The Full Fact Report 2020

Fighting the causes and consequences of bad information

Full Fact

Full Fact is the UK's independent fact checking charity.

About this report

Full Fact fights bad information. We do this in four main ways. We fact check claims made by politicians, public institutions, in the press and online. We then follow up on these, to stop and reduce the spread of specific claims. We campaign for systems changes to help make bad information rarer and less harmful, and advocate for higher standards in public debate.

This report is based on the evidence we have built up over the last ten years, with a particular focus on 2019. It is the first of three annual reports that we are able to produce thanks to the support of the Nuffield Foundation.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit **www.nuffieldfoundation.org**

This report was written by Rebecca Hill and staff at Full Fact and the contents are the responsibility of the Chief Executive. They may or may not reflect the views of members of Full Fact's cross-party Board of Trustees.

Nuffield Foundation

Contents

Bad information ruins lives

As fact checkers, we want to reduce the spread of information that can disrupt democracy or put people's lives at risk. But we also want to ensure that the right information reaches the people who need it most: whether that is the public when trying to make a decision about their health or who to vote for, or policymakers looking to change things for the better in our society.

Full Fact has been checking claims made by politicians, in the media, and online for 10 years. During that time, our dedicated team has built up an evidence base that can help us understand why misleading information arises, how it spreads and who is responsible. It also has the potential to suggest ways that we can improve the situation.

This is our first attempt to bring all of that knowledge together in one place. It marks the first of three annual reports funded by the Nuffield Foundation that seek to identify the problems in getting good information out into the public.

We hope that by identifying the barriers, based on a decade's worth of experience fact checking misleading claims, we will be able to create a risk register of the potential harms posed by the different blockers. This is a major piece of work, and this report aims to be the initial step in the process.

The report itself focuses on misinformation, which we define as the inadvertent spread of misleading or false information, rather than disinformation, which we define as misleading or inaccurate material that intends to deceive.

The fundamental distinction here is intent – for the most part, in our work as fact checkers we do not presume what the intention was of the person who created or shared the false claim. Indeed, we generally give the people we check the benefit of the doubt; an approach that we believe helps us to better engage with the people who have made false claims when we ask them to correct the record. We are pleased to say that many do take that opportunity.

We recognise that some of what we talk about as misinformation may actually be deliberate disinformation but this report only uses this term either to discuss disinformation specifically or in relation to proven instances of disinformation.

The report is divided into four parts. Part One provides an introduction to the report that looks at what we describe the 'journey of good information', assesses the harms that bad information can cause, explains our work as fact checkers and sets this into the wider context of other efforts to tackle misinformation.

In Part Two, we identify cross-cutting themes where responsibility lies with various actors. We start with the issue of information accessibility, which underpins many of

the claims we check and is fundamental to ensure open and honest public debate. Both the public and decision-makers rely on good information to make important choices. Without it, journalists, fact checkers and the public cannot hope to hold those with power to account.

We then look at two specific examples of where we find harm arising from bad information – public health and elections. The last year has given us grave cause for concern on these. During the election campaign we saw inappropriate and misleading campaign tactics, and now we are facing a deluge of false and misleading health advice for tackling the coronavirus. Finally, we identify two of the most common themes we have seen in the past year: misrepresentation and misreporting of polls, and claims that keep reappearing, which we call 'zombie claims'.

In Part Three, we discuss who is responsible for bad information reaching the public, divided into four groups: government, public bodies and politicians; the media; academia, charities and think tanks; and the internet companies. For each we discuss the levels of trust placed in them by the public, our experience fact checking content they produce or disseminate, and our experiences asking those involved to correct the record.

The final part sets out recommendations for each of the actors, for policymakers and for ourselves; we hope this report will also help frame our work over the coming year and act as a way of tracking both our own and others' progress.

Future reports will add to this evidence base from each year, assessing progress made by those identified in this year's report, as well as building on and identifying new themes. Overall, these reports seek to create a risk register of the harms of bad information and the steps everyone can take to improve trust and the quality of public debate in the UK.

Part One: Introduction

The unlikely journey of good information

False and misleading information spreads from producers to users in a variety of ways. It can damage public debate, pose risks to public health and erode public trust – and it can spread faster and more effectively than we can tackle it.

There are ways to challenge those who make mistakes – and as fact checkers, Full Fact has plenty of experience in stress-testing them – but it's also important to try and ensure that it is the good information, rather than the bad, that reaches the public in the first place. We want to change debate for the better.

That requires a better understanding of the journey that information takes, tracing it back to the source – be that politicians, the media, the public or elsewhere – and figuring out how to mitigate against the problems we come up against along the way.

A lot of people, institutions and systems have to work well in order for us to get accurate, timely and dependable information. In contrast, just one link in the chain has to break for poorer quality information to reach the public, and spread.

In the transport sector there is a principle known as the Swiss cheese model of accident causation. Many layers of holey cheese, representing different defence mechanisms, stack together to mitigate for the flaws in each. But sometimes the holes align, and an accident happens. The chances of that happening are lessened with each layer.

Our analogy reverses the situation: every layer makes it harder for the right information, presented and represented in the right way, to make its way through. But if we can make the holes align, we speed its progress. This is the unlikely journey of good information.

We hope that by identifying the barriers we can suggest solutions to the blockers and improve the quality of information in the UK.

Principles

There are three straightforward principles that we believe all those who choose to make serious claims in public debate – including fact checkers – should be held to.

These are:

- Get your facts right
- Back up what you say with evidence
- Correct your mistakes

Many more specific recommendations can be built on top of these principles – and we set some of these out in the final part of this report – but these basics should not be up for negotiation. They should be ingrained in all those who aim to present information to the public, and everyone should feel able to question those that fail to meet them. The more politicians, public bodies, experts and the media expect to be scrutinised, the more likely it is that they will change their behaviour from the outset.

How bad information causes harm

The harms – provable, plausible and potential – associated with bad information are a matter of debate. A great deal of anecdotal evidence exists, but there is less high-quality research, especially about the situation in the UK.

At the same time, there are legitimate concerns about the harms that a disproportionate response to misinformation could have on society. It is crucial to remember that freedom of expression isn't limited to accurate statements[1] and we must not conflate misinformation with ordinary people getting things wrong on the internet. The latter is not a harm in and of itself, and certainly not one that merits a policy response. Interactions on internet platforms are already mired with difficulties, and we advocate for a measured response and an understanding that everyone makes mistakes.[2]

But misinformation, both offline and online, does pose genuine harms that need to be addressed, whether that is by lawmakers, social media companies or the public. We group these into four main categories: disengagement from democracy, interference in democracy, economic harm and risks to life.[3]

Disengagement from democracy

It is clear we are being exposed to more information than ever before. With a wealth of sources to choose from it is harder for people to know what's true and what isn't, and that makes it harder for people to know where to place their trust.

In an Ipsos Mori poll of 18,180 adults across 23 countries in July 2019, 81% said that they find it hard to know who or what to trust due to contradictory information.[4]

The 2019 Ofcom Media Use and Attitudes study found that, despite almost all internet users using search engines, only six in ten understand that not all the websites returned will be accurate and unbiased.[5] Just one in ten internet users say they don't think about whether the content they see online is true and of those that do consider it, some 72% say they will check the information.[6]

The risk is that a lack of trust will cause people to disengage from democracy.

1   OSCE, 'Joint declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda', 3 March 2017, **osce.org/fom/302796?download=true**.

2   Full Fact, 'Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society', October 2018 **fullfact.org/media/uploads/full_fact_tackling_misinformation_in_an_open_society.pdf**

3   Full Fact, 'Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society'.

4   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth', 17 September 2019, **ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2019-09/ipsos-mori-trust-the-truth-event_0.pdf**.

5   Ofcom, 'Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report', May 2019, **ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/149124/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report.pdf**

6   Ofcom, 'Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report'

Research carried out by Full Fact and BritainThinks a week before the 2019 general election suggests that people could be turned off from voting if they feel unable to trust the information they are hearing.[7]

Our survey found that more than half (54%) said they tend to ignore what parties and politicians say because they don't know if they can trust them, while almost a third said they were worried that their own political opinions are based on false information. Worryingly, some 19% either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement: "I have been put off voting altogether by the level of false and misleading claims in this election campaign".

The UK is not unique – globally, trust in many institutions is low. Neither is this an entirely new phenomenon.[8] However, there is growing discontent in the UK with government over the long term.[9]

The 2019 Audit of Political Engagement shows that opinions of the system of governing are at a 15-year low: 72% say the system needs 'quite a lot' or a 'great deal' of improvement. Indicators of political engagement are broadly stable, but the Audit has found an intensification of feelings among those who are dissatisfied and disengaged. Some 18% say they 'strongly disagree' that political involvement can change the way the UK is run – a 15 year high – and 47% say they feel they have no influence at all in national decision making.[10]

The latest Ipsos MORI Veracity Index found that in the UK, trust in politicians and government ministers each fell by five percentage points between 2018 and 2019.[11] Politicians replaced advertising executives as the least trusted profession, with just 14% of the public saying they trust politicians in general to tell the truth, and 17% saying they trust government ministers. The same survey found that 26% said they trusted journalists to tell the truth, placing them below estate agents in the ranking, although this was the same proportion as the previous year.

From our own experience, it's clear that these traditional information intermediaries can and do misrepresent information or knowingly distort the facts. By doing so, they abuse their positions of power, and run the risk of further reducing the already limited faith in them that exists.

At the same time we are facing a rise of anti-establishment politics, and the politics of attack are seemingly more commonplace. Staking a defence against such attacks

7   Full Fact, BritainThinks, 'Research into Public Views on Truth and Untruth in the 2019 General Election', 29 February 2020, **britainthinks.com/pdfs/2019-Full-Fact-BritainThinks-election-research-data-tables.pdf**.

8   Amy Sippitt, 'Political Trust in the UK', June 2019, **fullfact.org/media/uploads/political-trust-in-the-uk.pdf**

9   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth'.

10   Hansard Society, 'Audit of Political Engagement 16', 2019 **hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/reports/audit-of-political-engagement-16**.

11   Ipsos Mori, 'Veracity Index 2019', November 2019, **ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-11/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2019-slides.pdf**.

can be hard at the best of times, especially if the actors don't deal in the facts. If the institutions that have typically been relied on to provide accurate information have lost the faith of the public, it will become even harder to challenge such attacks.

Taken together, this emphasises the importance of acting urgently to improve trust in politics and restore faith that the public does have a voice in the debate. As noted in Ipsos Trust and Truth, if there is a chronic, rather than acute, issue in trust that has been developing over time, then there may be multiple causes. There may also be multiple consequences; as the report states: "It might also reduce society's resilience against other sicknesses".[12]

If we want everyone to engage in democracy, people need to be able to trust that the debate they are entering is open, honest and fair. And if we wait any longer, until trust has been more seriously damaged, it may be too late to win it back.

However, we must remember that while there is evidence of the risk that misinformation poses to democratic engagement, this must be balanced with the risks related to the reactions of governments to misinformation.

Efforts to tackle bad information should not be at the expense of the other fundamentals within a democracy, including the rights to freedom of opinion and of expression. A heavy-handed approach could put these rights at risk, and we would urge a proportionate response that tackles the underlying causes as well as the symptoms.

Interference in democracy

There has always been a risk of interference during votes, but in the digital age both the type and scale is significantly different. Whereas historically, interference might have been locally focused, the internet allows for interference to happen at both small and large scale, and for foreign actors as well as domestic ones to wield more influence. Tackling these challenges is complex, but the growing body of proof of such interference in global elections shows the importance of doing so.

State interference was reported in the 2012 elections in South Korea[13], and there is evidence that Russia has produced or supported information in at least recent French, German and US elections.[14][15] There are also examples of Russian media outlets trying

---

12   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth'

13   Choe Sang-Hun, 'Prosecutors Detail Attempt to Sway South Korean Election', *The New York Times*, 21 November 2013, **nytimes.com/2013/11/22/world/asia/prosecutors-detail-bid-to-sway-south-korean-election.html**.

14   Select Committee on Intelligence, 'Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media', 2019, **intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf**.

15   Dean Jackson, Issue brief: How disinformation impacts politics and publics' (National Endowment for Democracy, May 2018), **ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/How-Disinformation-Impacts-Politics-and-Publics.pdf**.

to perform "damage control" for Russia during incidents like the Skripal poisoning.[16]

In the UK, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament has prepared a report into Russian interference but this has yet to be published, as it was delayed when the 2019 general election was called.

It is likely that disinformation – which we define as misleading or inaccurate material that intends to deceive, as opposed to misinformation, which does not refer to intent – will continue to be used by these actors to exert influence over longer time periods.

One recent report found evidence of organised social media manipulation campaigns in 70 countries in 2019, up from 48 in 2018.[17] It found in each country, at least one political party or government agency using social media to shape public attitudes domestically. This ranged from politicians amassing fake followers or spreading manipulated media to manipulate voters, to – in authoritarian states – use of social media to discredit political opponents and drown out dissenting opinions.

In the UK, outdated electoral laws pose another potential risk. For instance, rules on campaign spending can be too easily dodged, allowing actors both foreign and domestic to interfere in elections by making untraceable donations via PayPal or multiple small donations, either as individuals or part of a coordinated group.[18]

Electoral rules seek to ensure transparency in the democratic process. They require that contributions of £500 or more must come from a UK-based person or company, and it is an offence to attempt to donate more than this amount in smaller payments – the problem with anonymous online payment methods is that these measures can be more easily circumvented.

This feeds into wider concerns about the impact that such laws have on democracy, including the way they can be exploited by parties, candidates and their supporters. Some level of untrustworthy behaviour has always been expected during elections, but in the 2019 election we saw new levels of inappropriate and misleading campaign tactics. We discuss these further in Part Two.

On the other hand, it is important that the risks of interference in democracy are not overstated. Technical problems do not necessarily mean an attack, and not all cybersecurity incidents are part of a sophisticated, organised foreign campaign. Journalists, politicians and other actors – including organisations like us – should exercise caution when communicating the risks to the public.

And, while there is evidence of content that can be traced to state actors circulating

---

16   'Weaponising News', accessed 14 February 2020, **kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/weaponising-news.pdf**.

17   Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, 'The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised', 26 September 2019, **comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf**.

18   Ellen Weintraub, § Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics (2019), **ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/ETHI/meeting-154/evidence#Int-10656830**.

online, it isn't clear what real impact they have had on people's political beliefs or behaviours, or whether it affected the outcomes of any particular votes. This is partly because we don't have access to the right data that could help us understand these effects.

It is also important to make a distinction between disinformation that appeals to preexisting prejudices rather than changing target audiences' views, and disinformation that successfully alters viewpoints.[19]

Economic harm

Individuals, companies and systems all face potential financial risk from misinformation, and the internet makes it easier and cheaper to reach vulnerable people.

One example is the rise of the foreign exchange and cryptocurrency scams on social media, possibly using celebrity images or Instagram influencers to promote the investments, and linking through to professional-looking websites. The asset, though, might not even exist or the firms or people running the scams might distort its price. The UK's Financial Conduct Authority reported that more than £27 million was lost to foreign-exchange and crypto scams in 2018-19, with each victim losing on average £14,600.[20]

Scam job adverts are another way in which individuals can be tricked out of their money. In Africa, there have been cases where posts from social media accounts impersonating recruiters and even global charities ask job seekers to pay cash before they apply, in the form of a registration fee or to print out a badge.[21]

For companies, false claims about products or services can affect revenue and reputation in the long-term, wipe value off shares, and risks organisations being landed with fines.

In 2016, shares in construction group Vinci lost 18% after Bloomberg published a hoax press release, which said the group was revising its 2015 and 2016 accounts and planned to fire its chief financial officer. Vinci filed a complaint with the French markets watchdog, which concluded that Bloomberg should have verified the information in the release before publishing it, and fined the news group €5m.[22]

---

19   Christina Nemr and William Gangware, 'Weapons of mass distraction: Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age', March 2019, **state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Weapons-of-Mass-Distraction-Foreign-State-Sponsored-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf**.

20   Financial Conduct Authority, 'Over £27 Million Reported Lost to Crypto and Forex Investment Scams', 21 May 2019, **fca.org.uk/news/press-releases/over-27-million-reported-lost-crypto-and-forex-investment-scams**.

21   'World Vision Kenya Warns Public about Fake Facebook Jobs Scam', Africa Check, accessed 14 February 2020, **africacheck.org/fbcheck/world-vision-kenya-warns-public-about-fake-facebook-jobs-scam**.

22   'France's AMF Watchdog Fines Bloomberg €5 Million over Vinci Hoax', Reuters, 16 December 2019, **reuters.com/article/us-france-amf-bloomberg-idUSKBN1YK1VN**.

At an even larger scale, there has been speculation on the impact that misinformation could have on financial markets, which depend on accurate information, with examples of attempts to post false information online in order to affect markets.[23]

Risks to life

There is mounting evidence of the risk bad information poses to life. At the extreme end is the possibility of online radicalisation, which requires a particular kind of policy intervention and is an area that is beyond Full Fact's remit.

As fact checkers, we are more likely to come into contact with claims about public health, with the best known example until recently being vaccine hesitancy. But this is far from the only example of misinformation that poses a risk to health.

The internet and social media have made it easier for ideas to spread quickly and widely. This also makes it easier for bad information to reach many more people than it did before. Last year, we joined Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking programme, and this has given us an insight into the extent of health-related misinformation that people are exposed to on a daily basis.[24]

This included posts claiming that if you can't speak on a 999 call, pressing 55 will allow the police to track your location[25] – the police later launched a publicity campaign to debunk this – and that chemicals in a bath product could induce labour.[26] Although not necessarily directly damaging to health, such claims can lead to heightened fears that have the potential to cause real problems for people's everyday lives.

There is also evidence from across the world that misinformation has affected public perception of various topics including the Ebola virus, sexual and reproductive health, and AIDS.[27]

Most recently, we have been tackling various claims about the novel coronavirus. This brought a large number of claims that could put an individual at risk through bad advice, for instance on how to check whether you have the coronavirus or how to treat it. But there were also claims that could have put others in danger as theories

23   'Can Social Media Influence Financial Markets?', World Economic Forum, weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/can-social-media-influence-financial-markets.

24   Full Fact, 'Report on the Facebook Third Party Fact Checking Programme', fullfact.org/media/uploads/tpfc-q1q2-2019.pdf.

25   Grace Rahman, 'It's Not True That Dialling 55 in a Silent 999 Call Lets the Police Track Your Location', Full Fact, fullfact.org/online/dialling-55-doesnt-track-location.

26   Claire Milne, 'Clary Sage in Radox Isn't Dangerous for Pregnant Women', Full Fact, fullfact.org/online/clary-sage-radox-isnt-dangerous-pregnant-women.

27   Wilkinson, A., & Leach, M. (2015). Briefing: Ebola–myths, realities, and structural violence. African Affairs, 114(454), 136–148; Augustine Ankomah, Jennifer Anyanti, and Muyiwa Oladosu, 'Myths, Misinformation, and Communication about Family Planning and Contraceptive Use in Nigeria', *Journal of Contraception*, 2011, 95–105; Boghardt, T. (2009). Soviet bloc intelligence and its AIDS disinformation campaign. Studies in Intelligence, 53(4) cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol53no4/pdf/U-%20Boghardt-AIDS-Made%20in%20the%20USA-17Dec.pdf

about links between coronavirus and 5G went into the mainstream, there were reports that people were vandalising masts and accosting engineers. At the time of writing, we are just months into what is a continually developing situation and we will return to the potential harms of coronavirus misinformation in future reports.

But one thing we are preparing to hear more of as the efforts to tackle the virus moves from managing the outbreak and treating those infected to longer-term efforts to vaccinate people is false claims related to vaccines. This is an area where Full Fact has a good deal of experience, as these claims are already rife online.

This type of misinformation has been linked to conspiracy theories that have circulated both offline and online for decades. These are often traced back to claims that the combined vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) causes autism as a result of the disproven and now-retracted – though still widely accessible – study from Andrew Wakefield in 1998.

Although the vaccine-hesitant movement is more active in other countries, theories and 'warnings' are rife on social media here in the UK. According to data from NHS Digital, coverage in all routine childhood vaccinations in 2018-19 declined between 0.2 and 1 percentage points compared to the previous year.[28] And in 2018, the UK lost its 'measles-free' status from the World Health Organisation, after a marked increase in cases from the previous year.[29] There were 991 confirmed cases in England and Wales in 2018, compared with 284 in 2017.[30]

Public Health England's annual survey into parents' attitudes to vaccinations has found no evidence that anti-vaccination social media activity has had a major impact on vaccination uptake in England, instead pointing to delivery by local primary care providers.[31] The WHO director general has said that, although there is a "serious problem of misinformation" and increasing vaccine hesitancy, especially in rich countries, access to vaccines remained the world's "main problem".[32]

However, with evidence that social media activity is having an impact on vaccine take-up elsewhere in the world, PHE and NHS England have recognised the need to make a positive case for vaccination.[33] A variety of research groups are carrying out further work on this topic, but we should not wait to see evidence of harm here in the UK before taking action to tackle misinformation about vaccines. We go into more detail about health misinformation in Part Two of this report.

