anxieties over a decade ago."

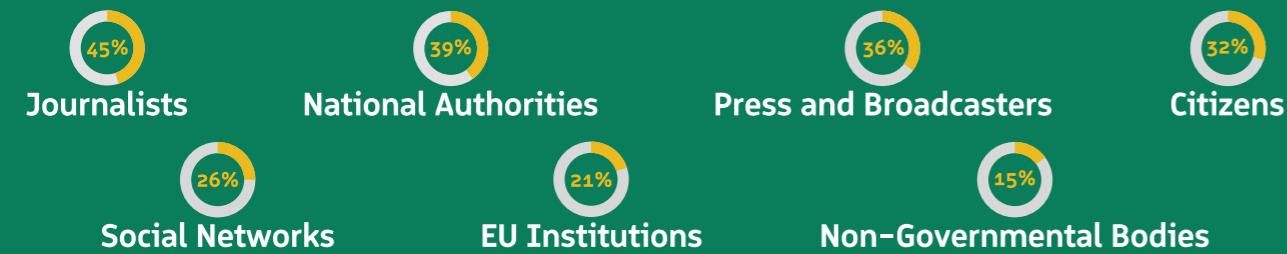
This pales in comparison to the 29,464 measles cases in Ukraine, where "a combination of anxieties about vaccine safety, historic distrust in government, and a health system needing reform converged to create fertile ground for the outbreak".

Writing in the journal Nature, Larson explains: "The next major outbreak of a fatal strain of influenza or something else will not be due to a lack of preventive technologies. Instead, emotional contagion, digitally enabled, could erode trust in vaccines so much as to render them moot."¹⁶

Rather like the historical existence of disinformation in the political sphere, concerns about health issues including vaccines is not new. But the numbers speak for themselves, and the serious threat to public health through mis- and disinformation should be considered as serious as the threat of "fake news" to national security or political stability.

Who is responsible for tackling the disinformation problem?

Our analysis has shown that the spread of 'fake news' cannot be blamed solely on new technology; neither can it be accounted for solely on people's habits and preferences; nor can it be put entirely at the feet of media. EU citizens were asked the question "who is responsible for tackling the disinformation problem" – as part of the EU Flashbarometer 2018 survey. The full break-down of 'responsibility' was as follows:



Journalists, national authorities and broadcasters were considered by EU respondents as those most responsible for tackling 'fake news'. However one surprising result was that 32% believed "Citizens" themselves should take a lead in halting the spread of 'fake news', confirming the strong human influence on their creation and spread.

How Journalism is responding

With 45% of respondents to the EU Flashbarometer 2018 survey believing that disinformation should be tackled by journalists, we consider how this profession is responding, in an era of increased pressure on traditional media to firstly, keep apace with the speed of the internet and secondly, monetise their product.

Traditional media has been facing competition in content creation from citizen journalists who can rapidly disseminate information, faster than professional journalists who need to cross reference and verify every piece of information. As a result, traditional media began focusing on speed at the expense of quality. Many facts are no longer checked thoroughly prior to publication, increasing the likelihood of journalism spreading mis- and disinformation.

Regaining people's trust will require journalists and journalism to regain its relentless reputation in the search and reporting of accurate and verifiable information. This can be achieved not only by fact checking exercises prior to publication, but by diversifying the range of people interviewed on a particular topic. A high level of transparency in journalism will go a long way towards building trust, credibility and confidence.

To that end, digitisation has supported the rise of a new age of borderless collaborative reporting, where significant data caches can be accessed for innovative investigative journalism. Journalists can identify patterns in the construction of fake news articles, such as sensational and complex titles, by studying sources with a history of publishing mis- or disinformation. Leveraging deep machine learning programmes, journalists can now work with data scientists and developers to systematically flag these traits, detect bias and identify hosts of fake news websites, even if original sources were not quoted by those publishers. A repository of these metadata sources, a pillar of any tech solution, should be created and shared with credible professional journalists and with government entities to be used as a reference for credible sources. It is not enough to only have in play post-publication fact-checking firms, whose general focus is on the political arena of election advertising, party manifestos and campaign speeches.



Expert view 3

With WPP's Iain Bundred.