---

28   'Childhood Vaccination Coverage Statistics - England 2018-19', NHS Digital, digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-immunisation-statistics/england-2018-19.

29   'Measles in England - Public Health Matters', publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2019/08/19/measles-in-england.

30   'Measles in England - Public Health Matters'.

31   National Audit Office, 'Investigation into Pre-School Vaccinations', 25 October 2019.

32   Elisabeth Mahase, 'Vaccination Uptake: Access Is Still Biggest Barrier, Experts Warn', BMJ 366 (17 September 2019), doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l5576.

33   National Audit Office, 'Investigation into Pre-School Vaccinations'.

Efforts to tackle bad information

Globally, most countries are taking a different approach to tackling misinformation, informed by their views and interpretations of other rights, such as freedom of expression or the role of the press.

This ranges from societal to regulation, and a combination of approaches is essential if we are to succeed in reducing the harm that misinformation has on our communities and democracy. This section aims to give a snapshot of the range of approaches that have been mooted or adopted, but does not seek to be exhaustive.

Fact checking

At one end of the scale is fact checking, whether by independent fact checkers, like Full Fact, or operations run out of media organisations like BBC's Reality Check or Channel 4's FactCheck. It is perhaps useful to start by explaining what we believe fact checking can and can't do.

Fact checking alone is not the panacea for bad information. It is essential that governments take action, whether that is improving how they use evidence in their own communications, ensuring democratic oversight of choices made by the internet companies, implementing educational programmes to embed critical thinking in the young or efforts to build the public's trust in the institutions providing information.

What fact checking can do is help ensure good information is available to the public and policymakers, while challenging bad information and highlighting the systemic problems that need a broader response.

The first part of this is the more public face of fact checking: publishing articles that scrutinise particular claims. This gets accurate information to our readers as well as the people they may share it with and – especially through Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking programme and search engine results – those who might not choose to visit us directly.

Fact checking works best when it clearly refutes false claims, gives a conclusion and is done in a timely way – even if a claim is false, repetition increases familiarity and with it the perception of veracity.[34]

In practice, this isn't always possible. For a start, the world is rarely black and white: there is often a grain of truth in a misleading claim, or the problem is the way accurate facts have been interpreted or represented, not the facts themselves. This is one of the reasons that Full Fact doesn't generally rate claims as true or false.

---

34   Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol and Amy Sippitt, 'Fact Checking in the 2019 Election: Research Recommendations', 2019.

Our fact checking focuses on providing as clear a conclusion as possible. We aim to set the claim into context and then allow the public to decide whether they believe the claimant used facts in good faith or twisted them for their own ends.

At the same time, we want to change attitudes to evidence and information, whether that's pushing institutions that produce statistics to be worthy of the public trust they seek or encouraging public figures to think twice before making a claim.

We can't possibly hope to do this by simply publishing a fact check and moving on to the next – which is why Full Fact places such emphasis on following up on our fact checks.

We challenge the false or misleading claims at their source, by asking the people or institutions who make false or misleading claims to correct themselves, or involving regulatory bodies like the Office for Statistics Regulation, or parliamentary committees that help hold officials to account.

By doing this, we hope to ensure that accurate information rises to the top and encourage behaviour change. Research has shown that fact checking efforts are more effective if the original source of an inaccurate claim makes a correction themselves.[35]

Evidence also shows that fact checking contributes to a culture of accuracy. The more politicians, public bodies, experts and the media expect to be scrutinised, the more likely it is that they will change their behaviour from the outset. One 2012 study in the US found that alerting politicians to the threat of fact checking could encourage them to make fewer inaccurate claims.[36]

Full Fact has seen some politicians respond positively to being fact checked, by correcting their mistakes or no longer using the claims that have been shown to be inaccurate. And generally we find that newspapers are willing to engage with queries about their articles and correct their mistakes, especially when they are significant.

But that is not to say that every intervention we make is met with an adequate response. In 2019, we made 126 interventions – these ranged from simple correction requests to newspapers to more complicated follow-up work that sought the publication of missing data.

In just 51 of those cases, the response was fully satisfactory. In many more we only had a partial result – a newspaper amending only part of an article or a politician failing to fully correct themselves. In the rest, those responsible did nothing. If we want more consistent responses, people and organisations in public life need to take more responsibility for the harms their inaccuracies cause.

---

35   Dora-Olivia Vicol and Amy Sippitt, 'Fact Checking in the 2019 Election: Research Recommendations', 2019.

36   Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, 'The Effect of Fact-Checking on Elites: A Field Experiment on US State Legislators', *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 628–640.

In addition, through work like this report series and our independent research, we aim to understand how our interventions can be more effective.[37]

Fact checking is more than a series of standalone articles or follow-up actions. As we fact check the same types of people or organisations, or scrutinise the same kinds of claims, we build up an evidence base that allows us to spot patterns and trends.

This allows us to act more quickly to prevent damaging information from reaching the public in the first place, and – when combined with our follow-up work – helps us test the existing checks and balances that should be promoting good information and protecting us from harms caused by bad information.

Some of the systemic problems we identify will require a much longer-term approach. Unpicking ingrained processes is hard and changing cultures within the institutions we address in this report will take a long time.

Underlying our fact checking work are our automated fact checking tools, which help us detect claims in large pieces of writing – such as political party manifestos – or in live debates on the TV or in parliament. These make it easier for the human fact checkers to step in and identify the most potentially harmful claims.

We also have tools that detect claims we've fact checked before as they pop up again, allowing us to both track the spread of the claim and make sure this version is corrected. Sometimes, particularly in the press, false claims continue rumbling on simply because someone has copied false information from a previous version of a story. By noticing this and correcting it every time, we are a step closer to stamping out that claim entirely.

Approaches by governments and internet companies

As we have said previously, fact checking is just one method Full Fact uses to address the problems caused by bad information. Part of our work is also aimed at educating the public, so everyone is able to spot, and challenge, potentially misleading claims.

We are not alone in these efforts: there are various media and information literacy programmes that seek to improve audiences' ability to think more critically about the information they come across. There is no one-size-fits-all approach that we can say works universally around the world, but media literacy appears to be the preferred approach internationally. A meta analysis of 51 interventions has found that these initiatives do increase knowledge, criticism and awareness of the influence of the media.[38]

---

37   Amy Sippitt, 'What Is the Impact of Fact Checkers' Work on Public Figures, Institutions and the Media?', February 2020, **fullfact.org/media/uploads/impact-fact-checkers-public-figures-media.pdf**.

38   Dora-Olivia Vicol, 'Media and Information Literacy Lessons from Interventions around the World', 2020, **fullfact.org/media/uploads/media-information-literacy-lessons.pdf**.

The UK government is currently developing a media literacy strategy – due for publication in summer 2020 – that aims to ensure a coordinated approach for children, young people and adults that supports them in thinking critically about what they see online and how they can report harmful content. We support efforts to coordinate this approach, given that there are a wide variety of programmes in existence already.

At the other end of the spectrum are regulatory approaches. Where countries have, or are planning to introduce, regulation this has been influenced by their cultural norms. We outlined international efforts in more detail in our 2018 report Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society, noting a range of responses to the problem.[39] This demonstrates a lack of global agreement about the scope, scale and potential solutions.

This is still a problem today. It can be illustrated by a couple of examples of policies enacted since then. The Singaporean parliament passed a law that gives the government power to order internet companies to restrict or even block access to content it deems to be false. Concerns, shared by Full Fact, were raised about the lack of protections for free expression of opinions, and the that risk the law will be used to control dissent against the government.[40]

In contrast, Canada's approach to tackling one area of potential disinformation – online political ads and election interference – has won more praise. A new law, passed at the end of 2018, sets out stricter transparency requirements, including that major online platforms maintain a registry of partisan and election advertising published online during the pre-election and election period.[41]

Rather than proposing legislation, the European Union has created a voluntary code of practice that the internet companies have signed up to. This sees them file reports detailing how they have tackled disinformation, bots and inauthentic accounts on their platforms. However, without a required standard format, the companies approached the code and its requirements differently, and reporting has not been consistent or comparable across the platforms.

In its annual report on the programme, the Commission acknowledged some problems in the process, calling on the companies to provide more big-picture context

---

39   Full Fact, 'Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society'.

40   'Singapore Passes Fake News Law amid Freedom-of-Speech Fears', *Reuters*, 9 May 2019, **reuters.com/article/ us-singapore-politics-fakenews-idUSKCN1SD1EQ**.

41   Democratic Institutions, 'Government of Canada Passes Elections Modernization Act', news releases, gcnws, 14 December 2018, **canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2018/12/government-of-canada-passes- elections-modernization-act.html**.

and information on trends, along with more, and better, data and search tools for the research community.[42]

One analysis also pointed to problems around a lack of agreed terminology between the internet companies or the member states, and called for a more iterative approach to identifying the data that would best answer the questions around disinformation online.[43]

Some administrations, like the US and UK, have been slower to act than others. In the UK, the government plans to introduce legislation covering a broad range of so-called online harms – including child sexual exploitation, terrorist activity, cyberbullying and disinformation – later this year. It is crucial that the development of any such policies is carried out in an open democratic transparent process, with continuous consultation with a variety of stakeholders.

Part of this work should focus on setting transparency requirements for the internet companies to produce regular reports that are consistent and accessible to the public. Without such efforts, we won't know whether, and to what extent, the measures that are implemented to tackle bad information online are effective.

We lack information on exactly what posts are taken down on each of the platforms; the reach these posts have had before being taken down; and what impact measures taken to reduce the spread of various posts have had. In particular, the data that has been published lacks the granularity organisations like ours need to properly understand the problem and whether measures we and others implement are successful. Measures that would allow the regulator to gather more data as it is deemed necessary, and which could be used to assess the accuracy and validity of the data provided through these efforts, will also be beneficial.

As governments have struggled with what action to take, pressure has mounted on internet companies to tackle the problems. But the range of international approaches also demonstrates how difficult it will be for them to develop one-size-fits-all policies. Neither are they best placed to establish policies that often require a fine balance between freedom of expression and protecting against harms that will be unique to each country.

In lieu of this, there has been an understandable emphasis on the importance of transparency. As mentioned above, the larger internet companies do produce

---

42   European Commission, 'Annual Self-Assessment Reports of Signatories to the Code of Practice on Disinformation 2019', Text, Digital Single Market - European Commission, 29 October 2019, **ec.europa. eu/digital-single-market/en/news/annual-self-assessment-reports-signatories-code-practice-disinformation-2019**.

43   James Pamment and James Pamment, 'EU Code of Practice on Disinformation: Briefing Note for the New European Commission', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, **carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/03/eu-code-of-practice-on-disinformation-briefing-note-for-new-european-commission-pub-81187**.

annual reports detailing their efforts to tackle disinformation alongside other transparency efforts, but the success and value of these voluntary schemes is very much up for debate.

Most notable are the databases of political advertising or messaging, which have been found to be error prone[44] and not fit for purpose by organisations including Mozilla[45] and Privacy International.[46] Nor are these efforts truly comparable – companies choose what, how and when to report such information.

Putting aside the obvious limitations of these voluntary efforts, even if they worked perfectly, these decisions should not be left to internet companies. For instance, they can change their terms and conditions and algorithms or stop participating in voluntary efforts whenever they like. Allowing this to continue over long periods risks making it harder to ensure compliance or properly track progress in tackling misinformation and disinformation over time.

In addition, few people have a clear idea of what impact these interventions have. At a general level, the black box nature of the algorithms used by the companies makes any assessment challenging. This is compounded by the fact the companies share very limited data shared with academics or other groups, including fact checkers.

As mentioned earlier in this section, any action to tackle bad information must be proportionate. We must balance the urgent need to address the problem with the need to prevent a knee jerk reaction, and the desire to produce a single solution. In this sense, policymakers mustn't let perfect be the enemy of the good: parliamentarians should expect to legislate frequently in this field. This is the norm in other areas, such as criminal law, and the same should be true for internet regulation.

44   Alex Hern and Niamh McIntyre, 'Google Admits Major Underreporting of Election Ad Spend', *The Guardian*, 19 November 2019, **theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/19/google-admits-major-underreporting-of-election-ad-spend**.

45   Mozilla, 'Facebook's Ad Archive API Is Inadequate', The Mozilla Blog, **blog.mozilla.org/blog/2019/04/29/facebooks-ad-archive-api-is-inadequate**; Mozilla, 'Google's Ad API Is Better Than Facebook's, But…', **blog.mozilla.org/blog/2019/05/10/googles-ad-api-is-better-than-facebooks-but**.

46   'Social Media Companies Are Failing to Provide Adequate Advertising Transparency to Users Globally', **privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/cop-2019_0.pdf**.

Part Two: Themes

The journey of information from producer to user is not a simple one.

There are many roadblocks that prevent the public from accessing good quality, accurate information when it matters. Some are unique to the institutions or actors involved, but many are common among the different groups.

This section looks at some of the biggest cross-cutting topics that we have to deal with. These are based on what we see as the most relevant today – either because of their prevalence or recent events. There are many more, and we'll be covering others in future reports.

Information accessibility

Good quality information is fundamental to individuals in their daily lives, to the work of the people who make decisions that affect others, and to the organisations that scrutinise them. In an ideal world, policies are developed based on up-to-date information, collected by trusted bodies. These policy interventions should then be monitored to measure the success of the intervention.

With access to good quality data, journalists can provide the public and policymakers with accurate insights into society and the world we live in. Such information is also essential if fact checkers are to ascertain if claims are accurate.

But it's all too common for the right data to be inaccessible, or for the existing data to be unable to tell us what we want, or need, to know. It could be that the data itself is insufficient, that it shouldn't be used in the way people use it, or that there are better ways to answer the question.

The ONS' International Passenger Survey – which is based on interviews with members of the travelling public at ports – was originally designed to track people's movement at airports. It's now used to measure immigation, and there have been concerns about its robustness for this work.

A 2013 review by the UK Statistics Authority found a consensus among users that the survey "does not provide sufficient robustness to meet some important needs for more local migration data; for example, at the local authority level or for smaller areas, and asked for continued improvement of estimation of international migration statistics".[47]

---

47   Andrew Dilnot, 'Review of the robustness of the International Passenger Survey', 25 June 2013, **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/archive/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-reviews/monitoring-review-4-2013---the-robustness-of-the-international-passenger-survey.pdf**.

With increasing availability of different data, it is possible there are better ways to measure migration. Just because something is the best information we have doesn't make it the right way to answer the question.

Overall, problems accessing good quality data can force organisations to rely on out-of-date studies; it encourages them to fudge the numbers from other datasets; and prevents independent organisations scrutinising the basis of others' assertions.

Some problems are technical: information that is held only in formats like PDF files makes detailed analysis unnecessarily difficult and time consuming. For a fact check about voter ID trials, we needed information from the Electoral Commission, but this was provided only in image format and could only be downloaded as a PDF or image file.[48]

Sometimes, it is that information is trapped behind a paywall, which closes it off from members of the public as well as fact checkers. We have seen instances of generosity: during the novel coronavirus outbreak, we saw news outlets that many will turn to at times like this, such as the Health Service Journal, New Scientist and The Atlantic, making their coronavirus-related content available for free.

To some extent, efforts like these can help address these more technical problems – other solutions include work towards open standards on information publishing. But some problems require a different approach that needs to be embedded in the working cultures of organisations that produce information, in whatever form.

When searching for information, press offices are often the first port of call for fact checkers or journalists, but they can be unable or unwilling to provide relevant information. In some cases, the data exists but it isn't published alongside the announcement.

Similarly, we see government funding pledges that offer no detail on where the money will come from or indeed whether it is 'new money' at all. Often public bodies will seek a second wave of positive press by re-announcing a previous funding pledge in smaller, more specific chunks. In these situations it can be surprisingly hard to narrow down exactly which pot the cash comes from, and press offices are not always prepared to answer those questions.

The problem is exacerbated by the time it takes for the organisation responsible to fill in these blanks when they are asked for more information. By the time the statistics or raw data have been dredged up, the news agenda has moved on. The risk then is that the public has only been exposed to the potentially misleading headline figure, and we are too late to have any real impact on the message they have taken away.

---

48   Joël Reland, 'Voter ID Scheme: Far More Turned Away than Convicted of Electoral Fraud', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/crime/voter-id-2019**.

We saw this when, in summer 2019, the government announced a £1.8 billion investment in the NHS but wouldn't answer specific questions about where exactly the money came from. Despite evidence that around £1 billion of this was money that trusts had already been told they'd get but that had been withheld, the government continued to insist it was new money and the debate quickly became mired in technicalities.[49]

It took three weeks for Department of Health and Social Care to respond to our questions, during which time the statistics regulator also wrote to the department asking for an authoritative official statement describing how the £1.8 billion is funded, "in order to enhance transparency and support public understanding" of what is a relatively complex funding structure.[50]

Of course, the government is far from the only actor that will happily cite unpublished data to further its own message or agenda. Opposition MPs, who can't benefit from the civil service, are able to ask the House of Commons Library to do some number-crunching – but they aren't required to publish the calculations, even if the statistic is referred to in parliament or in the press.

We have also seen charities that are unable to explain where the numbers in a press release came from, and it is accepted as standard practice that polling companies and clients don't have to publish the methodology behind polls immediately.

It is crucial that when public bodies, politicians and trusted organisations make statements referring to financing or statistics they back up their claims with evidence. If they are not ready to show that data to others, they are effectively hiding it from public scrutiny.

The small silver lining in many of these examples is that it is at least clear who should have published the information, meaning there is someone we can hold to account. Worse is when there is no clear source of information, and no organisation is responsible for providing that data. We had to call 13 separate press offices to confirm that Radox bubble bath probably doesn't make pregnant women spontaneously give birth, and even then didn't get a clear answer.[51]

A similar challenge comes in our work on knotty subjects like criminal law, court procedures and trade. Over the past three years, these – and many more – have become political footballs for both sides of the Brexit debate, with soundbites on World Trade Organisation terms and viral posts about the Lisbon Treaty becoming commonplace.

---

49   Claire Milne, 'Money for the NHS: Is It New or Not?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/nhs-money-new-or-not**.

50   'Statements on NHS Funding', *UK Statistics Authority* (blog), **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/statements-on-nhs-funding**.

51   Claire Milne, 'Clary Sage in Radox Isn't Dangerous for Pregnant Women', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/clary-sage-radox-isnt-dangerous-pregnant-women**.

But checking these claims is hard: the WTO documents platform, for example, isn't user friendly, the material is complex, and often it is open to interpretation, so it's tough to figure out if the latest claims are accurate, conjecture, a genuine misunderstanding or a flat-out lie.

In the case of the law, there is no official body responsible for setting out the law accurately for the public when there is confusion. The law officers – appointed by the prime minister to give legal advice to ministers and to perform various public interest functions around the law – have had a welcome recent focus on public legal education and might be well placed to fill this vacuum.

As fact checkers, we are able to dedicate days to diving into one claim if it's necessary; it is no surprise that non-specialist journalists and commentators under extreme time pressure make mistakes. When thinking about access to information, we must also consider if the existing mechanisms for access are fit for purpose.

Public health

Claims about health vary widely and, powered by the internet and social media, can rapidly spread around the world: an event elsewhere will often kick off a trend of misinformation that reaches us in the UK. There are also plenty of home-grown theories in the UK that take hold online, and can even make it into the mainstream press. In either situation, it's crucial that fact checkers react quickly to try and head these claims off as early as possible.

Full Fact's experience of checking claims about health has increased significantly in the last couple of years, in contrast to our relatively more extensive work checking statistical announcements or political proclamations.

This is partly to do with our participation in Facebook's international Third Party Fact Checking programme, which is discussed in more detail in the section on internet companies, and partly as we have increased our focus on online fact checking more generally, as health-related claims are more prevalent on social media platforms.

There are certain trends we see, like claims about cancer prevention, vaccines or technology. It is also notable how many appear to be targeted at women, such as claims about the efficacy of contraceptive pills, which plants reportedly stop you getting pregnant or, as mentioned previously, claims that Radox can induce labour.

Another noticeable theme is the number of claims that are technically true but are highly, and often dangerously, misleading. These claims might seek to persuade people of the supposed dangers of medical treatments by citing their side effects without any context, or listing ingredients that are not present in high enough quantities to do any harm. We have also seen examples of situations where a single scientific study is taken out of context. Full Fact is planning to expand its evidence base of claims like these, in order to understand if they demonstrate wider trends.

Novel coronavirus

During the final stages of producing this report, the world was rocked by the novel coronavirus outbreak, which originated in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019. On 30 January 2020, the WHO designated the outbreak as a "public health emergency of international concern", and by March the UK was in lockdown.

The crisis threw into stark contrast the essential need for good information, as false claims and exaggerations ran rife on social media, private messaging groups and even in the mainstream press. Amid confusion over symptoms, treatments and government rules, bad advice and potentially harmful 'cures' proliferated online, along with conspiracy theories that relied on existing prejudices or health concerns.

We have also been faced with an increase in misinformation spread via private messages, which led us to launch an online form to allow users to send us their

questions about the outbreak, or share claims they had seen that they wanted to see fact checked. Our aim has been to get a better understanding of what information was being shared in messaging apps, and provide people with good information they could use and share themselves.

In just over three weeks of operation, we had more than 2,000 responses. Based on preliminary analysis of these, the most common questions have been about social distancing, followed by medical questions, and then questions about transmission and treatment. They ranged from concerned citizens trying to understand whether they could leave the house, and when, to people asking how long the virus remained on surfaces or if sipping water regularly will prevent you catching the virus.

Some of the most concerning claims we have seen, from a health point of view, were spread organically on social media. Initially, many of the claims understandably focused on symptoms and treatments, as worried people wanted to share tips with their friends and family.

One post claiming to be from a user's uncle was shared more than 300,000 times and included a mixture of accurate and inaccurate statements, including claims that could have falsely led people to believe they don't have Covid-19 when they do or ways of preventing infection that wouldn't work. The claims in the post had been circulating since early February, but this post saw the claims go viral.

And despite the user changing the post, variations or copies of the claims in the original continue to circulate at least on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, although the advice was attributed to various different people, including "a member of the Stanford hospital board" and even "a friend's sister's friend's brother who just happens to be on the Stanford Hospital board".[52] Some of these may have been intended as satire, but they still have the potential to encourage people to follow misleading advice if taken seriously.

As time went on, claims followed what was happening in wider society, with false information about what was allowed under UK lockdown rules or when schools, pubs and branches of McDonalds would reopen. We also saw voice notes and audio clips used to spread misinformation and an increase in conspiracy theories, including that the virus had been engineered in a lab and linking 5G to the spread of coronavirus.

Although widespread on social media, we also saw irresponsible and misleading coverage in mainstream news outlets. The Daily Express claimed that a study showed that "coronavirus may have been genetically engineered for the 'efficient spreading in the human population'", when it didn't make any such statement.[53] The paper

---

52   Olga Robinson and Marianna Spring, 'How Bad Information Goes Viral', BBC News, 19 March 2020, **bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-51931394**; Grace Rahman, 'Viral Post about Someone's Uncle's Coronavirus Advice Is Not All It's Cracked up to Be', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/coronavirus-claims-symptoms-viral**.

53   Pippa Allen-Kinross, 'A study has not claimed the new coronavirus was 'genetically engineered for efficient spread in humans', Full Fact, 11 March 2020, **fullfact.org/health/new-coronavirus-not-genetically-engineered**

corrected its story after we contacted them, but similar claims have also been shared on social media, including by public figures.

At the time of preparing this report, one of the most common conspiracy theories is that coronavirus has been caused by, or is being spread more rapidly due to, 5G. As we will discuss later in this section of the report, false claims about the impact of 5G on health have been circulating for some time, but there was a sudden spike in interest in these as they were linked to coronavirus. There is no evidence to suggest 5G is harmful to health, and it has nothing to do with the new coronavirus, or its rapid spread.

Towards the end of March, these theories began spreading beyond social media and into the national press, as various newspapers reported in the main uncritically on claims made by celebrities about the supposed link. Articles like this tended to either omit the fact there is no evidence to make these links or put any context so far down the article it would be missed. When we contacted Metro and the Daily Star about their pieces, they did add in more context.[54] As time went on, reporting generally became more sceptical of the claims. However, there remain concerns that ambiguity feeds the conspiracy theory.[55]

Indeed, the idea appeared to take hold in the public, and by the start of April multiple mobile phone masts had been vandalised and network engineers were being confronted by members of the public.[56] This led mobile phone companies and government officials to make public statements against the rumours, amid pressure on the internet companies to take action to prevent the spread of the false claims.

Telecoms businesses can learn lessons from this. Companies that introduce changes that cause concern need to effectively reassure people. This would have been much easier when the concern was much less widespread, and the costs to the telecoms industry of doing that effectively would have been much less than the costs they now face because they did not manage to make that case.

These links to 5G is just one strand of a complex and developing situation around the novel coronavirus outbreak. It is too soon to fully understand the impact that misinformation has or will have on society, nor to assess the internet companies' actions.

---

54   Rishma Dosani, 'Ex On The Beach's Calum Best Blames Coronavirus on 5G Technology', *Metro*, 31 March 2020, **metro.co.uk/2020/03/31/ex-beachs-calum-best-blames-coronavirus-5g-technology-12482956**; Sophie Bateman, 'Coronavirus: Activists in Bizarre Claim 5G Could Be Acting as "accelerator" for Disease, *Daily Star*, **dailystar.co.uk/news/weird-news/coronavirus-fears-5g-wifi-networks-21728189**.

55   Sarah Manavis, 'How Celebrities Became the Biggest Peddlers of 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories', *New Statesman*, **newstatesman.com/science-tech/social-media/2020/04/how-celebrities-became-biggest-peddlers-5g-conspiracy-theory-coronavirus-covid-19**.

56   Jim Waterson and Alex Hern, 'At Least 20 UK Phone Masts Vandalised over False 5G Coronavirus Claims', *The Guardian*, 6 April 2020, **theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/06/at-least-20-uk-phone-masts-vandalised-over-false-5g-coronavirus-claims**.

By the end of March, a number of the internet companies had taken action in response to the coronavirus pandemic, both to reduce the spread of false claims and to try and surface good information for those in need. For instance, the Facebook platform, Google and Twitter – among others – directed people to sources of official information and took steps to prevent people from profiting from the crisis, by blocking adverts related to Covid-19 or removing content on false cures.

We will provide a fuller analysis of the types of misinformation we saw during the outbreak, the way those claims spread and the role of the media, internet companies and government, in due course.

Vaccines

One of the most common types of claim we check in our health-related work is content about vaccines. As discussed in Part One, there are obvious harms to the health of society, and a particular risk to the most vulnerable groups; the young, elderly and immunocompromised, if this sort of misinformation spreads. There is also some evidence that vaccine hesitancy is increasing in the UK, and the country lost its 'measles-free' status from the WHO in 2018.[57]

When fact checking this content, Full Fact relies heavily on trusted official sources, healthcare professionals and academic experts, such as the Vaccine Knowledge Project at the University of Oxford, which is a group of consultants, researchers, nurses and statisticians studying vaccines in the Department of Paediatrics.

We commonly see claims that make a link between vaccines or their ingredients and cancer. For instance, a campaign group in the US called Moms Across America claimed it had found glyphosate in five different vaccines (the reliability of these claims have been called into question).[58] Glyphosate is a herbicide used in some of agritech company Monsanto's products and over which it has lost several court cases that alleged it causes cancer. Despite this, it isn't completely certain that exposure to glyphosate does cause cancer, and it may be the case that only those exposed to very high levels are at increased risk.

Another common claim is that vaccines or their ingredients are linked to autism – theories that have persisted long after a supposed link between autism and the MMR jab was first mooted in the 1990s by disgraced former doctor Andrew Wakefield.

A trope we see in this community is presenting the increase in autism prevalence with the number of vaccines now recommended for most children. Those posting misinformation claim autism is one of the 'chronic illnesses' (despite it not being an

---

57   'Measles in England - Public Health Matters'.

58   Claire Milne, 'Most of These Claims about Glyphosate, Vaccines and Cancer Are Misleading', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/monsanto-glyphosate-cancer-vaccines**/.

illness or disease) associated with vaccines, along with things like eczema, diabetes, anxiety, and food allergies.

There has, in general, been an increase in diagnoses of autism spectrum disorders[59], but some studies have argued that this is due to increased awareness and expanded criteria for diagnosis.[60] This means it isn't clear whether there has genuinely been an increase in people with these disorders, or whether it's factors like monitoring and access to healthcare that means people with the disorder weren't being picked up before.

But what studies have shown is that there is no link between autism and vaccines. Due to the prevalence of claims about MMR and autism, multiple studies have been carried out, but no link was found.[61] Similarly, claims linking thiomersal, which is no longer used in most types of UK vaccine, to autism[62] persist despite a landmark 2016 study finding no link.[63]

Tackling misinformation related to vaccines is ultimately an area where the internet companies have a major role to play, as mainstream lifestyle trends often overlap with health misinformation. Looking online for advice on so-called clean living, whether that be food or cosmetics, can lead to misinformation related to vaccines on platforms like Pinterest quickly.

To an extent, the internet companies have recognised the problem. Facebook has introduced a misinformation initiative focused on claims related to vaccines on its platforms. This reduces the ranking of groups and pages that spread misinformation about vaccination in the news feed and search and rejects adverts that include vaccine misinformation.[64] This is based on information that global health organisations like the US Center for Disease Control and the WHO have identified as vaccine hoaxes.

59   WHO, 'Autism Spectrum Disorders', who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/autism-spectrum-disorders.

60   Lisa A. Croen et al., 'The Changing Prevalence of Autism in California', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 32, no. 3 (1 June 2002): 207–15, doi.org/10.1023/A:1015453830880; James G. Gurney et al., 'Analysis of Prevalence Trends of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Minnesota', *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 157, no. 7 (1 July 2003): 622–27, doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.157.7.622.

61   C. P. Farrington, E. Miller, and B. Taylor, 'MMR and Autism: Further Evidence against a Causal Association', *Vaccine* 19, no. 27 (14 June 2001): 3632–35, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0264-410x(01)00097-4; Anders Hviid et al., 'Measles, Mumps, Rubella Vaccination and Autism: A Nationwide Cohort Study', *Annals of Internal Medicine* 170, no. 8 (16 April 2019): 513, doi.org/10.7326/M18-2101; David C. Burgess, Margaret A. Burgess, and Julie Leask, 'The MMR Vaccination and Autism Controversy in United Kingdom 1998–2005: Inevitable Community Outrage or a Failure of Risk Communication?', *Vaccine* 24, no. 18 (2006): 3921–3928.

62   Grace Rahman, 'This Image about Vaccine Ingredients Is Extremely Misleading', Full Fact, fullfact.org/online/vaccine-ingredients.

63   Luke E. Taylor, Amy L. Swerdfeger, and Guy D. Eslick, 'Vaccines Are Not Associated with Autism: An Evidence-Based Meta-Analysis of Case-Control and Cohort Studies', *Vaccine* 32, no. 29 (17 June 2014): 3623–29, doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2014.04.085.

64   'Combatting Vaccine Misinformation', About Facebook (blog), 7 March 2019, about.fb.com/news/2019/03/combatting-vaccine-misinformation.

Links will take users to a page provided by the CDC in the US, and to a Q&A page on the WHO website in the rest of the world. However, this could be improved by catering to a UK audience specifically by linking to organisations more familiar to them, such as the NHS.

The company also blocks misinformation related to vaccines on Instagram from hashtags and the discover page, which helps stop people outside these circles being invited in, but fails to help those who are already inside.

Twitter has more-UK centric measures, introduced in May 2019, which presents users with the NHS vaccinations page when vaccine keywords are searched from the UK.[65] Pinterest introduced a similar initiative, which shows users searching vaccine keywords only pins from internationally recognised health organisations like the WHO.[66]

5G

In contrast to misinformation that poses a risk to public health, other forms of misinformation stoke fear around technology on health grounds. Many of these revolve around the dangers of 5G – the next generation wireless network technology, and the government plans to have this cover the majority of the country by 2027.

The general theory we see spread online is that 5G signals are more powerful than those that preceded it (4G and 3G) and are therefore dangerous to life, causing cancer and mental health problems. The evidence generally given are stories about dead birds, high readings on 'radiation detectors', and trees being chopped down (supposedly to make way for 5G).[67]

Claimants tend to draw selective attention to official statements or academic studies to back up their points. This includes a 2002 report from the World Health Organisation that said extremely low-frequency magnetic fields were "possibly carcinogenic" to humans[68] and the 2011 announcement that radiofrequency electromagnetic fields are possibly carcinogenic too.[69]

---

65   'Helping You Find Reliable Public Health Information on Twitter', **blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/helping-you-find-reliable-public-health-information-on-twitter.html**.

66   'Bringing Authoritative Vaccine Results to Pinterest Search', Pinterest Newsroom, **newsroom.pinterest.com/en/post/bringing-authoritative-vaccine-results-to-pinterest-search**.

67   Grace Rahman, 'Hundreds of Birds Were Found Dead in the Netherlands but It Had Nothing to Do with 5G', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/birds-5G-netherlands**; Grace Rahman, 'These Trees Weren't Cut down Because of 5G', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/trees-not-chopped-down-for-5g**.

68   IARC, *Non-Ionizing Radiation, Part 1: Static and Extremely Low-Frequency (ELF) Electric and Magnetic Fields*, **publications.iarc.fr/Book-And-Report-Series/Iarc-Monographs-On-The-Identification-Of-Carcinogenic-Hazards-To-Humans/Non-ionizing-Radiation-Part-1-Static-And-Extremely-Low-frequency-ELF-Electric-And-Magnetic-Fields-2002**.

69   International Agency for Research on Cancer, 'IARC CLASSIFIES RADIOFREQUENCY ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELDS AS POSSIBLY CARCINOGENIC TO HUMANS', 31 May 2011, **iarc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pr208_E.pdf**.

However, the NHS says that most current research suggests "it's unlikely that radio waves from mobile phones or base stations increase the risk of any health problems".[70] Meanwhile, PHE has said that there is "no convincing evidence" that 5G is dangerous as long as guidelines published by the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection – recognised by the Word Health Organisation – are followed. These guidelines go up to 300GHz, whereas the maximum for 5G will probably only be in the tens of GHz.[71]

As we began to monitor groups and pages on Facebook that put out misinformation on 5G, we noticed that several other topics came up, which could broadly be described as electromagnetic radiation misinformation. This included claims about mobile phone masts, smart meters, baby monitors, certain types of street lights and WiFi.

Concerns seem to stem in part from a feeling that people have been misled about public safety issues before[72], for instance about the dangers of thalidomide, cigarettes and asbestos. There is also a belief that there is evidence to back up the claims – whether that's scientific evidence or "proof" that authorities are hiding something, for example using pictures of people in protective equipment supposedly installing 5G (the man in the image in question was more likely wearing it to clean up bird droppings).[73]

Again, we see an overlap with mainstream wellness groups – emphasising that these theories are not simply confined to the depths of the internet. Indeed, many are surfaced with simple search queries about the safety of various equipment. Googling "do baby monitors emit radiation" gives a page full of blogs, alternative health sites and forums that warn baby monitors emit "very dangerous radiation" and even "deadly radiation".

This kind of misinformation is lent credibility when displayed in this way; Google has even provided a featured snippet[74] – small excerpts that are supposed to give users a quick answer to their question on the search results page – from a site called RadiationHealthRisks.com. This describes baby monitors as mini cell towers that "emit radiation full blast constantly whenever they are on".

Many baby monitors warn parents to keep the devices a certain distance from their children, but articles about life-threatening radiation, based on misapplied and misunderstood but vaguely familiar science, can cause unnecessary stress for new parents at an already difficult time.

_____

70   'Mobile Phone Safety', nhsdirectwales.wales.nhs.uk, **nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/m/article/ mobilephonesafety**.

71   'ICNIRP | HF (100 KHz-300 GHz)', **icnirp.org/en/frequencies/high-frequency/index.html**.

72   'We Say NO To 5G in Australia', **facebook.com/wesaynoto5ginaustralia/posts/1288193448012747**.

73   Grace Rahman, 'This Picture Doesn't Show Someone Wearing a Hazmat Suit to Install 5G', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/5G-hazmat-suit**.

74   'How Google's Featured Snippets Work – Google Search Help', **support.google.com/websearch/ answer/9351707**.

Optimising search results with things like 'featured snippets' is done automatically, but the internet companies need to take responsibility for the fact that they are actively highlighting misinformation to users looking for answers. They should consider how to better protect users from misinformation like this, as they have with content that makes false claims about vaccines.

Worryingly, we have also seen misinformation about 5G spread from the online world to offline, with debates in parliament about the potential effects on health[75], along with reports that councils are moving to block 5G as a result of misinformation and some people are vandalising items they think are 5G.[76]

To tackle this, the network companies have produced various debunks – although it isn't clear how seriously anyone who believed the claims would take information from the purveyors of the supposedly harmful tech.

Take, for instance, the response to the Advertising Standards Agency after it ruled against an advert from Electrosensivity-UK, an organisation that claims to inform the public of health risks of electromagnetic radiation.[77]

The ASA banned an advert that questioned the safety and rollout of 5G, saying that the advert had breached its advertising code because it felt people would understand from the advert that there was "robust, scientific evidence that demonstrated negative human health effects caused by 5G signals", when no such evidence had been provided. In response, Facebook users linked to an article that suggested that the ASA is not independent and is being funded by the telecoms industry.

This shows how important it is to ensure that official, trusted sources provide clear and accurate information that address these claims. The Swiss government has a series of fact sheets[78] on a number of electrical appliances that produce electromagnetic fields, giving practical advice based on "available findings" as well as some technical data.

75   'Electromagnetic Fields: Health Effects' (2019), hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-06-25/debates/7D18471E-627A-41C4-B338-11F278CEA9B7/ElectromagneticFieldsHealthEffects.

76   Will Humphries, 'Councils Block 5G as Scare Stories Spread', *The Times*, thetimes.co.uk/article/councils-block-5g-as-scare-stories-spread-gnfgshn58; 'Council Bosses Argue against Government's 5G Mast Planning Proposals', *Lancashire Telegraph*, lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/17965111.council-bosses-argue-governments-5g-mast-planning-proposals; Ian Johnson, 'Man Scaled Lamppost to Remove "5G Antenna" after Viral Post Said It Was Harmful', *NE Chronicle*, 18 May 2018, chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/man-scaled-lamppost-remove-5g-14672752.

77   Advertising Standards Authority | Committee of Advertising Practice, 'Electrosensivity-UK', accessed 14 February 2020, asa.org.uk/rulings/electrosensivity-uk-G19-1029264.html.

78   Federal Office of Public Health FOPH, 'Fact Sheets NIR', bag.admin.ch/bag/en/home/gesund-leben/umwelt-und-gesundheit/strahlung-radioaktivitaet-schall/elektromagnetische-felder-emf-uv-laser-licht/emf.html.

In the UK, Public Health England has published similar documents on electromagnetic field safety, on subjects like WiFi and smart meters, and more recently the safety of 5G, which the government will point to when questioned on 5G and health.[79]

However, those concerned by the claims – including Labour MP Tonia Antoniazzi – have said that the advice is "far from reassuring". Considering how mainstream these views have become, we believe that this shows that an effective public information campaign would require a much more proactive approach that responds specifically to the most common arguments against 5G.[80]

To some extent, we may be seeing the beginning of a more proactive approach, as the government and mobile phone companies try to tackle the raft of conspiracy theories linking 5G and the novel coronavirus. These claims stem from the same theories as those we checked throughout 2019, but they became more extreme as the situation progressed.

There was not a single claim. Some said the symptoms of the virus were actually the result of mass injury as a result of 5G roll-out, despite the fact the point at which the technology was 'switched on' did not coincide with any of the outbreaks. Others claimed the lockdown was being used by the government as an excuse to install the new 5G technology without the public's knowledge. The potential for harm from these claims became very real when multiple phone masts were vandalised across the UK.

---

79   'Electromagnetic Fields', **gov.uk/government/collections/electromagnetic-fields**; 'Smart Meters: Radio Waves and Health', **gov.uk/government/publications/smart-meters-radio-waves-and-health**; '5G Technologies: Radio Waves and Health', **gov.uk/government/publications/5g-technologies-radio-waves-and-health/5g-technologies-radio-waves-and-health**.

80   Electromagnetic Fields: Health Effects.

Elections

The past decade has been marked out by the sheer number of times the public were called to the polls. Full Fact has fact checked four UK elections and three referendums, as well as working through multiple European Parliament and other elections.

We have seen a variety of campaign tactics over this time, but the most recent election brought with it new and numerous inappropriate and misleading activities.

Political advertising

The topic that elicited most discussion in the run-up to the 2019 election was how the parties would use online adverts. This was a particular concern for Full Fact because – despite years of pressure from us and various other organisations – the government had failed to update electoral laws so they were fit for a digital age.

As such, we were left to rely on the insufficiently detailed or accurate data provided voluntarily by the internet companies. Because both Twitter and Google changed the rules for political advertising on their platforms during the campaign, our analysis focused on Facebook ads.