Q. What are the major threats to being able to stop the trend?

A. Many would say that the biggest threat to combatting disinformation is technology, yet the biggest threat is a long-term failure in trust amongst authoritative sources. If citizens become completely disengaged from news via social media, we lose an important channel through which to communicate and engage with them. In fact, if they switch off entirely, the core functions of government become a lot harder to deliver.

The damage that untruths can inflict extends beyond civic discourse to the livelihoods of brands, businesses, NGOs, executives and other authoritative voices. They depend on the trust and faith of their consumers to maintain their reliable voices, and that is being undermined.

How governments are reacting

EU Flashbarometer 2018 survey revealed that 39% of respondents believe mis- and disinformation should be tackled by public institutions. A variety of governments have looked at the problem, and attempted legislative regulation of disinformation on social media as one form of response.

In 2016, Germany's parliament passed the Network Enforcement Act, imposing fines on social media platforms up to 50 million euros (US \$53 million) if they fail to remove "obviously illegal" content within 24 hours of receiving a complaint. For offensive online material that requires further assessment, publishers ought to block such content within seven days, failing which a fine will be imposed.

Facebook expressed concern that the Act would encourage social media companies to remove content that is not obviously illegal in the face of a "disproportionate threat of fines". It would in effect transfer responsibility for complex legal decisions from public authorities to private companies.

Kenya's president signed into law the Computer and Cybercrimes Bill which states that if a person "intentionally publishes false, misleading or fictitious data or misinforms with intent that the data shall be considered or acted upon as authentic," they can face a penalty of up to almost US \$50,000 or two years in jail.

Singapore issued a Green Paper on the challenges and implications of deliberate online falsehoods in January 2018, and the parliament held public hearings on the topic.

Belarus' prosecutor general announced a draft bill to reportedly prevent the spread of false statements that "turn public opinion upside down, leading to big consequences".

Indonesian authorities are countering 'hate speech' with clear guidelines for law enforcement. The National Police have formed a 'Multimedia Bureau' to monitor social media for misinformation, while the Communications Ministry actively blocks suspect websites.

And the Congress in **Brazil** is considering a Bill which will criminalize the publication and sharing of any false or incomplete information on the Internet to the detriment of any private individual or legal person. To fight the "dissemination of false information" during the electoral process, ten of Brazil's 35 political parties signed an agreement with the election authority.

Italy's government looked to support from citizens reporting fake news, by launching an online portal in January 2018, where this could be done to a division of the nation's police service.

The **UAE** Telecommunications Regulator Authority has warned residents that their use of social media should not spread unverified news. Users are told to verify sources and always use the official UAE government accounts when sharing government news.

Saudi Arabia has enshrined a law against generating "fake news" in the Kingdom.

The various avenues being trailed by governments fall into two main categories of approach: i) leveraging citizen support in countering the problem and ii) holding technology platforms responsible for the spread of material deemed easily recognizable as illegal or fictitious.

Case study 1: The UK's Rapid Response Unit¹⁷

In January 2017, the UK government announced the setting-up of a Rapid Response Unit which will tackle disinformation – or the spread of ‘fake news’ – within the context of a wider national security capability review.

The unit is tasked with identifying emerging issues with speed, accuracy and integrity, monitoring news and information being shared and engaged with online.

The Unit's work in fighting “alternative news sources” and “sensationalist stories” was initially kept under wraps. More details were issued in July that same year, explaining how the Rapid Response Unit is made up of analysts, data scientists and media and digital experts.

Since it began round-the-clock monitoring the team has identified and sought to tackle “several stories of concern” in order to reclaim a “fact-based public debate”. These include domestic news relating to the NHS and crime, plus stories about a suspected chemical weapons attack in Syria.

After the Syria airstrikes in April, Alex Aiken, Executive Director of Government Communications in the United Kingdom, said, the unit saw that a number of false narratives from “unreliable” alternative news sources were gaining traction online and appearing above official Government information on Google. “These ‘alt-news’ sources are biased and rely on sensationalism rather than facts to pique readers’ interest,” Aiken noted. The unit took action to improve the Google ranking of the relevant Government information from below 200 to number one, so that those using search terms indicating bias, such as ‘false flag’, were “presented with factual information on the UK’s response”, he added.

Also in April 2018, the RRU responded to a number of articles in the UK and US using what Aiken described as “selective” data to show murder rates in London outstripping New York for the first time. “Sensationalist in nature, these stories quickly spread via social media, which was then spotted by RRU monitoring.