We found that the two main parties took markedly different approaches to their use of ads.[81] The Conservatives released a large number of ads, many of which had relatively low sums of money spent on them, and focused on adverts that carried their key election pledges and attack lines. Many of these were claims that we had already checked, including misrepresentations of Labour's spending plans and pledges that lacked context.

In contrast, Labour put out fewer ads but spent more heavily on some individual adverts than the Conservatives, and focused on messages to activate their supporters, including general sentiments or calls to action. This reduced the amount of content we could check, but the party did run some adverts with factually inaccurate claims, such as how much money Labour's policies would save the average family.

---

81   Abbas Panjwani, 'The Facts behind Labour and Conservative Facebook Ads in This Election', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/election-2019/ads**.

Outdated electoral laws

The way that adverts are targeted at small, specific groups online can fundamentally undermine one of the principle tenets of democracy: that it is a shared experience. Unlike offline campaigns where large numbers of people will see the same information, few people experience an election the same way online.

The Electoral Commission[82], parliamentary committees[83] and civil society organisations[84] want the government to implement promised digital imprint rules that would require all online political campaign material to display the information on who paid for it, as is the case for offline material.

We and others have also asked for a database of all political adverts that is updated in real-time and includes at a minimum information on who is being targeted by the advert, who it reached, who paid for it and how much it cost. This would ensure real transparency in the campaigns, and ensure that journalists, academics and groups like ours can scrutinise the messages and tactics of the campaigns.

This information must be provided in machine-readable format, because without the help of technology it won't be possible to scrutinise the millions of adverts that campaigns produce.

The transparency measures provided by the internet companies fail to offer sufficiently granular detail[85] and are error prone. In the 2019 election alone, Google admitted to major underestimates in spending;[86] Snapchat's library provided inaccurate data;[87] and almost half of the UK's political adverts

82   Electoral Commission, 'Transparent Digital Campaigning', electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/changing-electoral-law/transparent-digital-campaigning.

83   Committee on and Standards in Public Life, 'Intimidation in Public Life', December 2017, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/666927/6.3637_CO_v6_061217_Web3.1__2_.pdf; House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and, and Sport Committee, 'The Online Harms White Paper', 2 July 2019, publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/2431/2431.pdf.

84   Who Targets Me, 'The Ad Transparency Triple-Decker', Medium, 15 April 2019, medium.com/@WhoTargetsMe/the-ad-transparency-triple-decker-22cb05dcd4fc; Electoral Reform Society, 'Experts Call for Urgent Update of Britain's "Wild West" Campaign Funding Rules', electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/media-centre/press-releases/experts-call-for-urgent-update-of-britains-wild-west-campaign-funding-rules.

85   'Social Media Companies Are Failing to Provide Adequate Advertising Transparency to Users Globally', privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/cop-2019_0.pdf.

86   Alex Hern and Niamh McIntyre, 'Google Admits Major Underreporting of Election Ad Spend', The Guardian, 19 November 2019, theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/19/google-admits-major-underreporting-of-election-ad-spend.

87   Alex Hern and Niamh McIntyre, 'Labour Spends Five Times More than Tories on Snapchat Ads', The Guardian, 19 November 2019, theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/19/labour-spends-five-times-more-than-tories-on-snapchat-ads.

disappeared from Facebook's ad library for more than 24 hours just days before the election.[88] The UK shouldn't rely on US internet companies – which can change their Ts&Cs at any time – to ensure election transparency.

A further concern is that electoral regulations are in place only for the duration of the campaign period, which is an outdated principle for digital campaigning. For instance, between mid-June and mid-September, UK political parties spent £1m on partisan Facebook ads, despite no election having been called.[89] We believe the Electoral Commission's remit should cover a wider period, beyond the current time limit.

It's also easier for people outside of the official campaigns to run online advert campaigns on their behalf, and only those who spend more than £20,000 in England or £10,000 in the rest of the UK, have to register with the Electoral Commission. This makes it harder to keep on top of all the groups or individuals that are attempting to influence the vote, and the claims they make while trying to do so.

In all conversations about regulating to protect democracy, we need to think more widely than elections. A democracy is about much more than a single, defined election period, and actions during the period have the potential to have an impact on society well beyond that particular vote. Public trust can be undermined at any time.

Online campaigns

Beyond adverts, this election brought other misleading tactics online, including doctored videos and publicity stunts that gave us very real cause for concern.

That included the Conservatives' selective editing of footage from Labour shadow Brexit secretary Keir Starmer's appearance on Good Morning Britain[90] to make him seem unable to answer a question about Brexit that he did respond to.

88   Mark Scott, 'Political Ads on Facebook Disappeared Ahead of UK Election', *POLITICO*, 10 December 2019, **politico.eu/pro/facebook-political-ads-general-election-united-kingdom**.

89   Mark Scott, 'Britain's Election Is Alive and Kicking Online', *POLITICO*, 13 September 2019, **politico.eu/article/general-election-boris-johnson-uk-facebook-digital-campaign-disinformation**.

90   Rachael Krishna, 'This Footage of Keir Starmer Being Interviewed on Good Morning Britain Was Edited before Being Posted by the Conservative Party', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/news/keir-starmer-gmb**.

The Conservative party press office's Twitter account also rebranded itself as "FactcheckUK" during a live TV debate.[91] As we said at the time, it is crucial that the public can quickly and easily distinguish between independent fact checking organisations that provide accurate and well-sourced information and a political party, which could not be expected to provide a balanced assessment of its own leader's arguments.

Afterwards, a spokesperson from Twitter told the BBC: "We have global rules in place that prohibit behaviour that can mislead people, including those with verified accounts. Any further attempts to mislead people by editing verified profile information – in a manner seen during the UK Election Debate – will result in decisive corrective action."[92]

In the week that this happened, when the public were surveyed on what events or stories they had noticed during the campaign, this event was in the top five.[93] In that and the two following weeks of the campaign, the most noticed events were "lies / don't trust politicians". This suggests that examples of false or misleading claims from both sides of the political spectrum resonated with the public.

We also saw more discussion about the role of people or groups that run adverts in support of parties or candidates. As online ads can be cheap, not everyone will need to register to play a part in attempting to influence the vote. This can be a great positive – more people are able to engage in politics and campaigning, which benefits democratic process. But the role of third parties is one that should be closely monitored. For instance, this year there were reports of a former Vote Leave executive running adverts to encourage people to vote for the Greens, which the Cambridge Green Party alleged was intended to sow divisions and hamper "cooperative politics".[94]

We don't know whether any of the tactics discussed in this section were a carefully constructed battle plan or the parties testing out new ideas. Neither can we say they mark the start of a trend - the changing nature of the online world means it isn't possible to predict what specific tactics might be used.

91   'Full Fact on Twitter: "It Is Inappropriate and Misleading for the Conservative Press Office to Rename Their Twitter Account 'FactcheckUK' during This Debate. Please Do Not Mistake It for an Independent Fact Checking Service Such as @FullFact, @FactCheck or @FactCheckNI" / Twitter', Twitter, **twitter.com/FullFact/status/1196887778736390146**.

92   Dave Lee, 'Tories Criticised over "factcheckUK" Rebranding', BBC News, 20 November 2019, **bbc.com/news/technology-50482637**.

93   'Would You Vote Tactically? What Worries You Most about a Tory or Labour Government? What Would Actually Happen under Johnson or Corbyn? Week 3 of My General Election Dashboard - Lord Ashcroft Polls', **lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/11/would-you-vote-tactically-what-worries-you-most-about-a-tory-or-labour-government-what-would-actually-happen-under-johnson-or-corbyn-week-3-of-my-general-election-dashboard**.

94   Gian Volpicelli, 'An Ex-Vote Leave Staffer Is Running Facebook Ads Pushing the Greens', Wired UK, 23 November 2019, **wired.co.uk/article/vote-leave-3rd-party-green-party**.

Similarly, we don't yet truly understand the long-lasting impact that digital campaigning techniques, or the delay to implement protections, have had on society or democracy. These are important questions that the internet companies could help answer. For instance, they have information on the adverts that were shown to their users and the data used to target them, along with who interacted with those adverts and in what way. Some also have data on turnout – for instance through Facebook's 'I voted' button. Overall, though, there is too little transparency about exactly what data is collected and whether or how it is combined. If it is collected, any further use would need full consideration of privacy and ethical implications.

Offline campaigns

Despite the widespread focus on digital campaigning in the run-up to the election and various predictions in the media, we still saw various misleading claims and tactics offline.

This included local printed campaign materials masquerading as newspapers or lifestyle magazines. Offline campaign materials are required by law to identify themselves as such – stating who printed it and who authorised it to be printed. Guidance from the Electoral Commission says that this must be on the first or last page of a multi-sided document or, if it's a single-sided document, it on the face of the document.[95]

This does not say how big the imprint has to be. The result is that campaigners can publish a multiple page newspaper with the smallest of small print in a corner of the back page.

The Liberal Democrats published materials in Lambeth and Sheffield, among others, each described as a "free newspaper" under the name "Lambeth News" and "Sheffield Hallam News", respectively.[96] In both, only a very small line states that this isn't a genuine local newspaper, but party literature.

The Conservatives also circulated materials made to look like local newspapers in Pudsey and West Bromwich[97], along with magazines that aped lifestyle publications like Pick Me Up! and local newsletters, which didn't carry party branding and again stated only in the small print who they were printed on behalf of.

This is not to say that this sort of use of printed materials is an entirely new phenomenon. During the EU referendum campaign, both sides used similar

95   Electoral Commission, 'Factsheet for Candidates: Election Material and Imprints-Great Britain', **electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Factsheet-Candidates-Imprints-May-2016.pdf**.

96   ElectionLeaflets.org, 'Sheffield Hallam News', **electionleaflets.org/leaflets/full/91311**; ElectionLeaflets.org, 'Lambeth News', **electionleaflets.org/leaflets/17180**.

97   ElectionLeaflets.org, 'West Bromwich West Future', **electionleaflets.org/leaflets/17295**/; ElectionLeaflets.org, 'Pudsey Future', **electionleaflets.org/leaflets/17303**.

official-looking leaflets purporting to offer 'the facts'. Stronger In printed leaflets with the headline "Re: The facts you need to know about Europe and the EU referendum". Vote Leave printed leaflets with the headline "The UK and The European Union: The facts". Both were presented in a way that appeared to try to avoid being recognised as campaign materials for one side of the argument.[98]

As we push for more transparency online, we cannot ignore what is happening offline and at the local level, we must consider whether the current provisions for what must appear on printed material are sufficient. We recommend the Electoral Commission consults on requirements for imprints to be in proportion to the size of the campaign material and in a specific, consistent location and format on all materials so the public gets used to looking in the same place.

How bad information affects the public during an election

It isn't just the official campaigns that can spread false or misleading information during an election period: members of the public and media can play a part in this, either by accident or design.

One theme we see time and again in the run up to any election is misleading information about how to vote, and the ballot process. This can include claims that if you fill in your vote in pencil it could be rubbed out, and misinformation about when to vote – for instance saying that if you're voting for a certain party, you should go to the polling station on a date that is actually the day after the vote.

In the 2019 election, misinformation circulated online about whether young voters in Bromley were being prevented from filling in postal ballots because of pre-filled date-of-birth boxes on forms.[99]

Concerns were also raised online about possible breaches of electoral law following a number of comments from politicians and journalists in which they appeared to know the results of postal ballots before polling day.

We think there is more the Electoral Commission could do in their public information role to reassure the public and provide reactive information about postal voting and polling day issues as they arise.

Our election research with BritainThinks showed that 76% of the public felt that "voters are being misled by false and dishonest claims in this election campaign", with 54% saying they tend to ignore what parties and politicians say because they don't know if they can trust them.[100]

---

98   Full Fact, fullfact.org/europe/vote-leave-and-stronger-facts-leaflets

99   Abbas Panjwani, 'Councils Aren't Using Pre-Filled Postal Ballots to Suppress the Youth Vote', Full Fact, fullfact.org/online/councils-arent-using-pre-filled-postal-ballots-suppress-youth-vote.

100   BritainThinks, 'Research into Public Views on Truth and Untruth in the 2019 General Election'.

Some 36% said they had switched off from the campaign because of not knowing who to believe, and 19% said they had to some extent been put off voting altogether by the level of false and misleading claims in the election campaign. This clearly demonstrates the importance of addressing the chronic problem with trust, and to do so well before another poll is called.

Polling

The regularity of elections and referendums in recent years has inspired no end of opinion polls from official pollsters, the media and political players - whether about voting intentions or views on societal or political issues. This has allowed us to gather a vast amount of evidence on the way they can be misused, misreported or misinterpreted.

Polls provide interesting information on a variety of topics, particularly public opinions and behaviours, that aren't served by national or official statistics. When done well, they can tell us something valuable about our society, and can offer information to citizens and those working in the public, private and third sectors that could help them make better decisions.

However, the essentially subjective nature of much of their content means it's possible to present the data in a way that supports an organisation's biases, while often being hard to read or interpret by others. At the same time, it's relatively straightforward for anyone to run a poorly designed poll and make misleading claims about the results.

We have fact checked a wide variety of polls over the past decade and in our experience, the problems can be boiled down to three main areas: bad design, bad interpretation and bad representation.

What makes a good poll?

A fundamental part of good poll design is to make sure that the sample is representative of the population it is making claims of. So, if a poll is meant to represent the general public's views, they might try and survey the same number of men and women. But because it's almost impossible to create the perfect sample, pollsters will also weight the sample, adjusting the raw numbers so they match the known characteristics of the populations.

In general, it's better to have a representative poll than a large one – but if a poll is representative, then bigger does tend to be better because there's a lower margin of error associated with the results. As a rule of thumb, national polls that survey significantly fewer than 1,000 people will have relatively large margins of error. It's also important to remember who has been asked which question. A study of 1,500 people might sound good, but some questions may have been posed to just a subset of that, meaning the margin of error for that question will be larger.

The question is also vital. Common pitfalls include loaded questions ("after the Prime Minister's abysmal performance this week, do you agree or

disagree she should stay on?") or asking more than one question at a time ("Do you agree that Theresa May is managing Brexit negotiations well and should stay as Prime Minister" essentially asks respondents to give one answer to two questions). We also need to remember that when asked if they agree with something, people are more likely to say 'Yes' than 'No' and that people sometimes lie or adjust their answers to what they think is more socially acceptable.

Polls are only as good as the people they survey and the questions they ask, and an awareness of this among those who are using polling data is crucial. For polling companies, there are codes of conduct set by membership bodies that require this sort of transparency.

The British Polling Council (BPC) – to which most major polling companies belong – requires that when a poll enters the public domain, full computer tables must be published within two working days.[101] The pollster must also publish certain information on its website, including a full description of sampling procedure and tables showing the exact questions in the same order, along with the responses.

We believe this information should be published as soon as the survey has been made public, to ensure that anyone who sees reporting of the results can easily and quickly access the full details.

In contrast to the BPC's code, which focuses on transparency, the Market Research Society (MRS) says that "members must take reasonable steps to ensure that findings from a project, published by themselves or in their employer's name, are not incorrectly or misleadingly presented".[102] We would urge the BPC to consider adopting a similar statement about interpretation and presentation in its own code of conduct.

Even if imperfect, these measures ensure some level of transparency. When polls are conducted by other organisations, there is no requirement for them to provide this extra information, making it hard for the public to be fully informed, and impossible for fact checkers to fully analyse the findings.

Another issue we are seeing is the increasing number of polls on social media, which are prone to being poorly designed and open to a number of problems. By their nature, social media polls are likely to get large numbers of responses – but what they cannot do is properly weight the survey or control who responds. In the run up to the general election, Twitter polls by public figures with large followings gained lots of traction, with some having more than 30,000 votes.

---

101   'Objects And Rules | British Polling Council', **britishpollingcouncil.org/objects-and-rules**.

102   MRS, 'Code of Conduct', September 2014, **mrs.org.uk/pdf/mrs%20code%20of%20conduct%202014.pdf**.

When compared to polls from YouGov, which sampled around 1,600, the Twitter polls might appear to some to be the better survey. However, as explained by one BBC journalist[103], a Twitter poll cannot provide a representative sample. This is because it is likely that those responding would be self-selecting and might be motivated to take part due to their interest in the subject matter, which is likely to skew the sample.

Another problem can be polls run by individuals, often shared widely on social media, that do not use proper polling methodology. Take the poll run by former deputy leader Tom Watson on his personal website, which asked about the party's Brexit policy.[104] He claimed that "84% of Labour members and supporters who took the survey" want an all-member ballot to decide the party's future policy.

But not only was the question framed in a leading way, there was no way of ensuring that respondents were Labour members or supporters, or that they only responded once; neither was there evidence that the sample was weighted, meaning the sample was not guaranteed to be representative of the group Watson claimed it was. These problems did not stop the poll being reported uncritically by the media.[105]

It isn't unusual for organisations or people to misrepresent the findings of their surveys in a bid to generate interest or bolster their position with 'evidence'. This might be a political party – the Liberal Democrats have become notorious for their use of misleading graphs on election materials[106] – or campaign groups.

Back in 2013, Fair Fuel UK managed to pick up some press coverage for a poll conducted ahead of the Budget that claimed two-thirds of Britons were concerned about the price of fuel.[107] However, the poll was run from Fair Fuel's website, meaning that those taking part were visitors to the site and therefore already more likely to be concerned about fuel prices.

---

103   Joey D'Urso, 'This Is the Sort of Misinformation That's Really Hard to Stop', Twitter, **twitter.com/josephmdurso/status/1197440131831083008**.

104   Abbas Panjwani, 'Labour MP's Brexit Poll Is Meaningless', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/labour-mps-brexit-poll-meaningless**.

105   '84% Of Labour "Members And Supporters" Want Online Ballot On New Brexit Referendum', *HuffPost UK*, 29 May 2019, **huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/vast-majority-of-labour-members-want-online-ballot-to-stop-brexit-watson-poll-finds_uk_5ceeb416e4b07666546fa2b7**.

106   Aamna Mohdin and Ben Quinn, 'Lib Dems Accused of Using Misleading Data on Election Material', *The Guardian*, 5 November 2019, **theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/05/liberal-democrats-accused-using-misleading-data-election-material**.

107   Full Fact, 'Is the Price of Fuel the Greatest Concern to the Nation?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/price-fuel-greatest-concern-nation**.

Moreover, the question and options were framed in a leading way, as it asked what two were most relevant to respondents' daily lives, but gave a limited list that included issues unlikely to affect most people's everyday lives more than fuel prices:

- European Union membership
- Horse meat in food chain
- Gay marriage
- Price of petrol/diesel
- Scottish devolution
- Financial care of the elderly
- Tax avoidance help from banks

Newspapers are not immune to this sort of behaviour either. Many commission polling firms to run surveys on their behalf, and there are times when their interest in a good story means the results are misinterpreted or contradictory information is set to one side.

A prominent example came last year. Amid debate over whether prime minister Boris Johnson would suspend parliament for an unprecedented period of time, the Daily Telegraph commissioned pollster ComRes to survey adults in the UK on their views on this and other aspects of Brexit. The paper splashed with the line that "more than half" of the public supported prorogation.[108] The poll results actually found that 44% agreed, 37% disagreed and 19% said they didn't know. In this case excluding "don't knows" was misleading.

When Full Fact approached the newspaper, it initially offered only a clarification note at the end of the online article that would not be seen by non-subscribers. We were disappointed with this inadequate response, and asked for a correction to the headline and first lines, which would be seen by all readers, and were pleased the Telegraph agreed.

But for all the problems this throws up about the way the newspaper handled the poll, ComRes press released the poll with the same top line. We believe it is incumbent on professional polling companies to lead by example: they should avoid representing the results of polls they run in a misleading way. Polling companies should consistently challenge organisations that want to run surveys with potentially leading questions.

---

108   Camilla Tominey, Christopher Hope, and Harry Yorke, 'Boris Johnson Has Public's Support to Shut down Parliament to Get Brexit over Line, Exclusive Poll Suggests', *The Telegraph*, 12 August 2019, **telegraph.co.uk/ politics/2019/08/12/boris-johnson-has-publics-support-shut-parliament-get-brexit**.

Zombie claims

There are some claims that crop up repeatedly. They can have a lifespan of weeks, months or years; they can die off and come back unexpectedly; and they can mutate into other claims. It's often hard to track back to where the claim came from, but in some cases the spread is possible to discern.

Relentless zombies

Some claims don't change. We and many others debunk them as often as we can, but they are repeated nonetheless, almost despite being wrong. These claims seem to get under the skin: it may be that the public responds to them and politicians are advised to keep repeating them, or it could be that we simply haven't found the right route to challenge the claim itself.

Labour has bolstered its arguments about solar subsidies with a claim that they dropped by 94% between March and April 2019, when in fact there is always a drop between these two months.[109] This is despite there being other, long-term evidence that makes their case just as well. It has also crept into the newspapers, which keeps the claim alive.[110]

An example we saw a lot during the 2019 election was from the Conservative government, and in particular Boris Johnson, who claimed an extension to Brexit would cost the taxpayer £1 billion a month.[111] In reality, an extension of up to the end of 2020 would cost no more than leaving with a deal in October 2019, as was the government's publicly stated policy at the time.[112]

We called this out at every opportunity, and asked the Prime Minister to make the required ministerial correction to Hansard, the official record of the UK's parliament, when he made the claims in the House of Commons. However, this request was not dealt with and at the time of publication, the claim remains on the record.

When tackling relentless zombie claims, we do have to make careful decisions on whether we're giving more publicity to an inaccurate claim, and the trade-offs of rebutting it.

109 Joël Reland, 'Labour Makes Misleading Claim on Solar Energy', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/energy-bill/solar-installations**.

110 Press Association, 'Government Must Not Change VAT on Solar Panels from 5% to 20%,…', Mail Online, 10 September 2019, **dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-7447123/Government-not-change-VAT-solar-panels-5-20--campaigners-urge.html**.

111 Boris Johnson, 'Early Parliamentary General Election - Hansard' (2019), **hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-10-28/debates/742E40C9-51E0-4692-83A6-9DE26B5990AF/EarlyParliamentaryGeneralElection#contribution-B33A1468-EB80-4CC3-B013-CCF273B68FF0**.

112 Tom Phillips, 'Boris Johnson Repeats His False Claim That Extending Brexit Costs £1 Billion a Month', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/one-billion-a-month**.

But, this isn't necessarily a reason to stop trying. One claim that felt relentless was that 3 million jobs depend on the EU, which had been around since 2000 and was based on a research paper from the time. We kept calling it out, and finally saw politicians take notice as Labour and the Liberal Democrats both tweaked the wording to say 3 million jobs are linked to trade with the EU.[113] This small change shows that even the most relentless of zombies can be altered to improve its accuracy.

On the other hand, the relentless reappearances of claims demonstrates why it's important to get to the claim early, before it spreads as we know that repetition matters in terms of how much it is believed by the public.[114] It may also be easier to get a politician to stop using a claim before they have publicly defended it too many times.

Slippery zombies

These are zombie claims that are able to adapt and evolve when faced with criticism. Their changing nature means that even when challenged, claimants can side-step criticisms and add an extra layer of complexity that fact checkers and journalists have to unpick before they can once again challenge the claim.

A prime example is from the midst of the debate over the UK's future trading relationships after Brexit, when what was previously an obscure acronym to the public became commonplace: GATT 24. Shorthand for one of the rules of the World Trade Organisation, GATT 24 sets out how member countries can agree free trade areas and customs unions with each other. It also covers the establishment of interim agreements that lead to a permanent trade agreement.

Many people argued that the UK could leave the EU on WTO terms – without signing the Withdrawal Agreement – and that GATT 24 would allow the UK and EU to trade tariff-free. However, it isn't as simple as that, with various experts saying it was unlikely to happen in part because countries wanting to rely on this must have a "plan and schedule" agreed for concluding a final deal, which the EU would have to agree to before the UK left the bloc.

The earliest instance of this claim being used in connection with Brexit are from news reports around March 2017, but it was rarely used before 2019. At that time, it was raised repeatedly by politicians and Leave campaigners, and picked up in the press and on social media. The prevalence of the claim did mean that it was regularly refuted, including by then international trade secretary Liam Fox, then Bank of England governor Mark Carney and other experts.

---

113 Amy Sippitt, '3 Million Jobs "Linked" to Trade with the EU', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/3-million-jobs-linked-trade-eu**; Amy Sippitt, 'Nick Clegg's speech on Europe', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/nick-cleggs-speech-europe**.

114 Dora-Olivia Vicol and Amy Sippitt, '**Fact Checking in the 2019 Election: Research Recommendations**', 2019.

It's GATT to stop

Number of citations of the phrase 'Gatt 24' or 'Article 24' in 32 UK media outlets, plus Hansard, Twitter and Facebook. Monthly, Jan 2017-June 2019.

*Excludes any references to 'Article 24' that don't relate to GATT, for example UN articles

Source: Full Fact trends technology
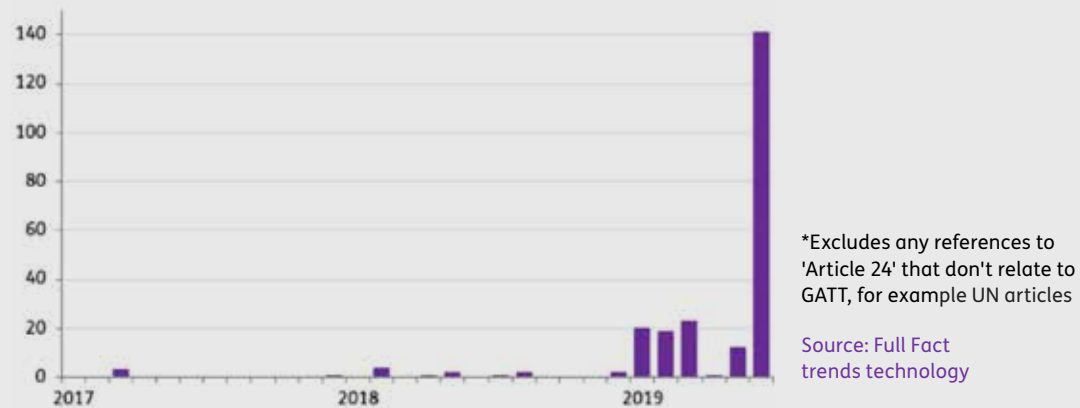
This didn't stop the claim, though. Instead it mutated into one based on even more obscure knowledge as the very technical nature of GATT rules meant it was possible to manipulate the claim or interpret the text to suit different contexts or focus on different aspects.

Eventually, the debate reached the point where one of the UK's most prominent political interrogators Andrew Neil was grilling Boris Johnson on his knowledge of sub-paragraphs of the agreement.[115]

The time it took to reach this point, and the number of repetitions, make this the exception rather than the rule when it comes to slippery zombies. It also isn't clear what effect this had on public understanding, but it wouldn't be surprising if the public's interest waned as the claim became more technical.

In contrast, there are longer-term slippery zombies: claims that stick around for years, shifting slightly whenever they reappear. For instance, claims that one council charges less council tax than another are commonplace before every local election, with the parties using different numbers or methods to make their case.

The people's zombies

These are claims that circulate online regularly over long periods of time - sometimes even decades. They are typically shared by the public, but can escape beyond these bounds when picked up by public figures, politicians or the press. Examples include

---

115   'Neil Tests Johnson's Knowledge of GATT 24', BBC News, **bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-48971407/andrew-neil-tests-boris-johnson-s-knowledge-of-gatt-24**.

claims that the Royal British Legion won't be selling poppies in certain places due to "upset minorities", and claims about the benefits available to pensioners compared with refugees and asylum seekers.

What is remarkable about these claims is their longevity. One incorrect claim, about the supposed bad behaviour of MPs, was originally circulated online around 20 years ago and was focused on members of the US Congress, using almost exactly the same figures.[116]

A subset of people's zombies are folklists made up of more complex claims, like viral lists of mostly inaccurate claims about Covid-19 or the Lisbon Treaty.[117] The latter we traced back as far as a Facebook page that attributes it to an "Ex-pilot in the Gulf wars" and claims to be a set of "worst-case scenarios" for leaving the EU, but newer versions have additional text asking "why is nobody talking about the Lisbon Treaty".[118] This shows again how easy it is for claims to mutate.

Cabbage facts

One claim[119] that there are 26,911 words in the EU regulations on the sale of cabbage – often used to make a point about Brussels' red tape – has been circulating in some form or other since 1943.

During that time, the subject of the regulations is sometimes changed – duck eggs, caramel and foghorns have all been singled out – but the number generally remains at 26,911. So where did it come from?

As with so many claims, there appears to be a grain of accuracy underlying the falsehood. Back in 1943, the Office for Price Administration, was sent a wire criticising a verbose regulation about cabbage seeds:

---

116   Claire Milne, 'This Post about MPs Is Untrue and around 20 Years Old', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/false-claims-about-mps**.

117   Full Fact Full Fact, 'There's a Lot Wrong with This Viral List about the Lisbon Treaty', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/viral-list-about-lisbon-treaty-wrong**/.

118   'British Forces Tri Services Brexiteers', **facebook.com/bftsbrexiteers/posts/711565839243320**.

119   Tom Phillips, 'The Cabbage Myth Returns: EU Cabbage Regulations Don't Have 26,911 Words', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/cabbage-myth**.

> **The Ten Commandments contain 297 words**
> **The Lord's Prayer 56**
> **The Declaration of Independence 1821**
> **The Gettysburg Address 266**
>
> **And it took an OPA lawyer 2611 words to say cabbage seed (Brassica capitata) is the seed used to grow cabbage.**

Despite being exaggerated for comic effect, the contents were reported by Reader's Digest and later mentioned in the Senate. The legend was revived in 1951, with cabbage seed changed to cabbages and the word-count rising to the precise 26,911.

It spread through the media in the 1950s and reappeared in the late 1970s and 1980s – Walter Cronkite ascribed it to the European Common Market regulations on duck eggs, while here in the UK, it has appeared in columns or letters in the Daily Mail, Daily Express and Daily Telegraph. The duck egg version has even been mentioned twice in parliament.

One thing that is clear about all kinds of zombie claims is that the misleading statements are often kept in the public eye by repetition in the media or by public figures – even when coverage also includes refutations of the claim. Fact checkers try to avoid repeating the claims we check in ways that could reinforce the original error.

This emphasises how important it is for everyone – whether it is those in the public eye or members of the public – to check and challenge the sources of the claims before they share or repeat them. None of us can, or should, rely on someone else having verified the source of any claim.

Part Three: Who is responsible for spreading bad information

This part looks in more detail at different actors that are responsible for the spread of bad information.

They are divided into four: government, public bodies, parliament and politicians; the media; academia, charities and think tanks; and internet companies.

For each, we outline the role they play in the flow of information from producers to consumers, using our evidence base to identify the problems and pitfalls related to each actor and make recommendations to improve the situation in the short and longer-term.

We also consider the varying levels of trust placed in each by the public. We see trust as being of fundamental importance to the journey of good information. This is on the basis that, no matter how good your information is, if the people who want to use it don't have faith in it or confidence in who has produced it, it will not have the impact it could or should have.

Government, public bodies, parliament and politicians

These actors – made up of our elected representatives in different guises, along with various public bodies and civil and public servants – all produce, disseminate and use information for various purposes, depending on the time and what hat they have on.

This section considers how the machinery of government and those that rely on it can fail, and how our political leaders can manipulate and mislead, allowing poor quality or incorrect information to reach the public in a variety of ways.

Trust in the government and politicians

Much of the information discussed in this section is either directly or indirectly produced by civil and public servants, who are relied upon to serve the government of the day with impartiality.

It is perhaps for this reason that trust in this group is fairly high. In 2019, some 65% of the public said they trust this group to tell the truth, up from 63% in 2018.[120]

The situation is markedly different for politicians and government ministers, with the public now less likely to believe they are telling the truth than in the recent past.

Globally, just 9% say politicians are trustworthy, and 12% government ministers, according to Ipsos MORI.[121] In the UK, it is possible to explore trends over time because of the long-running British Social Attitudes survey. This has shown that the proportion of people who say they trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own at least most of the time has fallen from 40% in 1986 to 22% in 2016.[122]

The November 2019 Ipsos Mori Veracity Index survey found that just 14% of the public said they trusted politicians to tell the truth – a drop of 5 percentage points on the previous year. Meanwhile, 17% said they trust government ministers to tell the truth, also a 5 percentage point fall. The lowest recorded score was in 1993, when 11% felt they could be trusted.

The low levels of trust the public has in our public representatives should concern us. But – in the same way as we would not encourage blind cynicism – neither do we want to encourage blind faith in our political leaders.

And just because there is more trust invested in civil and public servants doesn't mean they are immune from either mistakes or pressure from political leaders. Nor does it mean that the processes that should protect against information being misused are effective or that they work consistently.

Meanwhile, our research with BritainThinks during the 2019 election provides us with an idea of what the public sees as the least acceptable behaviours from politicians. Most people (90%) say that actively manipulating or falsifying evidence is unacceptable, and more than half pick it as one of their top two most unacceptable behaviours.[123]

At the other end of the scale is making a claim that was found to be false and then correcting themselves – just 6% put this in their top two. But it is perhaps worth noting that 53% still found it unacceptable, demonstrating how important it is for politicians to get their facts right the first time round.

It is clear that there is need for urgent improvement in the systems that allow information to be used to mislead, which needs to be coupled with efforts to champion a wider culture of accuracy.

120   Ipsos Mori, 'Veracity Index 2019', November 2019

121   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth', 17 September 2019

122   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth'

123   BritainThinks, 'Research into Public Views on Truth and Untruth in the 2019 General Election'.

Public attitudes to politicians' behaviours[124]

Statement	% saying 'unacceptable'	% picking as one of top two most unacceptable
Actively manipulating or falsifying evidence	90%	58%
Repeating claims even after they have been found to be false	90%	37%
Making a promise to voters they know they may not be able to deliver	89%	43%
Keeping the public in the dark by withholding information	88%	26%
Misrepresenting each other's policies	86%	9%
Putting out campaign materials without prominent branding, or posing as other organisations	79%	7%
Cherry picking statistics or using the most impressive numbers to support their view	78%	7%
Making a claim that was found to be false and correcting themselves	53%	6%

The information public bodies produce

Public bodies have a crucial role in producing and publishing huge amounts of both hard and soft data that is relied on by a wide variety of organisations and people. This covers everything from court records to housing benefits; public spending to migration; information on staff and citizens to service performance.

This information can be gathered intentionally or as a by-product of other work, and is of varying degrees of consistency, accuracy and quality.

At one end are official statistics, which are regulated in the UK by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). The OSR is responsible for ensuring that producers of statistics comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics, which has the stated aim of ensuring statistics are of public value, are high quality and are produced by people and organisations that are worthy of trust.[125]

---

124   BritainThinks, 'Research into Public Views on Truth and Untruth in the 2019 General Election'

125   OSR, 'Code of Practice for Statistics', **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice**.

Statistics that have been assessed as fully compliant with the Code are designated national statistics; the other types of official statistics are experimental – those that are under development and still being assessed – and statistics that have been assessed as not fully compliant with the Code, including those that have lost their national statistic designation. A weakness of the UK system is that formally it is up to ministers to ask for official statistics to be assessed under the Code, although the UK Statistics Authority has actively sought to obtain these requests where necessary.

On top of official statistics is non-statistical data that is collected during day-to-day activities or forms information on the performance of services. It is notable that there is no comprehensive list of datasets each department is responsible for producing. This would allow users to access the information they need and make clear where there are gaps that need filling.[126]

Clear and accessible data sources could also help those who might otherwise request data using Freedom of Information laws, potentially reducing the burden on departments that are already struggling to manage the volume of requests.

Similarly, there is little consistent information available on the performance of public services, which is essential for assessing and improving these services as well as making or justifying public spending decisions.

Full Fact is one of a number of organisations urging the government to improve how it collects, analyses, shares and uses data. This is essential to hold the government to account, give people confidence that services are trustworthy, and make informed decisions. The promised National Data Strategy offers an opportunity for the government to make wholesale improvements to cross-government leadership and skills on data, investing in data that will allow it to understand its own operations, and fixing the UK's data infrastructure.[127]

Beyond hard data, parliamentary and public bodies also produce vast amounts of documentation for instance from select committees, the House of Commons Library or in departments' annual reports and accounts. However, this information is not always transparent or comprehensible, which makes it harder for those who want to understand or hold the government to account.

In some cases, it ends up being civil society organisations that devise innovative ways to open up this information. This is commendable, but we shouldn't rely on this in the long-term: the responsibility for transparency should lie with those who produce the information.

---

126   Gavin Freeguard, 'Gaps in Government Data: Five Things the UK Government Should Publish' (Institute for Government, September 2018), **instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/gaps-govt-data-final.pdf**.

127   Full Fact et al., 'Better Use of Better Data Is Key to Better Government and a Better Society.', 15 July 2019, **fullfact.org/media/uploads/national_data_strategy_-_joint_open_letter_to_sos.pdf**.

Misinterpreting statistics

Statistics alone can only do so much. The way they are presented is a crucial part of how they are interpreted and understood by the public. When data is presented without context or caveats, it can't give the whole picture.

As the director general of the OSR said in the introduction to the organisation's new Vision, there are a number of ways that statistics can fall short:[128]

"They can fail to be relevant or accurate; producers can fail to innovate or make their data widely available; the statistics can fail to give a sufficiently fine-grained picture of what is going on in society; there can be gaps, whereby key areas of policy and society are not described by statistical outputs; and data can be used in ways that jar with public attitudes and public consent.

"And statistics can be used in ways that also do not serve the public good: precise numbers can be used to give a misleading picture of what the statistics actually say; too much weight can be put on statistics; or they can be described incorrectly."

Indeed, the Code of Practice for Statistics puts requirements on those producing statistics to ensure, among other things, that the methods used are clear; that any limitations are identified and explained; and that they are presented in such a way that they can be understood by all types of users.

But despite this, there are times when statistics are misinterpreted or the wrong conclusions drawn. When this happens, it is incumbent on those producing the statistics to step in and iron out the confusion, not to allow it to continue.

For instance, at the start of the decade, there were numerous instances of newspapers misrepresenting labour market statistics – which give data on the number of people in employment – to make claims about the number of "new jobs" taken by foreign workers.

Following pressure from Full Fact and the UK Statistics Authority, the ONS included a clarification in the release that made it clear that the estimates relate to the number of people in employment, not the number of jobs. This isn't a silver bullet – some people have gone on to make the same mistakes again – but such changes are essential to reduce misunderstandings.[129]

---

128   Office for Statistics Regulation, 'Statistics That Serve the Public Good', **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/OSR_Vision.pdf**

129   Full Fact, 'ONS Moves to End Misreporting of Foreign Worker Job Statistics', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/news/ons-moves-end-misreporting-foreign-worker-job-statistics**.

What's in a name?

There are often multiple ways to interpret a particular dataset. Those producing statistics should consider the ways in which they may be used and clearly explain any context that could improve public discussion and understanding of a particular issue. One release that is particularly popular is the ONS' annual ranking of baby names in the UK. In many ways, this is a gateway for the public to better understand the ONS' wider work.

In recent years the baby names release has become politically charged, as some commentators conclude that if you added up different spellings of Muhammed, it would be the most popular boys' name. This is often linked to the increase in Muslim communities in the UK and plays into wider concerns about immigration.

In 2019, the ONS published a blogpost the day before the baby names release directly addressing this interpretation and explaining why the ONS chooses to treat different spellings as different names. However, the release itself – which contains the data and therefore likely gets the most attention – failed to address these broader issues. This risks users losing out on valuable context, and giving the impression the ONS hasn't tackled the sensitive question head on.

Full Fact expressed concerns, which the OSR brought to the attention of the ONS. The ONS has said it would consider publishing and properly cross-referencing a similar post simultaneously in future.[130]

Those producing statistics must also make clear what judgements have been made about the data and methods. This includes any limitations or changes to the methodology, as this may affect the results or make comparisons with previous years more complicated. As the code of practice states, "these explanations are as important as the numbers themselves".

Of course, sometimes misinterpretations happen despite the statistics making clear what they can and can't do – and the responsibility here lies with both the user and the producer. Labour this year issued a press release based on figures on sentencing issued by the Ministry of Justice, saying that fewer offenders – 7,728 down from 8,050 in the year ending September 2019 and 2018, respectively – were sentenced to jail for knife crimes.

---

130   'Response on Developments to ONS Baby Names in England and Wales Statistics', *UK Statistics Authority*, **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/response-on-developments-to-ons-baby-names-in-england-and-wales-statistics**/.

As well as failing to make clear that the figures related solely to possessing knives or offensive weapons in public or threatening or endangering the public – not also to assaults and murders involving a knife – Labour failed to make clear that the figure was provisional.[131] This means it doesn't take into account offences that happened in that year but are still going through the justice system. The MoJ has estimated that when this has happened, the number will reach 8,384.

This isn't to say Labour intended to mislead, and to some extent the party tried to do the right thing by pointing to data to back-up their argument about the other side's policies. But it does emphasise that it isn't simply a case of choosing the dataset you think serves the purpose: you also have to properly understand what it can and can't tell you before using it to bolster your argument.

Misleading use of statistics

Genuine error is one thing, but statistics can also be used for political advantage. This doesn't necessarily mean fudging the data: real numbers presented without caveats can be just as misleading as incorrect numbers.