“Action needed to be taken to prevent panic and provide reassurance in the face of these alarmist news stories.” The unit pushed out content on social media to “rebalance the narrative and reassure those who were most engaged with the topic”, he added.



Expert view 4

With WPP's Iain Bundred.

Q. Are governments fighting back in appropriate ways?

A. Governments are responding in very different ways but the simplest way to fight back is to be prepared. Robust data and analytics systems allow you to find and assess what mis- or disinformation is out there. The best efforts invest in social media tracking to be able to isolate potentially dangerous content from the larger noise. The UK government is doing this with its Rapid Response Unit, which is proving to be effective.

Once a piece of malicious content is identified, governments have a number of routes to fight back. Behavioural research shows that simple fact-checking is not going to get it done. In a polarized world where facts are disputed, responding to false campaigns requires a mix of classic crisis communication, with hyper-targeted and social-first counter-narrative campaigns, that fight fire with water, dousing the flames before they become a wildfire.

The counter-narrative approach obeys some of the classic rules that public sector communicators have long utilized in responding to attacks. It is important not to overreact and to avoid amplifying ‘fake news’.

How tech companies are reacting

In response to government crack-down on mis- and disinformation being disseminated via technology platforms, the companies are tackling the issue via different approaches.

Nick Pickles, Twitter's head of public policy for the United Kingdom, made clear that while Twitter is happy to serve as a platform for fact-checkers, it does not want to get into the business of making its own judgments about what is true or false. “We are not the arbiters of truth.” he said in a report for The Washington Post in February 2018¹⁸. However, the platform announced it would take steps including Artificial Intelligence to curb the spread of misleading information in India's 2019 elections. To address this, Twitter will take down automated spam bots and remove millions of fake accounts – helping to remove weaponized propaganda and hate speech.

On the other hand, Facebook's position has been to develop a multi-faceted approach to tackling ‘fake news’. The company announced it will fight sensationalism and misinformation by prioritizing trustworthy news based on a model of crowdsourcing the identification of high-quality outlets.

Before France's 2017 presidential election, Facebook placed full-page newspaper ads featuring tips for users to help them identify fake news. The Gulf Times recently reported similar action by WhatsApp, which took out full-page ads in Indian newspapers in July 2018 to warn users against ‘fake news’.

The question of whether tech companies are doing enough to combat ‘fake news’ was considered by the Reuters Institute, which drew attention to the growing dissatisfaction with tech companies’ action on the problem. Their focus groups indicated the public's heightened worries about privacy, heated conversations, and unreliable news.

Case study 2: Facebook and Pagella Politica

Pagella Politica, an Italian-based fact-checking organization, has partnered with Facebook and other Italian media outlets to reduce the impact of ‘fake news’ in Italy. It operates within the realms of free speech, to which Facebook as a USA company is beholden. Its model has the following three stages:

- 1. Detect.** Pagella Politica routinely scrapes public Facebook pages associated with ‘fake news’. It fact-checks suspected misinformation and produces a corrective article when necessary.
- 2. Counter-narrate.** Facebook displays a link to Pagella Politica's corrective article alongside any suspected fake content.
- 3. Follow up.** If a user shares suspected ‘fake news’, Facebook flags to the user that the piece has been disputed and encourages them to read the fact-checking piece.

‘Fake news’ debunked by Pagella Politica so far includes claims that polygamy has been legalized in Italy; giants dating to 1000 BC being found; and that refugees have slaughtered cats for fun.

What their examples shows is that fighting ‘fake news’ requires more than an emergency response. Finding partners and organizations that can help government take a proactive and educational role helps restore trust and engage citizens without risking accusations of state overreach and propaganda.

Pagella Politica's example highlights the merit of treating ‘fake news’ as the basis of civil engagement rather than political panic.

Public awareness

To understand the general public's overall literacy levels with regards to media and journalism, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018¹⁹ commissioned a survey of 74,000 news consumers in 37 countries. Its findings revealed there was still considerable scope for public 'education' on issues that affect an individual's ability to distinguish between verified reporting, and mere opinion or harmful news.