This becomes more problematic when the error is pointed out, and yet the same claims are repeated without the necessary context. For instance, the Conservative party has often pointed to the fact there are more children in schools that Ofsted has rated good or outstanding since it came to power as evidence of its successful policies (see box). However, the situation is more complicated than this bare bones claim and – despite multiple calls for change – claimants rarely include proper explanation and so the claim is misleading.

Good or outstanding?
Governments want to take credit for having improved society, and the bigger the number they can quote, the better. For years, numerous Conservative MPs, education secretaries and even a prime minister have claimed that more than a million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools due to their policies.

The figure isn't technically wrong but it is highly misleading to claim this as a success because it ignores vital context. Ofsted changed its inspection practices twice in this time period; pupil numbers are rising anyway – they increased 560,000 (7%) between 2010 and 2017; and it's hard to accurately attribute changes to a single party's policies.

---

131   Joseph O'Leary, 'It's Very Unlikely That Fewer Knife Offenders Are Facing Jail', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/crime/knife-possession-prison-sentences**.

The first time we saw a variant of this claim was in 2015, when then education secretary Nicky Morgan said: "We've made huge strides in the past five years—a million more pupils now in good or outstanding schools."[132] By 2018, the number of pupils had risen, but the claim was fundamentally the same: that there are 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools than in 2010.

"While accurate as far as it goes, this figure does not give a full picture. It should be set in the context of increasing pupil numbers, changes to the inspection framework and some inspections that are now long in the past," the UK Statistics Authority said in a letter to then education secretary Damian Hinds in October 2018.[133]

Part of the problem with the claim is that it doesn't give a clear picture of the quality of education pupils were receiving, because outstanding schools are usually exempt from inspections. That means it's more likely for lower-ranked schools to go up, and less likely top-tier schools will be downgraded.

These concerns were borne out last year, when Ofsted released data that its chief inspector said should "set alarm bells ringing": just 16% of outstanding schools had kept their rating when re-inspected, a much lower level than the previous year.[134] The Department for Education then announced plans to lift the exemption on outstanding schools.

This example demonstrates a common problem for fact checkers. We always aim to provide the public with a compelling explanation that can be easily and quickly understood, and to show why the claimant should correct the record. But things are rarely black and white, and it's harder for us to hold those in power to account if they can fall back on technicalities, or claim we are simply being pedantic.

There is some evidence that corrections are less effective if the misleading claims have been repeated more often,[135] so it's important we secure clear corrections quickly – but we have found that when something is in a grey area this is less likely to happen.

---

132   Amy Sippitt, 'A Million More Pupils in Good or Outstanding Schools? Not Just a Simple Story of School Improvement', Full Fact, fullfact.org/education/million-more-pupils-good-or-outstanding-schools-not-just-simple-story-school-improvement.

133   David Norgrove, 'Chair of the UKSA Writes to Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP', 8 October 2018, statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/20181008_Sir_David_Norgrove_letter_to_SoS_for-_Education.pdf.

134   'Ofsted Chief Inspector Repeats Call for Outstanding School Exemption to Be Lifted as More Schools Lose Top Ofsted Grade', GOV.UK, gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-chief-inspector-repeats-call-for-outstanding-school-exemption-to-be-lifted-as-more-schools-lose-top-ofsted-grade.

135   Nathan Walter and Riva Tukachinsky, 'A Meta-Analytic Examination of the Continued Influence of Misinformation in the Face of Correction: How Powerful Is It, Why Does It Happen, and How to Stop It?', Communication Research, 22 June 2019, 0093650219854600, doi.org/10.1177/0093650219854600.

In situations like this, we rely on fast and robust action from the regulator. There is a limited window of opportunity if an intervention is to have an impact on public debate and understanding. We have also been told that a public dressing-down – especially one that receives press coverage – is felt at the more senior levels of government departments and can shift attitudes.

Although we acknowledge that there will be times when the OSR cannot intervene, there have been times when responses have been too slow and too weak in its message. In contrast, swift interventions from the chair of the UK Statistics Authority Sir Michael Scholar in 2008 on government errors in the handling of the release of knife crime statistics saw government officials properly held to account.[136]

Cherry-picking information

Administrations from all sides will use any data they can to claim their interventions a success or that cast them in the best light, carefully choosing the numbers that suit their narrative. This can mean ignoring vital context or tweaking the figures to create a more positive picture. Conversely, politicians in opposition will happily pick data that creates the worst impression of their opponents' policies.

While we are not naive about the nature of politics, it is essential that fact checkers and others are ready to scrutinise these claims, hold politicians to account, and challenge the most egregious examples, to ensure that misleading claims don't spread. It's also worth noting that 78% of those we surveyed said that this was unacceptable behaviour from politicians, demonstrating the public are likely to want to see cherry-picking data challenged.[137]

An example that shows just how easy it is for two sides to pick figures that tell almost completely different stories about the same issue is a debate on fuel poverty from back in 2014, during the Coalition government.[138]

By choosing to focus on the number of households in fuel poverty, the government was able to claim success, because this number had fallen since 2010. But by looking at the number of families with children in fuel poverty – which had increased since 2010 – and the amount by which the needs of fuel poor households exceed the threshold for reasonable costs – which also increased – the opposition was able to point to its failures.

---

136   'Statement by Sir Michael Scholar', *UK Statistics Authority* (blog), **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/statement-by-sir-michael-scholar**.

137   BritainThinks, 'Research into Public Views on Truth and Untruth in the 2019 General Election'.

138   'Beyond Cherry-Picking: The Fuller Picture on Fuel Poverty - Full Fact', **fullfact.org/economy/beyond-cherry-picking-fuller-picture-fuel-poverty**.

Solar installations: more light needed

Labour has claimed that solar installations fell 94% between March and April 2019, attributing this to Conservative policies.

The figure in itself is accurate, but it misses crucial context: solar capacity almost always falls between these two months and so the numbers should be looked at over time.[139] But doing that shows that solar capacity has stagnated since 2017, meaning Labour could have made the same argument using better data. Instead, though, it chose the bigger, more eye-catching number in a bid to make a bigger impact.

And indeed, our automated fact-checking tools have detected this claim appearing in various outlets since Labour made it, including the Press Association, Independent, the Guardian and Novara Media. This demonstrates the long tail that claims have, and how important it is to challenge them early and often. In this case, responsibility lies with both Labour and the newspapers repeating the claims.

Politicians also have a propensity for picking big numbers, claiming that something – whether it's spending, employment or violent crime – is at 'record levels'. We find there's often more to this than meets the eye.

In some cases, it's simply because the population is larger than in the past. But it could also be that the data is collected in a different way, so it's impossible to draw that conclusion. The number of violent crimes recorded by police might be at the highest ever level, but changes in police recording practices mean we can't establish any trustworthy trend and can't accurately say violent crime is at record levels.

Another possibility is that the point at which the statistic was calculated hides a bigger trend, or the measure isn't able to tell you everything you need to know about the subject. Take employment, which by the official UK definition is at its highest since the early 1970s. But on its own this can only tell you so much; it doesn't say whether the jobs people have are providing the hours, stability or wages that they want, and whether that has improved over time. We also need to consider how different working patterns affect the statistics, and put the overall figure into context.[140]

---

139   Joël Reland, 'Labour Makes Misleading Claim on Solar Energy', Full Fact,
       fullfact.org/energy-bill/solar-installations.

140   Abbas Panjwani and Joël Reland, 'Employment: How Is It Defined and Why Does That Matter?', Full Fact,
       fullfact.org/economy/employment-since-2010-definition.

Factbombing: Blinding you with statistics

We know politicians will choose the biggest numbers to show off how well they are doing, or how badly the other side is performing. But last year, we reported on another disconcerting trend: long lists of disconnected facts reeled off in quick succession with no context and little meaning. We call this factbombing. One place this is most common is the weekly battle ground of Prime Minister's Questions, when the two party leaders go head to head in the House of Commons.

We analysed the number of factual claims (which we defined as a falsifiable assertion about the state of the world backed up by evidence, in order to further an argument) made by Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May at PMQs between 2 May 2018 and 1 May 2019, and found that 12% of all statements had been factbombs. These made up 30% of all the claims made during exchanges at PMQs.[141]

This shows a culture where facts are used as rhetorical devices, rather than to make clear points that add to the debate or to scrutinise topics in more depth. Using statistics in this way doesn't help the public better understand any of the areas mentioned and, due to the nature of PMQs, there are rarely any real questions asked of the data used.

Unpublished and unsubstantiated information

Politicians want to hit the headlines. One way to do this, as we've already seen, is to use big numbers. But in their search for a splash, pledges are far too frequently lacking in policy detail, and politicians are too slow to publish supporting or contextual data. This effectively keeps the public in the dark by withholding information – a behaviour that 88% of respondents to Full Fact's survey said was unacceptable from politicians.[142]

Whatever someone in a position of power says, it needs to be backed up with evidence, and that evidence should be available at the same time as the announcement is made. When it isn't, it is hard for journalists or organisations like ours to scrutinise the claim – and even if the underlying data is published just a day or so later, the incorrect claim may have settled in the public's mind and the news agenda might have moved on, making it harder to hold the claimant to account.

---

141   'The Factbombing Problem: Why Too Many Statistics Can Be Damaging to the State of Public Debate', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/blog/2019/jun/factbombing**.

142   BritainThinks, 'Research into Public Views on Truth and Untruth in the 2019 General Election'.

When the government announced its NHS Long-Term Plan, it said this would save 500,000 lives. What it didn't say was over what period this would happen, how these lives would be saved, or even what it defined as a 'life saved'. Despite repeated requests, NHS England failed to offer answers to these questions.[143]

This kind of behaviour is unacceptable. When an announcement is made, those involved should have answers to such basic questions at their fingertips. This means ensuring that press offices and other public-facing parts of the civil service or political parties' teams are equipped with a proper understanding of where the information in a policy, press or ministerial statement comes from.

The Code of Practice of Statistics is also clear that any policy, press or ministerial statements that refer to official statistics should contain a prominent link to the source statistics, with the statements themselves meeting the basic standards for stats, which includes accuracy, clarity and impartiality.

Housing claims

In April 2018, then housing minister Dominic Raab claimed in an interview with the Sunday Times that immigration had pushed house prices up by around 20% in the last 25 years. This generated much discussion, but as the claim was based on unpublished analysis from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the debate was not well informed.

It was only after the Office for Statistics Regulation wrote to MHCLG, saying that "where analysis is quoted in public debate, we regard it is essential that it is equally available to all"[144], that the department published the analysis that allowed us to assess the claim properly.

We then found that, although the analysis did contain the figure, it also said that it wasn't meant to be a complete answer and should be used with caution. Income growth was reported in that to be the biggest driver of increased house prices, something that Raab didn't mention in the same piece.[145]

---

143   Claire Milne, 'It's Unclear Exactly How NHS England Plans to Save 500,000 Lives', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/unclear-nhs-england-save-500000-lives**.

144   Ed Humpherson, 'Letter from Ed Humpherson to Melanie Dawes', 13 April 2017, **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/House-Prices-Ed-Humpherson-to-Melanie-Dawes.pdf**.

145   Abbas Panjwani, 'Have House Prices Risen Because of Immigrants?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/immigration/have-house-prices-risen-because-immigrants**.

> This clearly demonstrates why it is so important for original analyses and underlying data to be published if it is going to be used in public by politicians making a point, or seeking to persuade voters to their way of thinking. If the analysis had never been published, we would have been in the dark about the wider context of a figure used to bolster a minister's point in a newspaper.

One solution for government announcements or speeches would be to ensure that any claims have been fully sourced and fact checked before they are made. To some extent, these processes do already exist. Full Fact submitted Freedom of Information requests to all government departments, and found a range of informal and formal procedures.

Public exchanges between the UK Statistics Authority and the Department of Health and Social Care in 2015 refer to an internal Media Centre Data Document for speeches, "designed to have the weblink and lead officials/analysts for each fact included", and a "fact checking and sourcing element" in the process for developing strategic ministerial speeches to "reinforce the point that quoted facts should be in the public domain".[146]

However, the reason for this exchange was that Jeremy Hunt had made a claim in a speech based on unpublished information, which shows that – despite well intentioned plans – mistakes still slip through the net. We know this is not unique to DHSC.

We also know that there are situations where an announcement cannot be subjected to the same scrutiny, for instance when a small team is working on the weekend or responding to something immediate. Meanwhile, high staff turnover within government – a problem that has been discussed in detail elsewhere[147] – and busy agendas also put informal processes at risk of being forgotten or bumped down the priority list.

We therefore need to look beyond procedures and push for culture change, emphasising to everyone at every level of the civil service not just that fact checking and publication of sources is important, but why it is important: government cannot succeed when it is flying blind. This should include training on statistics and the importance of evidence for all new recruits, especially those in policy and press teams.

Political parties and individual politicians are just as likely to publicise analyses without showing their working. Before the 2019 general election was called, the

---

146   'Unpublished Estimate of Excess Deaths Arising through Weekend Admission to Hospitals in England', *UK Statistics Authority* (blog), **statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/unpublished-estimate-of-excess-deaths-arising-through-weekend-admission-to-hospitals-in-england**.

147   Tom Sasse and Emma Norris, 'Moving On: The Costs of High Staff Turnover in the Civil Service', 16 January 2019, **instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG_staff_turnover_WEB.pdf**.

Conservatives spoke to the press about their attempt to cost Labour's welfare spending – putting the overall bill at some £520 billion. But this was based on the assumption that Labour planned to introduce universal basic income at a high level, when Labour had no such policy, and on costings that remained unpublished and therefore impossible to scrutinise.[148]

We see similar problems from the opposition, for instance when they are relying on research carried out by the House of Commons Library, which provides impartial assessments for MPs to support their work and so that they can hold the government to account.

MPs often use this to feed negative headlines in the press but are not obliged to publish the information or analyses that they receive. In 2013, Labour did provide us with the full data that it used to brief the press of what it described a "toddler tax".[149] However, in the most recent general election the party didn't share the workings behind figures it had used to make claims about how much its policies would save an average household.[150] This limits scrutiny of the opposition's claims to only those where they choose to allow it, which is at best inconsistent and at worst open to manipulation.

It is crucial that the opposition can benefit from the services provided by the House of Commons Library, and we do not believe all data should be made public by default. But once information has been used to win column inches, used on the floor of the House or made public in some other way, the materials should be opened up for scrutiny. This would bring it in line with policies on polling (described in Part Two) and with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Claiming credit and placing the blame

One of the biggest challenges in fact checking is when politicians claim credit for a policy decision, or place the blame on the opposition. That's because it's hard to definitively prove causation, especially in complex policy areas; it's also hard to figure out when a particular policy will have had an impact in real life.

For instance, when do you start counting? The minute the politicians take office – when events are still likely affected by the previous administration's decisions – or at some other point when new policy changes have had time to take effect?

148 Abbas Panjwani, 'Claim about Cost of Labour's Welfare Policy Is Unsubstantiated', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/labour-universal-basic-income**.

149 Full Fact Team, '"Toddler Tax": Are Parents £1,700 Worse Off?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/toddler-tax-are-parents-1700-worse**.

150 Joseph O'Leary et al., 'Labour Claims about Savings under Their Policies Are Not Credible', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/election-2019/labour-claims-about-savings-under-their-policies-are-not-credible**.

How do you know what was due to that party's policies, and how much was because of external factors? And what about the policy itself: a round of job cuts will have a more immediate impact than plans to hire more staff.

A clear example that we've checked more than once is claims about Boris Johnson's record as the Mayor of London, a position he held from 2008 to 2016. Using comparable figures for 31 March each year, there were more police officers around the time Johnson stopped being mayor (around 32,100) than when he began (around 31,500).[151]

However, starting the clock in 2008 isn't necessarily the best measure of his tenure, because his first budget – which includes funding for police – wasn't until February 2009, covering the 2009/10 financial year. In addition, it takes time to recruit and train officers, which means it can take time before the effects of a new administration are felt. If you compare police numbers from a year or two into Johnson's tenure with a year or two after he left, the number of officers fell.

And, as we saw in the previous section, it's easy to pick the statistics that suit you best. The Tony Blair Institute last year defended the Blair government's record on inequality and social mobility with a set of broadly accurate figures, but without mentioning overall income inequality: one area where available data wasn't as complimentary.[152]

This same pronouncement also claimed credit for the UK hitting the target for spending 0.7% of GDP on foreign aid, but this didn't happen until 2013, three years after Labour left office. Although Blair's government accelerated the growth of foreign aid spending, it was the Coalition government that both enshrined a commitment to 0.7% of foreign aid spending into law, and was the first to reach that target.

It's unrealistic to expect politicians not to point to their successes in office, and indeed voters should be able to judge their political leaders on their record as well as their promises. Our own research ahead of the general election found that 89% said making a promise to voters they know they may not be able to deliver was unacceptable. There is therefore a risk that apathy will grow from the sense that politicians never keep their promises.

This means it is crucial we develop accurate and effective ways to assess politicians' claims about their track record when in power, and what policies they promised and what they delivered on. Work to develop policy trackers exists in the UK, and we are supportive of this being carried out by independent, non-partisan expert groups as well as officially through the civil service. It's also important that such work acknowledges that it isn't necessarily a bad thing for a government not to keep a

151   Joseph O'Leary, 'Police Numbers under Boris Johnson's Time as Mayor', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/crime/police-officers-under-boris-johnson**.

152   Full Fact team, 'Labour's Record on Inequality and Social Mobility: 1997 to 2010', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/labour-inequality-1997-2010**.

promise – governments need to deviate from proposals where necessary to respond to public demand or safeguard the population.[153]

Similar work could be done to assess the deliverability of the pledges made during campaigns in the same way as the Institute for Fiscal Studies can provide an assessment of the credibility of spending claims, so that the electorate has access to better information before casting their vote.

Spending figures

The actors in this chapter spend a large chunk of their time talking about budgets and spending, which is usually beyond the remit of the departmental statisticians. However, these figures are just as open to exaggeration and misrepresentation as other kinds of statistics and information. Understanding how the government, or would-be government, of the day plans to spend the money it has is essential for a well-informed public – but at the moment, discussions of public spending can be confusing and intimidating.

We want to see politicians being clear about where money is coming from. It's far too common for something to be described as "new money" when it is in fact just redirected from another pot, and re-announced to give the impression of an extra boost. Politicians use this to their advantage to look more generous than they are, and can hide behind complex funding structures to avoid scrutiny. And, as we saw in Part Two, this can be compounded by a failure to make the situation clear even when pressed.

Another issue is using different numbers to talk about the same thing, resulting in confused messaging to the public and a limited ability for anyone to understand how much money has actually been granted to the scheme or sector being discussed.

Similarly, politicians will often choose not to adjust for inflation. Because money is continually getting less valuable, when you don't factor in inflation, what is in reality complete stability in government spending looks like a news story. This allows parties to spin things to suit their own agenda.

Wage growth is a classic example of this: time and again, the government and media organisations will make claims about how fast wages are rising, when in real terms the growth is slower and what happens to the average wage doesn't necessarily reflect what happens to the typical person.

Failing to correct for inflation can also make things look worse under your opponents' rule: during the 2019 general election, Labour showed the change in prices over the Conservative government unadjusted for inflation, but presented the change in wages

---

153   Jordan Urban and Adam Feldman, 'The Future of Promise Tracking', 19 March 2018,
        fullfact.org/media/uploads/the_future_of_promise_tracking_jordan_urban_adam_feldman_fullfact.pdf.

as adjusted for inflation, by which measure they have fallen slightly. More broadly, the party claimed that costs to the average family had risen by almost £6,000 since 2010, but few of the figures used by the party actually represented "average families'" spending.[154]

Inflation primarily affects macro arguments rather than people's lived experiences, and it's probably fair to say that most people will struggle to truly understand the difference between two very large figures. It could, though, impact their overall understanding of the national situation; their views may be influenced by whether things look like they are in continual flux, or indeed getting worse when they are really staying the same.

At a more fundamental level, we believe that the public deserves access to the most accurate information, presented in a consistent way from all public bodies, government officials and politicians. For instance, briefings to ministers should only be provided with real terms increases or decreases set out, without nominal figures included. This will ensure policies and announcements can be easily compared, and puts the burden on the people providing the information, not those who are consuming it.

Correcting the record

Government officials and politicians should aim to get things right in the first place, backing up what they say with evidence and demonstrating their commitment to open, honest public debate. But this isn't always possible: time pressures, human error and more all play their part, and mistakes can and will happen. Everyone can misspeak or misremember a statistic. When that happens, the mistakes need to be quickly corrected at source, and there needs to be methods for these actors to do that.

Unlike the media, where corrections procedures are well established – if not always well used or enforced, as we'll see in the next section – there aren't many defined or public routes by which the actors in this chapter can correct themselves.

If a minister makes a factual error in parliament, they are required by the Ministerial Code to submit a written ministerial correction for publication in the official record as quickly as possible; these have to be free-standing and can't be used to provide new information. If they want to make a correction that would not comply with this criteria, they can submit a written statement instead.

According to a search of Hansard records, there have been a total of more than 400 letters of correction submitted since May 2010. Full Fact has successfully secured

---

154   Joseph O'Leary et al., 'Labour Claims about Savings under Their Policies Are Not Credible', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/election-2019/labour-claims-about-savings-under-their-policies-are-not-credible**.

corrections from Liz Truss, who incorrectly said that the UK had seen the highest real wage growth for 10 years – this was only true when you don't correct for inflation[155] – and David Cameron, who made a mistake in how many fewer schools operating at full or over-capacity in 2016.[156]

However, at the time of publication, we had not received a response to four requests for Prime Minister Boris Johnson to correct the record. These are claims that Scotland has the highest taxes in Europe, the monthly cost of a Brexit extension, the amount the economy has grown under the Conservative government, and how many unaccompanied child refugees have been accepted.[157] These failures to correct the official record are disappointing, especially as we would expect that the prime minister would seek to set an example to others, and the prime minister is responsible for the Ministerial Code.

The ability for ministers to correct the record in this way came about as a result of recommendations in 2007 by the House of Commons Procedure Committee[158], but for those occupying non-ministerial roles, there is no official route for correction or code by which others can hold them to account. MPs who wish to, can raise a point of order and correct an error in the House, but this relies entirely on the willingness of the MP and their ability to find a suitable time to make the verbal correction.

Earlier this year, Jeremy Hunt mistakenly said that NHS surgeons operated on the wrong part of the body four times a day, when it is actually four times a week.[159] He corrected himself during a related debate the week after but his original statement remains on the record with no link to the correction. We asked the Hansard editorial team if it would be possible to do this, but they have no process for this.

We have been told there are currently no plans to change the procedure for back bench or opposition MPs and urge that this is reviewed and a formal process for such corrections established.

Having this route to clearly amend the written official record for instances where a factual inaccuracy has been identified would be a straightforward way to emphasise

155   Elizabeth Truss, 'Ministerial Correction' (2018), hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-12-20/debates/7AD19466-7A29-4C7C-979A-5A1E79C0A28B/Treasury.

156   David Cameron, 'Ministerial Correction' (2016), parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-03-04/HCWS580.

157   Joël Reland, 'Scotland Doesn't Have the Highest Taxes in Europe', Full Fact, fullfact.org/economy/scotland-doesnt-have-highest-taxes-europe; Tom Phillips, 'Boris Johnson Repeats His False Claim That Extending Brexit Costs £1 Billion a Month', Full Fact, fullfact.org/europe/one-billion-a-month; Abbas Panjwani, 'Boris Johnson Gets His Numbers Muddled on Economic Growth', Full Fact, fullfact.org/economy/boris-johnson-economic-growth; Kate Lewis, 'Since 2010, the UK Has Granted Protection to around 41,000 Asylum Seekers and Refugees under the Age of 18', Full Fact, fullfact.org/immigration/40-thousand-unaccompanied-children.

158   House of Commons Procedure Committee, 'Second Report: Corrections to the Official Report', 5 June 2007, publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmproced/541/541.pdf.

159   Abbas Panjwani, 'Jeremy Hunt Muddled the Numbers on Botched Surgeries', Full Fact, fullfact.org/health/botched-surgeries.

to the public that all of parliament takes honesty in debate seriously. It would also hopefully normalise the practice of making corrections so that all MPs do so more willingly.

Of course, ministers or MPs do not make all their mistakes in parliament – they happen in interviews with broadcasters, local or national newspapers and on social media and these statements are equally, if not more, likely to be noticed by the general public. Here, it is even more vital that politicians correct the record quickly and fully.

We aim to encourage this by following up on fact checks directly, asking the claimants to correct the record. Some are very receptive. Last year, Liberal Democrat MP Layla Moran published a correction video on Twitter explaining a mistake she made on social media and thanking Full Fact for intervening.[160]

Meanwhile, Labour MP Liam Byrne's team corrected the text on a figure about employment to make it clear what statistic they were using – although they did not commit to not use that measure in future, despite the ONS recommending against using it as it may provide a "misleading representation of changes in the UK labour market".[161]

There have also been numerous occasions where politicians have ignored us, or disagreed with the assessment of their claims. This means the misleading information remains in the public domain, often on their social media accounts. These posts may have refutations underneath – sometimes including our own – but it isn't yet clear what impact this has on the public.

As we continue to intervene on cases where misinformation is being spread by public figures and politicians on social media, we are building up an evidence base of what works and what doesn't when it comes to asking for a correction. Our next step is to understand how effective each intervention is, and what impact the time between claim and fact check, fact check and correction, has on the life of the claim.

Another important actor in holding politicians to account is the media – they are often in the room when a politician makes a mistake and have the best chance to ask for, or indeed force, a correction or apology from the person in question.

If politicians become less committed to facing interrogations from the press this may change, but even if our political representatives do engage, we have to rely on the journalists asking the right questions at the right time, often under extreme pressure and without the facts at their fingertips. As fact checkers, we know how long it can take to understand a subject well enough to challenge the claimant's point of view.

160   Layla Moran, 'Layla Moran on Twitter', Twitter, **twitter.com/laylamoran/status/1186737927742730240**.

161   Abbas Panjwani, 'MP's Claim about Rising Unemployment in the West Midlands Is Wrong', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/west-midlands-unemployment**.

This means a politician has repeated a claim three or four times before they are properly challenged, after concerns about the accuracy of the statement have been questioned widely enough for this to have been picked up by reporters or producers. And, as we saw in the case of the GATT 24 claim, once politicians do get pulled up on the claim, it's common for them to tweak the statement, and the whole process starts again.

Media

The media isn't one single entity. We are using the term here to cover everything from local newspapers to national TV or radio, from online-only outlets to journalists on Twitter, and everything in between. Each of these has different influences, biases, audiences and, for some, regulators. Understanding these is crucial if we are to understand the way information is disseminated to the public.

At a fundamental level, all of these outlets act as conduits between the producers of information – the government, academia, think tanks and more – and citizens, but they also produce information, whether through data-driven journalism or by publishing materials that would otherwise have gone unpublished.

In this sense, the media plays a crucial role in speaking truth to power and holding those in positions of influence – including peers – to account. Reporting at its best can expose scandals and abuses of power on both large and small scales, or protect whistleblowers so they can tell stories the public has a right to know.

But the media doesn't always live up to these standards. Newspapers write hyperbolic headlines that misrepresent or distort important issues; outlets don't offer context necessary to fully understand a story; their political leaning influences what they choose to report on, and how; and interviewees can be misquoted or just let off the hook.

This can happen by accident or design; they can be driven by inherent biases, the pursuit of a good story or a need to drive up clicks or sales. Either way, mistakes in reporting or in judgment can have a long-lasting and widespread impact on citizens as individuals, and on society as a whole.

Trust in media

It's fair to say that the media as a whole is not well trusted, with journalists regularly ranked towards the lower end in surveys about trust and trustworthiness. Globally, some 45% of people rate 'the media' as untrustworthy or very untrustworthy, beaten only by the government.[162]

However, given how broad a category 'the media' is, and how much the sector is changing, we need to break this down to get a clearer picture of trust.

TV remains the way most UK adults consume their news, with 75% saying they use it, but this is on the decline, while social media is on the up, reaching 49% in 2019.[163]

162   Ipsos Mori, 'Ipsos Global Advisor: Trust in the Media', June 2019, **ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/ documents/2019-06/global-advisor-trust-in-media-2019.pdf**.

163   Ofcom, 'News Consumption in the UK: 2019', 24 July 2019, **ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/ uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf**.

For those aged 16-24 and those from a minority ethnic background, the internet is the most-used platform for news consumption.

Magazines and TV tend to fare better in terms of trust than online news or journalists as a whole. In the UK, some 61% say they trust TV newsreaders to tell the truth[164]; the same survey puts trust in journalists at 26%.

And in a Europe-wide survey, 70% said they trust the news they receive from radio, 66% from TV and 63% from printed media, compared with less than half who trust online newspapers and magazines, and around a quarter for social networks, messaging apps and video-hosting websites.[165]

The differences may partly be explained by the regulatory requirements placed on broadcasters around accuracy and impartiality that aren't placed on print media.

Attitudes also vary depending on the age of the person. The same study found that younger people are more likely to trust online sources: 60% among those aged 15-24 years old, dropping to 34% in over 55s, although there was a higher proportion of don't knows in the older group.

Among 12 to 15 year olds, the divide is much more even: 29% said TV was the medium they used most often to get news, while 22% said social media, despite the latter being ranked by this group as the least trustworthy and accurate sources of information.[166]

But with increasingly blurred lines between our offline and online lives, it may be outdated to make this distinction: traditional media outlets are increasingly experimenting with different digital and social media offerings. Meanwhile, there are growing accusations of bias within the UK's national broadcasters from both main political parties, commentators and the general public, which could have an impact on the levels of trust in these traditional outlets.

Taken as a whole, there is reason to be concerned about low levels of trust in the press[167], but there is still time to act. This chapter uses our evidence to develop a set of recommendations for short and longer-term changes that could improve levels of trust in the media, by demonstrating that the system works to protect against and correct mistakes.

---

164   Ipsos Mori, 'Veracity Index 2019', November 2019, **ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-11/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2019-slides.pdf**.

165   'Flash Eurobarometer 464', April 2018.

166   Ofcom, 'Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2018', 29 January 2019, **ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/134907/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-2018.pdf**

167   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth', 17 September 2019.

Problems the media face

There may be many issues with the way the media does its job, issues that affect the public's ability to access good information, and biases that have the potential to influence people to make a decision they may not have if they had more accurate information. We will discuss these in more detail in this section.

However, these issues need to be put into context with the problems the media faces. This ranges from potential challenges to the role of a free press and its ability to operate as is necessary to hold those in power to account, or issues that restrict the media's day-to-day work, so creating a barrier in the journey of good information. We must also appreciate and acknowledge the changing media landscape and various other pressures – financial, time and increasing number of competitors at home and overseas – that affect the decisions and compromises that all news outlets have to make.

Much of the time, the press and fact checkers are working on the same side. We also face many of the same issues, such as those of information quality and accessibility outlined in Part Two.

In addition, we are seeing a concerning trend of senior political leaders avoiding direct scrutiny from the press. On record, un-briefed conversations are crucial in allowing public scrutiny and fact checkers often benefit from the access journalists get to challenge politicians when they use misleading or false information.

Towards the end of 2019 and into the start of 2020, we saw the Conservative government boycott the BBC's flagship Today programme, along with Sky News' Kay Burley show and Good Morning Britain.[168] This decision was reversed during the novel coronavirus outbreak. But we believe that politicians should be willing, at all times, to explain their policy decisions, in public, to members of the press in interviews that are not pre-arranged.

It should also be remembered that, compared with many other countries, the UK benefits from many journalists who, in general, are committed to accuracy and will correct the record when it is necessary. However, despite all this, there are still mistakes, attempts to sensationalise and questionable judgment calls, all of which can stop good information reaching the public.

---

168   Amy Jones and Christopher Hope, 'No 10 Boycotts Today Programme Citing "failure of Senior Management" over Election Bias', The Telegraph, 15 December 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/12/15/no-10-boycotts-today-programme-citing-failure-senior-management/.

Bias: real or imagined?

The UK's national broadcasters, in particular the BBC, are increasingly faced with accusations of bias from all sides. Meanwhile, the nation's newspapers have long-standing political leanings that influence their coverage. A 2017 YouGov survey suggests the public understands this[169] – the Daily Mail was seen as the most right-wing and the Guardian the most left-wing. But we should be aware that this might not be the case for non-regular readers or casual browsers on social media.

Generally, the main effect this has on coverage is less apparent scrutiny of the policies or assertions of the parties the newspaper supports. For instance, the Daily Express published inaccurate and misleading claims about Labour's supposed universal basic income policies based on an unpublished analysis from the Conservative party, but Labour had no such policy and the asserted cost was far from realistic.[170]

On the other hand, the Guardian and the Independent have reported on the number of people attending the anti-Brexit People's Vote march as being far higher than it was, and have continued to use this figure, despite experts refuting it.[171]

"You won't see this in the mainstream media"

The rise of social media has closed the intersection between the public and the media. Journalists frequently rely on social media for their stories – it gives them immediate access to a wealth of quotes from the outraged of Tunbridge Wells, helps them identify what stories might draw eyes to their pages, and gives them a simple route into a trending story.

But this scrutiny goes both ways, and is leading to a shift in the mistrust the public has in the press. Social media users can now offer second-by-second scrutiny of what the press is – or isn't – reporting on. This might be fed by changes in the way people see information: on social media, users may see lots of a particular type of content shared by friends and pushed to them by algorithms. If they don't then see the main media outlets reporting on it, they might question why and presume there is a conspiracy that is being ignored.[172]

The common refrain here is "the mainstream media won't report this", and it can feed into the growing distrust that some groups have of the establishment and what it

169   YouGov, 'YouGov Survey Results', February 2017, **d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/ document/n34shyp79t/InternalResults_170215_Left-RightScale_ExtraCB_W.pdf**.

170   Panjwani, 'Claim about Cost of Labour's Welfare Policy Is Unsubstantiated'.

171   Mark Townsend, 'Police across Country Put on Standby for London's Million-plus Protest Day', *The Observer*, 13 October 2019, **theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/oct/13/police-on-standby-london-peoples-vote-extinction-rebellion-million-plus-protest-day**; 'Brexit March: No Deal Is Not "Will of the People", Final Say Campaigners Tell Boris Johnson, *The Independent*, **independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-march-protest-london-second-referendum-no-deal-boris-johnson-rally-a9148541.html**.

172   Rossalyn Warren, 'House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee Hearing' (n.d.), **parliamentlive.tv/event/index/f32e7f40-17dc-4e83-9ee7-149e0856202a?in=17:15:26**.

chooses to filter down to the citizens. There are numerous examples from both sides, which range from the implausible – tweets that quote-tweet direct references to the story being covered in national news outlets – to those that are a grey area.

A similar type of claim we have seen and checked is that the British media have been banned from reporting on a topic – in this case the French yellow vest protests – that seek to suggest that the government is censoring the press.[173] Again, such misinformation risks sowing discord and mistrust among the public.

The mainstream media deserves criticism and scrutiny – much of what Full Fact does is based on this principle. However, reports that it "isn't covering" an issue could have negative consequences.

It could lead people to believe in an establishment conspiracy that might risk disengagement from democracy, or it could encourage people to seek news in outlets that are seen to get the story "quicker" but that fail to verify their authenticity to the same extent, which risks exposing people to more misinformation. Finally, it could build scepticism about any claims the "MSM aren't reporting this" and lead to complaints about genuinely unreported stories getting drowned out.

Misleading headlines

Headlines are probably the most obvious part of a news story, especially when they involve the main story on the front page. They're the first thing, and sometimes the only thing, that people see.

And in a social media age, the headline often becomes the tweet, lifting it away from the context provided by the rest of the copy. According to a 2016 study of article links posted by five major American news organisations, 59% of the links shared by Twitter users during one month were not actually clicked on.[174] It shouldn't be down to the reader to make sure they look at the piece as a whole: if they see just the headline, they should get an accurate picture of the story. This is why it is crucial headlines are accurate.

However, we find we often have to seek corrections on headlines, even when the body text has got the facts right. This could be because space constraints mean newspapers squeeze out a necessary bit of context, the headline wasn't written by the journalist who wrote the story, or that other outlets simply copy another's without checking it properly.

173   Rachael Krishna, 'There Is No D-Notice Blocking Reporting on Yellow Vest Protests', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/online/d-notice-yellow-vests**.

174   Maksym Gabielkov et al., 'Social Clicks: What and Who Gets Read on Twitter?', in *Proceedings of the 2016 ACM SIGMETRICS International Conference on Measurement and Modeling of Computer Science - SIGMETRICS '16* (the 2016 ACM SIGMETRICS International Conference, Antibes Juan-les-Pins, France: ACM Press, 2016), 179–92, **doi.org/10.1145/2896377.2901462**.

Sometimes, it's the social media text that's the problem rather than the article's headline. In 2019, a Public Health England review found that a quarter of adults in England had received a prescription for certain medications that can be addictive. The review did not say that this many people were addicted to them. But the text used on Twitter by the Daily Mail – which was also the auto-generated text created when users clicked on the 'share' button for the story – was incorrect, stating: "One in four people is hooked on prescription drugs". The newspaper changed the text after we raised the issue.

In order to better understand misleading headlines, and why they happen, Full Fact looked at accuracy rulings made by the UK press regulator, IPSO, as well as other examples, to identify five main types of misleading headline, and suggest five reasons misleading headlines might occur.[175]

The five main types of misleading headline

- Factual claims that are exaggerated in the headline
- The misleading omission of relevant information
- A wrongly or misleadingly paraphrased quotation
- The mishandling of numbers and statistics
- Factual claims that are not at all supported by the text

Five reasons why:

- Customisation for social media
- Corrections and updates aren't reflected in the headline
- Headline writers don't read or properly understand the article
- Lack of space
- Publications copying each other

Factual claims that are exaggerated. Take The Sun's famous headline: "Queen Backs Brexit". IPSO ruled against the newspaper, saying there was nothing in the headline "to suggest that this was conjecture, hyperbole, or was not to be read literally"[176].

Another common trope here is to exaggerate academic studies' claims – for instance, The Guardian reported: "Exposure to weed killing products increases risk of cancer by 41% – study," but – as the article made clear – the meta-analysis had actually found that people in the highest exposure groups to some pesticides had a 41%

---

175   With thanks to Eugene Smith for his work on this while at placement at Full Fact

176   'Revealed: Queen Backs Brexit as Alleged EU Bust-up with Ex-Deputy PM Emerges', *The Sun*, 8 March 2016, **thesun.co.uk/news/1078504/revealed-queen-backs-brexit-as-alleged-eu-bust-up-with-ex-deputy-pm-emerges**.

increased chance of developing one particular type of cancer, not a greater risk of cancer in general.

Misleading omission of relevant information. In July 2016, a headline splashed across the front page of The Express read: "98% say no to EU deal". However, it failed to say that this referred to the 5,765 people who had voted in the Express's premium-rate phone poll, advertised on page seven of the paper the previous day.[177]

A wrongly or misleadingly paraphrased quotation. This might be that the way a headline is written creates the impression that the person referred to has said something they haven't, or selectively quoting from statements. For instance, an Independent headline that read "White House chief says 'everything Donald Trump says is offensive'," could reasonably be interpreted to mean that White House chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, found Trump's comments offensive. What he actually said was: "I understand that everything Donald Trump says is offensive to some people."

Mishandled numbers and statistics. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of Full Fact's work looks at the misuse of statistics, and these certainly creep into headlines. A good example is back in May 2012, when we checked a misleading headline in the London Evening Standard that said there had been a "3% drop in the cost of living". In fact, as the rest of the article accurately reported, the Consumer Price Index rate of inflation had fallen from 3.5% to 3%—and "the rising cost of living [was] still outstripping most wage rises".[178]

Factual claims not supported by the text. Although this is less common than exaggeration, we saw several examples of headline claims that weren't backed up in the article – and in some cases directly refuted. In November 2016, the Daily Express published an article headlined: "Anger as less than A THIRD of Muslim nations sign up to coalition against ISIS". As IPSO ruled, there was nothing in the article to substantiate the statement that anyone had expressed "anger" at some Muslim nations not signing up to the coalition.[179]

Uncritical reporting

As a major provider of information to the public, the media has a responsibility to scrutinise both the claims that are being made and the people making them. Ideally, this will involve an assessment of organisations' biases and their basis for claiming expertise on an issue.

---

177 Freddy Mayhew, 'Daily Express Forced to Run Second Front-Page Correction over pro-Brexit Coverage in Space of a Week', *Press Gazette*, 7 February 2017, **pressgazette.co.uk/daily-express-forced-to-run-second-front-page-correction-over-anti-eu-coverage-in-space-of-a-week**.

178 Full Fact Team, 'Evening Standard Incorrectly Reports a Drop in the Cost of Living', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/news/evening-standard-incorrectly-reports-drop-cost-living**.

179 '13416-16 Versi v Express.Co.Uk', **ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=13416-16**.

Despite this – perhaps through time pressure, poorly worded press releases or simply the pursuit of a good story – a number of the corrections we ask for from newspapers are a result of an apparent failure to double check something, and if others cover the story, misleading information can spread quickly. It is then harder to ensure that all instances of the claim have been corrected.

On other occasions, it is subjective reports from seemingly expert bodies or surveys with small sample sizes run by organisations with obvious vested interests that are reported with little context. This grants the original claimants a sheen of authenticity as they are featured in national newspapers.