The emergence of training courses in 'News Reliability'²⁰ aimed at helping young people identify disinformation and pinpoint reliable, trustworthy news sources has become more prevalent in recent years. At the same time however, increased media literacy is being associated with an increase in skepticism and therefore reduced trust in the news.²¹

It is interesting to note therefore that The Times has reported an increase in young adult Americans not only subscribing to traditional national media, but being happy to pay for quality news, accessed online behind paywalls. The Reuters Institute report puts figures to paid subscription for online news – ranging from 6% in Greece, through 16% in the USA and a world-leading 30% in Norway.

Some analysts have posited, however that paywalls present a two-tier system, whereby those in a stable financial situation can access reliable information, yet those with less spare money available will only be able to access what amounts to the least reliable information. As such, in fulfilling their duty of care to all citizens, governments need to ensure their policies and initiatives do not reinforce the two-tier system.

In Jordan, the "Fatabyano" platform was developed to produce and spread informed and evidence based knowledge specifically to combat "fake news". Relying on social media channels for dissemination, the content is primarily aimed at Jordanian and Arab youth, free to access, and available in six other languages.

Global public perceptions¹⁹

- 58% are concerned about news that is completely 'made up'.
- 51% trust the news sources they use.
- 44% trust news in general.
- 42% see poor journalism, mistakes and clickbait every week.
- 39% complain of 'spin' and agenda-filled news.
- 38% trust the news they find in search.
- 23% trust news on social media.

Fighting back

Given the clear consensus that regulation alone will not fix the problem of 'fake news', governments need to address a number of issues to tackle the problem from various angles.

Included in such a multifaceted approach is the need for professional editors and journalists to participate in the fightback against the devaluation of truth, and regain their trusted authority status. The fraudulence of the 1998 MMR vaccine story in the UK was revealed not by academic or public health vigilance, but through a journalistic investigation and exposé. Verified and authenticated information is essential for reliable information in first reporting news, and in addressing mis- or disinformation through a detailed counter-narrative that provides the correct information.

By engaging in Media and Information Literacy initiatives along with NGOs operating in this space, the news media are also playing a role in educating the public about why journalism is worth cherishing and protecting.

Citizens too can play a role in listening, learning, responding authentically, rather than overreacting. Case Study 3 – on The Pro-Truth Pledge – develops this thinking further.

Five principles for combatting 'fake news' in public policy

Government communication teams need to think in terms of the same journalistic values described above, when considering where and how to engage user-generated content for counter-narrative strategies.

Maintaining a broadcast, one way model has been shown to be ineffective in delivering the robust yet social context for reframing thinking around a conversation. Yet often government officials are wary of engagement on social media. Best-practice in resolving information issues, however, identifies that the conversation needs to be continued on the channel where it began, and thus government communicators need to be confident about engaging in conversations where they are happening.

Listen and generate insight	Triage	Respond authentically	Avoid overreacting	Learn and feed future campaigns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove the noise • Detect signals that make sense • Generate actionable insights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use robust processes • Rely on human judgement • Infuse the policy context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a steady drumbeat • Fight like-with-like • Think mobile-first 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stick to the strategy • Clarify, don't amplify • Micro target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question everything • Build campaigning mentality • Get ahead of the next meme

What you should ask

- Are we taking a proactive, educational stance on the issue?
- Have we trained our communicators to identify "fake news" mis- and disinformation?
- How can I better understand the potential of mis- or disinformation to play a role in topics and messages that are central to my organization?
- Is there a clear escalation plan in place should mis- or disinformation be linked to a key narrative or event that I'm connected to?
- How can I better understand the current and potential future definition of so-called "fake news", the employed tactics and regular perpetrators?
- How might a growing cynicism around mis- and disinformation' impact on how messages are conveyed and received by audiences?

What you should avoid

- Rushing responses and decisions: some responses may lead to public backlash, accusations of state propaganda, or counter-narratives.
- Direct engagement: conversing with perpetrators of fake content may have an inverse effect, potentially increasing reach and further amplifying mis- or disinformation.
- Criticizing concerned citizens: 'fake news' is increasingly difficult to determine, and citizens have varying levels of digital literacy. Being sensitive is important.



Expert view 5

With WPP's **Iain Bundred**.

Q. What capabilities should governments in the GCC be building to address 'fake news'?

A. Disinformation is borderless. Implementing global best practice in response to the spread of online falsehoods may involve building or importing capabilities. What is critical is to ensure whole-of-government thinking for efficient and effective local solutions.

I recommend embedding new data and analytic tools and training in-house teams to create both a central core dedicated to tracking the attacks coming from targeted disinformation campaigns, and a decentralized capability that advocates across ministries, trained in spotting malicious content and developing a social-first counter-narrative.

In addition, I would suggest investing in the 'upstream' activities such as training citizens, journalists and communications professionals to improve resilience to fake attacks.

Case study 3: The Pro-Truth Pledge

In an online article in May 2018²², Gleb Tsipursky, Assistant Professor of Behavioral Science at Ohio State University, describes how, despite the human tendency to spread falsehoods, people also have "a behavioral tic that can combat this: We want to be perceived as honest."

Research has shown that the incentive for individuals to lie decreases when they believe there is a higher risk of negative consequences; are reminded about ethics; or commit to behaving honestly. Leveraging these three tendencies was the concept behind the Pro-Truth Pledge.

Launched in December 2016, by US nonprofit organisation Intentional Insights, the Pledge aims to promote honesty by asking people to commit to 12 behaviours that research shows correlate with an orientation toward truthfulness. For example, it asks participants to fact-check information before sharing it; cite sources; ask friends and foes alike to retract info shown to be false; and discourage others from using unreliable news sources. So far, approximately 6,700 people and organizations have taken the Pledge. Follow-up studies on its effectiveness, incorporating a comparison with the Pledge-takers behaviour prior to the initiative, have revealed large and statistically significant changes in behaviour among Pledge-takers. Those changed behaviours include more thorough fact-checking; a growing reluctance to share emotionally charged posts; and a new tendency to push back against friends who have shared suspect information.



Expert view 6

With WPP's **Iain Bundred**.

Q. Which is more efficient in your opinion: a government-owned team established to tackle 'fake news', or a privately commissioned one?

A. Public sector clients who consider embedding specialist knowledge and expertise need to ascertain if that is best met by upskilling current talent, collaborating with outside suppliers or rethinking team structures and operating models. Given the relatively niche area of expertise, capability, and innovation required, a hybrid model is likely to be most effective at the outset. Yet even in the longer term, it will usually be more efficient to use suppliers for data and analytics, for example. Whichever model is chosen, governance procedures must ensure all output fits within the government's long-standing approach to external communications.

The way forward: Four Cs

Through our experience, we have developed a strategic model for engaging with citizens to manage mis- and disinformation campaigns. It leverages the role of government communication versus regulation in isolating a problem and delivering on the transparent story through a continuous, authentic thread of fact that counteracts the mis- or disinformation. Data points along the journey will also provide key indicators for government communicators on areas of discussion where a wider campaign can be developed if necessary.

1. Contain

Using a digital media monitoring tool such as Brandwatch, NewsWhip or Precise will allow you to understand the volume of a potential piece of mis- or disinformation, remove the noise and understand key drivers that may shape how you deal with the issue.

2. Counter-narrate

After analyzing the audience for the content, seek to portray a more factual narrative. This should be done in a targeted way and only if the misinformation has reached dangerous volumes. Strategic partnerships

with companies like Facebook and Twitter can also be effective in tapping into a citizen's preference for receiving information from their trusted sources. Publicly available information can be layered together to provide a constructive overall view.

3. Calculate

It is important to measure the volume and impact of mis- and disinformation at each stage of its digital life, as well as after it has been debunked. This can be done via a dashboard that monitors volumes automatically. You can also set up alerts for any steep increases in volume or to track the involvement of particular influencers.

4. Campaign

Research the role mis- or disinformation may be playing around featured topics when designing communication and campaign initiatives. This will enable you and your team to stay one step ahead.

Opportunities for citizen engagement

Harnessing the shifting citizen landscape to rebuild trust in a post-truth world requires finding new ways to reach and participate with the newly engaged citizens.

How governments can work with citizens:

• Personalisation in an era of privacy

- o In the context of recent privacy laws and citizen mistrust, the ability to use data to create personalised experiences is a challenge. However, some institutions are capturing user information without PII to tailor experiences such as through quiz mechanics. Transparency about data usage moves beyond a tick box into explicit yes/no questions and creative ways of showing the value of a user giving their data and consent. Playing back social norm or geographic data is proving to be a driver for users to take action.

• Citizen-powered tools and the co-creation opportunity

- o As people lose trust in institutions, they look to useful utilities and tools to help them make informed decisions. These tools are increasingly being created by citizens themselves, often in a low-tech and iterative manner (SwapMyVote, WhoTargetsMe) or as government services (StreetBump). This is an opportunity for governments to work with citizens to create human and useful experiences and practical utilities.

• An advocacy approach: digitally instigated, offline organising

- o Citizens are finding ways of reclaiming power and empowering others using online efforts for offline, real-world action. An example in the US is Indivisible which started as a Google doc, and has now over 6,000 groups with at least two in every Congressional district.

Government capabilities and recommendations for the GCC

The institutional set-ups that governments should have:

• Cyber Security

- o Continued development in digital transformation initiatives and e-government solutions brings with it the increased risk of cyber vulnerability. Governments need to ensure their cyber security frameworks are evolving to meet next generation challenges from artificial intelligence, machine learning and IoT for example. Implementing an integrated approach not only across government institutions, but with industry experts, the private sector and the public, to deliver end-to-end security for business, community and citizen interactions, is essential.

• Monitoring Teams of Journalists and Data Scientists

- o Specialist digital monitoring teams of journalists and data scientists should be embedded within a central Government Communications unit. Its role would be to actively monitor online conversations and provide a forensic analysis of trending issues, detailing story sources, keywords and hashtags being implemented, sentiment analysis, intersections with other trending topics and threat rating etc. Leveraging machine learning, AI and knowledge based programmes, monitoring teams can systematically fact check and flag credibility of sources by mapping the relationship between biased articles, faster radicalization, a website's credibility and 'fake news', content and build smart news engines that predict the spread of an online outlet's content across social platforms. Citizen panels can be created to represent user groups and understand sentiment and needs from a variety of data sources.

• Central Control Teams

- o Transforming the monitoring team's data and guidelines into meaningful and actionable insight-led responses should be managed under the auspices of a central control team. The control team should liaise with a designated government spokesperson to develop the content that delivers the accurate counter-narrative, leveraging the skills of data engineers, researchers, journalists and designers to rapidly develop verified messaging.
- o Developing Artificial Intelligence Personas will allow for a new type of message testing, and the running of simulations can incorporate an exponential number of variations in seconds.
- o Creative testing at speed will develop the ability to create content toolkits allowing government entities to react in real time.
- o With a real-time dashboard operating across the counter-narrative channels, outputs can be optimised for live mobilization of resources to manage and champion the conversion of the conversation from negative to neutral or positive.

• Behavioural Insights expertise

- o As part of a government's holistic approach to tackling mis- and disinformation, engaging citizens in the fight against 'fake news' through the incorporation of behavioural interventions that leverage powerful insights to drive changes in behaviour, should be considered. If a government does not yet have in-house behavioural insights capabilities managing initiatives across other policy areas, expert external suppliers can support the development of relevant, tailored initiatives.

• Legislation

- o The popularization of new technology tools in the fight against 'fake news', such as the smart news engines developed by data scientists, will help break the foundations upon which 'fake news' is built, and continually erode any efforts to rebuild its environment.

Conclusions

The problem of 'fake news' is a problem we all must own, expressing far-reaching consequences from polarizing societies to fueling international tensions, or affecting the long term outcomes of public health initiatives such as preventable disease programmes.

The proliferation of 'fake news' is exacerbated by many factors including though not limited to such catalysts as political motivations, commercial incentives, the automated disinformation of bots, echo chambers derived from cognitive biases, a growing sophistication of 'deep fakes', the switch of fact-checking from pre to post-publication, and a human tendency to share the sensational.

Fighting back against 'fake news' will require interventions both large and small, from the technical possibilities of algorithms and Artificial Intelligence; to government monitoring and regulation, and solutions based in both civil society as well as corporate initiatives.

The value of a multi-faceted approach that addresses public education, counter-narratives, journalism training, cyber security and solutions that negate cognitive biases, demonstrates the need for governments to be both proactive and inclusive in their strategies against 'fake news'. Developing citizen trust in public institutions that respond authentically and without overreacting, will be a core element in diluting the perceived value of information reported by unreliable or unverified sources.

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Authors would like to thank Mr Pete Taylor for his contribution to this paper.



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