As fact checkers, we have the luxury of time. We know how complicated it is to scrutinise such complex reports, because we have sometimes spent days fact checking them. The press generally isn't afforded that and it is often hard for journalists to flat-out refuse to run a story an editor is keen on – especially if it suits the political slant of the newspaper. But being clear about exactly what is and isn't backed up with evidence should be the minimum.

Brexit stockpiling
In 2019, a number of news outlets ran with a story that claims Britons had spent £4 billion on stockpiling goods in case of a no-deal Brexit.

The figure came from a survey conducted by research company Consumer Intelligence, which surveyed 1,052 adults in the UK about their preparation for Brexit, finding that 20% had stockpiled goods. Among those who had stockpiled, the average spend was £380, and the company multiplied that figure by the roughly ten million people they estimated had stockpiled goods – based on the 20% figure – and came up with £4 billion.

The problem is that the survey didn't make it clear whether respondents were answering as individuals or a household, meaning at least some – and likely many – would report a household figure not the individual sum.

Amid the heat of the Brexit debate and general election, there was also an increased focus on a perceived growth in reliance on unnamed sources, with journalists being called upon to stop uncritically repeating lines that are fed to them by 'insiders'. Many believe those inside the so-called Westminster bubble should know better than to share information from sources they know to be less trustworthy.

The reputation of the press relies on journalists committing never to reveal their sources – sometimes in the face of great pressure from the state – and it is absolutely

essential this practice continues. However, there is a big difference between a whistleblower and a spokesperson issuing a government line as part of a planned communications strategy.

By passing on information attributed to a "number 10 source", rather than a spokesperson, it allows the government to avoid issuing an on-the-record comment; no one has to take responsibility for the statement, it can't be properly scrutinised, and no one can hold the administration to account.

The phenomenon of providing information "on background" only is not restricted to the government. Multinational companies often use it as a way to control what journalists are able to say. The activity poses a particular problem for Full Fact. Because we provide a source for everything that we write, we find it hard to refer to information given to us on background. This prevents us from providing readers with the full story; and if we did refer to on-background sources, the readers would in turn be prevented from making their own minds up about the trustworthiness of the source.

Polling

As discussed in Part Two, polls are a useful tool for many actors to understand more about a section of society or issue, but are open to poor design, manipulation and misinterpretation. The media is one of the main ways the general public hears about such surveys, and we have various examples where polls have been reported with too little context or scepticism.

For instance, the Guardian reported that veganism had "rocketed" in the UK, but this was based on a survey where the question was phrased so as to include people who were previously vegan but no longer are.[180] The New European reported that 61% of the country would back Remain in a second referendum, but the poll limited the choice to two options: remaining or leaving with the current deal – if other options were included, support for remain was lower.[181] And multiple outlets picked up on a misleading Fathers4Justice poll, where the survey asked too broad a question to make the claims it did.[182]

Sometimes, of course, mistakes are unintentional. When we contacted the Daily Mail to request a correction about a headline based on an incorrect interpretation of a poll about the number of people with dementia have to sell their homes to pay for care, the newspaper told us that this was an honest mistake in reading the survey results and quickly corrected the piece online and in print.

180   Joël Reland, 'Are There 3.5 Million Vegans in the UK?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/vegans-uk**.

181   Tom Phillips, 'Does 61% of the Country Now Back Remain?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/do-61-percent-back-remain**.

182   Eugene Smith, 'Did Four in Ten Dads Not See Their Children This Father's Day?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/news/fathers-day**.

Newspapers don't always act so quickly. For instance, the Express published an article in August 2019 headlined "Britain will be BETTER OFF after Brexit: Poll shows businesses BRIMMING with confidence". This was based on a poll commissioned by a group that represented maritime businesses but the claims made in the article weren't supported by the poll data. It wasn't until March 2019, when IPSO ruled that the article was "significantly misleading" that action was taken.[183]

Sometimes, though, it is the newspapers asking pollsters to run surveys with leading questions. Professional polling companies should strive to avoid these situations.

Correcting a misleading poll

An August 2019 front page splash in the Telegraph was headlined: "Public backs Johnson to shut down parliament for Brexit", which claimed that more than half (54%) of the public supported prorogation.

But the results showed a different picture: 44% agreed, 37% disagreed and 19% said they didn't know. In order to reach the 54% figure, the Telegraph – and ComRes in a press release about the study – excluded those who said they didn't know. This is a common way of reporting polling findings and is appropriate when estimating voting intention. But when discussing public sentiment, 'don't know' is a legitimate point of view and this should be made clear.

Full Fact wrote to the Telegraph to ask for a correction, but it initially offered just a line at the bottom of the article stating that the figures referred to didn't count don't knows. This online clarification wouldn't have been visible to anyone who didn't have a Premium Telegraph account – non-subscribers can only see the top three paragraphs of pay-walled articles – so we pushed back, asking for the introductory paragraphs to be changed.

The Telegraph accepted our suggestions and changed the wording to say that "Boris Johnson has the support of most people who have an opinion to deliver Brexit by any means, including suspending parliament, according to a poll" and a correction note was published on page 2 of the newspaper in a later edition.

183   'Ruling Partlett v Express.Co.Uk', 26 March 2019, **ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ ruling/?id=07925-18**.

IPSO has since issued a ruling on the article, which said that reporting the results without making clear that a significant proportion of respondents had not expressed a view was "significantly misleading, particularly where this interpretation formed the basis for the claim in the article that more than half of the public were in agreement".[184]

For us, the article raised two major concerns: first, the way in which polls are reported by the press, and second that it is the industry norm to issue a correction to a front-page splash on an inside page. The Telegraph piece is one example of these issues, and not specific to either the story or the newspaper.

Correcting the record

There are standards that the media is expected to maintain, mostly overseen by a set of regulators specific to the outlet. Full Fact's work led to changes by the old Press Complaints Council so that third parties – those not mentioned in newspaper stories – can make complaints about general points of accuracy and ask for corrections. This is now generally accepted by every outlet and regulator we have dealt with.

But there are still flaws in this system. Information about who to contact in media organisations to report an error vary wildly; some have clear pages that set out the whole process and others bury email addresses on a hard-to-find webpage, or even list different addresses depending which page you look on. For online outlets, including ITV or Sky News, there is often no clear route at all.

Responses also vary immensely – and are sometimes non-existent. It's also worth noting that not all outlets are covered by a regulator, which means there is no clear way of escalating an ignored request.

In 2019, we made 37 correction requests to outlets regulated by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS). Some 23 have resulted in the article being corrected or, in some cases, deleted.

It is notable that of the 8 correction requests we made to the Express and Sunday Express in that time period, only one received a response, with the paper declining to make a correction. Three were eventually fully resolved, but one was not corrected until more than three months later. In contrast, we made the same number of requests to the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, all of which were replied to, with seven resulting in corrections made within no more than a week.

---

184   IPSO, 'Ruling 06056-19 Baker v The Daily Telegraph', **ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=06056-19**.

Of three requests to the Guardian in 2019, just one correction was made, while the London Evening Standard corrected all three of the requests we made during the year.

Throughout 2020, Full Fact will develop its evidence base across a wider range of newspapers to establish trends in response times and decisions with a view to understanding what approaches are more or less successful.

Another perennial problem is the prominence of corrections. Although there is the possibility of seeking a front page correction, this is far from the standard. The industry norm is for corrections to be positioned on the newspapers' designated corrections page. This is usually a small box at the bottom of an inside page and there is no consistency between papers over which page this is on.

Moreover, given the way news is now consumed – with a move away from people reading a newspaper cover to cover each day – it isn't guaranteed that a reader who saw an inaccurate headline on, say, Monday would see a correction notice on Wednesday, even if it was in a prominent place. Relegating it to the fine print on an inside page renders it even less likely.

There is a real opportunity for positive action from both newspapers and regulators here, to increase accountability and ensure the public has a chance of seeing accurate information. This is also an area of further work for Full Fact in 2020.

Online corrections policies, meanwhile, vary. Notices equivalent to those in the newspapers are sometimes time-limited and many newspapers don't have a single page to see all corrections. This has obvious problems for transparency, and demonstrates clearly the problematic lack of consistency across the industry.

In addition, notes about corrections to online articles can – and should – be appended to the end of the piece, so readers can understand what has been changed; this is important for transparency in the media. However, this can depend on how serious the newspaper thinks the error is, as not all outlets have a policy to make any amendment clear.

There is also an issue for papers that are partially paywalled – those without subscriptions might not be able to see a crucial clarification. This is exemplified in our experience with the Telegraph, when the paper initially offered a clarification note at the bottom of a page that would only have been seen by Premium content subscribers.

Academia, charities, think tanks

Trust in academia, charities and think tanks

This group contains some of the most trusted, most influential – and often least questioned – actors.

Globally, scientists are seen as the most trustworthy profession, with 60% of people trusting them.[185] In the UK, the 2019 British Social Attitudes Survey found 85% of people trust university scientists "to do their work with the intention of benefiting the public".[186] The latest Ipsos MORI Veracity Index found that 84% would trust scientists to tell the truth.[187]

In contrast, the Veracity Index found that 45% said that they would trust charity chief executives to tell the truth. This is still higher than the least trusted professions of journalists, government ministers, advertising executives and politicians generally.

For charities as a whole, scandals in recent years have seen the public's trust in charities drop slightly, although trust levels remain higher than, for instance, private companies or banks. A 2018 report from the Charity Commission found an average level of trust in charities at 5.5 out of 10, which was a fall from 6.7 in 2017.[188]

Think tanks, meanwhile, are slightly different – only around half of the public say they understand what a think tank is or does and 55% are unsure about whether they trust them.[189] What our experience fact checking claims in the press shows, though, is that despite this, journalists often either take think tanks at their word, or report on their work without much interrogation. The result is an official-sounding source in the papers.

Taken together, this group is particularly important as providers of information, since it seems likely that what they say will be taken seriously by the public, or cited by other actors.

The status of some of these groups also brings different problems for those seeking to challenge misleading or inaccurate information. Consider the optics of a fact checking organisation calling out the work of medical research charities or those working with the homeless. However, the fundamental principles should be no different here;

---

185   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth', 17 September 2019.

186   John Curtice et al., 'BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES.' (LONDON: NATCEN SOCIAL RESEARCH, 2019), **bsa.natcen. ac.uk/media/39363/bsa_36.pdf**.

187   Ipsos Mori, 'Veracity Index 2019', November 2019, **ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/ documents/2019-11/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2019-slides.pdf**.

188   Populus, 'Trust in Charities, 2018', July 2018, **assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/ uploads/attachment_data/file/723566/Charity_Commission_-_Trust_in_Charities_2018_-_Report.pdf**.

189   'Forging the Think Tank Narrative UK', Cast From Clay, **castfromclay.co.uk/forging-the-think-tank-narrative- uk**.

arguably it's even more important to scrutinise figures that are more likely to be widely accepted, regardless of where they come from.

Fact checking St John Ambulance

In 2012, St John Ambulance released an advert claiming first aid could prevent 140,000 deaths a year. The figure was surprising to us, so we asked where the charity got its data from and were told that it had assessed whether first aid would be effective for each of the ONS' 'cause of death' categories and added up the total number of deaths in each.

However, the charity refused to share its dataset publicly, which we felt went against the Advertising Standards Agency's code that advertisers have to be able to prove any claims they make. The ASA eventually ruled against St John Ambulance, saying that as the charity couldn't substantiate the claims it had made, it breaches the rules on misleading advertising.[190]

Reporting a charity seeking to reduce preventable deaths to the ASA was a difficult decision for Full Fact, but ultimately one we made because it is vital that we hold everyone – no matter their intentions or their role in society – to the same high standards. If we want everyone to stick to our principles – check your facts, back up what you say with evidence, and correct your mistakes – it's important we don't make judgments on whether a misleading statement is justifiable or not.

Problematic press releases

A common way for information to filter down to the public from the actors in this group is via press releases sent out to the media. This report has already covered the problems of the media reporting on releases they are sent uncritically, but the responsibility does not lie solely on journalists. Universities, research organisations, charities and think tanks all have a responsibility to both the press and the public to issue releases that accurately represent their own work.

Over-stating a report's conclusions in the press release, cynically choosing lines that are likely to get most pick up, and a failure to offer full context is unacceptable. Organisations that do this cannot be shielded from criticism with the argument that journalists should have read the full report.

---

190   Full Fact Team, 'ASA Bans St John Ambulance Advert after Full Fact Complaint', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/asa-bans-st-john-ambulance-advert-after-full-fact-complaint**.

Days before the original October deadline for Brexit, the universities of Cardiff and Edinburgh published a press release based on a set of questions that formed part of a much larger social attitudes survey. This stated that most Leave and Remain voters thought violence towards MPs was a "price worth paying" to Leave or Remain, respectively. This received widespread press coverage, with most leading with the line that violence towards MPs was a "price worth paying".

Nowhere did the release make clear that the questions posed to respondents referred to the risk of violence.[191] In our view, there is an important difference between the statement that violence is a price worth paying to achieve a particular outcome, and the sentiment that something is worth doing, despite the risk of violence. In addition, respondents weren't given the option to indicate that they did not think this risk is likely, or that they don't believe the outcome will change the risk of violence. The Guardian, the Standard and the Scotsman all changed their articles to reflect this nuance after we contacted them.

We contacted both universities about the press release and one, Cardiff, responded. It disagreed with our assessment, noting that the question under discussion was just one part of a wider, long-running and well-respected survey; that the academics were confident that the findings on attitudes towards violence were not an artefact of question wording; and that the press release was not misleading.

When communicating research, especially that on a controversial topic, care should be taken to ensure that it is an accurate representation of the work. Failure to do so risks distorting the findings of academic work and contributing to media coverage that misrepresents the research finding.

We also see problems when press releases are simply written without sufficient clarity or use technical terminology that might not be as apparent to those who aren't specialists in the field.

For instance, last year we looked into claims in a press release from the British Heart Foundation that reported the first sustained rise in heart disease deaths in under 75s in 50 years. Here, the word "sustained" is crucial, and meant it was the first time that the number of deaths had increased for three consecutive years – the number of heart disease deaths among under 75s have actually been rising since 2014.[192] But many newspapers reported the story as if 2017 was the first time that heart disease deaths had risen in 50 years. We think that is at least partly down to the wording of the press release.

Equally, the teams working on releases should make sure that any quotes or statements in a press release convey the same message as the reports that they

191   Joël Reland, 'Poll about Support for Violence against MPs Is Flawed', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/crime/violence-against-MPs-survey-flawed**.

192   Abbas Panjwani, 'The Heart Disease Death Rate Isn't Increasing', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/heart-disease-death-rate**.

are publicising. For instance, the Trades Union Congress released an in-depth study looking at the gig economy, with their press release stating that the rise in "platform work" shows UK workers are "increasingly likely to patch together a living from multiple different sources". The word "increasingly" suggests that platform workers were not previously receiving income from multiple sources, but the report itself provided no evidence for this.[193]

At the extreme end of the scale, we have seen the very real and lasting impact that sensationalised research can have on society in the form of the disgraced former doctor Andrew Wakefield's impact on vaccine uptake. This is despite his studies having been retracted and a weight of evidence against his theories, showing just how hard it can be to undo the damage done in such cases.

Access to information

Sometimes the problem is that the source information just isn't available to everyone, which makes it difficult for organisations like ours to scrutinise it.

This could be because the work has been presented at a conference and isn't publicly available, because the original source material is hard to identify, or because the work was never published at all.

One claim that falls into this category, and which we have seen more than once, relates to the cost of the NHS internal market – introduced in the 1990s – in England. A claim has been circulating for years that the internal market costs about £10 billion a year, but there is no evidence to prove this.[194] The research that arrives at this figure just estimates increases in admin costs over time, rather than trying to single out what impact the internal market has had.

The problem we have had in fact checking it, though, is finding sources for any of the figures that are used in reaching that £10 billion number. None are easy to find, and in some cases they're virtually impossible to pinpoint. Among the sources we've managed to find is a reference to a York university report written in 2005, which was apparently commissioned by the Department of Health, but never published.[195] This means all we have to go on is a quote referenced in a 2010 House of Commons Health Committee report – and even this refers to the figure as "a very crude approximation".

Meanwhile, many academic research papers are published in paywalled journals that not all media outlets or organisations like ours can afford subscriptions to. The subject

193   Joël Reland, 'Has the Gig Economy Doubled in Size in Three Years?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/has-gig-economy-doubled**.

194   Joseph O'Leary, 'No-One Knows the Exact Cost or Benefit of the NHS Internal Market in England', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/cost-creating-internal-market-nhs**.

195   Amy Sippitt, 'How Much Is the "NHS Market System" Costing?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/health/how-much-nhs-market-system-costing**.

of open access is one of heated debate within the academic community and is not an area of particular expertise for Full Fact. However, in the same way that government officials are expected to make public the data on which they have based statistics they use in public, there is good reason to think that organisations publicising a piece of research should make it more readily available to those seeking to scrutinise it.

Another barrier we have faced when scrutinising claims from think tanks that hit the headlines is that there will be a period of days, sometimes weeks or months, between the news story coming out and the full report being published. We are not taking issue with newspapers that genuinely get a good scoop. Rather, it is the practice of think tanks releasing a study to national newspapers but then failing to publish the full reports at the same time. This results in two tiered access: newspapers have the report, but the public or anyone else who wants to probe more deeply has to wait before they can see the think tank's working.

Data provided by non-profits

Once a statistic has got out into the public, it will be repeatedly cited by the press and even politicians or the government, often without consideration of where it came from in the first place. And if it came from a non-profit, campaign group or similar, there are no guarantees that it is the latest or most accurate figure, or that the process by which it was arrived at was robust.

There is an inherent lack of accountability in using such figures, especially over long periods of time. For instance, when trying to trace a number back to its source we have been told that the person who wrote the report it came from no longer works at the organisation, or that the research was done so long ago the raw data is no longer available.

There is also no guarantee that that source will keep the data up to date: when checking claims that England uses 8.5 million plastic straws each year, we traced the claim back to a 2017 report by environmental consultancy Eunomia. This was based on a figure from the campaign group Straw Wars, which had found that McDonald's used 3.5 million straws each day in the UK – however, McDonald's said in 2018 that it actually uses 1.8 million straws each day.[196] When we contacted Straw Wars about the figure, it replied to say it had stopped using the incorrect one on its website.

Non-profits should not be entirely responsible for providing data that is fundamental to understanding society, or for keeping it up to date. For a start, there is no guarantee that such organisations will continue to function, and sources like this are under no obligation to keep it up to date. We can't expect such organisations to routinely and rigorously measure the same thing.

---

196   Claire Milne, 'How Many Plastic Straws Do We Use?', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/environment/how-many-plastic-straws**.

This is not to say that the information they provide is not useful. In some cases, their commitment to the cause means that they are producing well-evidenced data that would otherwise go uncollected, or adding context to the official figures. For instance, Inquest, which collects evidence on deaths in police custody, provides data that includes deaths following restraint where no arrest or detention has taken place and which are not counted in figures from the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

The Trussell Trust is the UK's biggest provider of food banks. They release figures on food bank use every six months, one of which came at the height of the 2015 general election campaign, and claimed that "more than 1 million people used Trussell Trust foodbanks, compared to 900,000 last year".

However, the figure referred to "uses" not to "people" – one person might use a food bank twice.[197] After we spoke with them, the Trust agreed to change the wording of the press release and some of the subsequent media coverage was more accurate as a result. In the longer term, it allowed us to build a good relationship with the Trussell Trust and, we believe, has helped ensure that future releases were clearer about what the data can and can't say. The Trust later went on to work with Oxford university to gather detailed data on how foodbank use and poverty are connected.[198]

At a fundamental level, we believe it is for policymakers to ensure that we have accurate, sustainable and long-term data on widely-debated public issues such as homelessness or food bank usage. This doesn't necessarily mean the government must collect it itself, but it has a responsibility for ensuring that the information can be gathered sustainably, even if this is by an independent organisation.

Correcting the record

There isn't an official route to correct claims made by charities or think tanks. In academia, when a piece of research is found to be incorrect or invalid, and that work is published in a journal, corrections can be made or – in the worst cases – the paper can be retracted. The site Retraction Watch covers instances of such retractions, and is building a database of retracted papers.[199]

But even with this effort, it is far from guaranteed that the public will hear if a research paper they read a story about in the press is later retracted.

---

197   Full Fact Team, 'More than 1 Million People Used Food Banks Last Year: That's Not What the Evidence Shows', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/economy/more-1-million-people-used-food-banks-last-year-s-not-what-evidence-shows**.

198   'Cutting Edge Research Provides Unparalleled Detail on UK Poverty', *The Trussell Trust*, 29 June 2017, **trusselltrust.org/2017/06/29/cutting-edge-research-provides-unparalleled-detail-uk-poverty**.

199   'Retraction Watch Database User Guide', *Retraction Watch*, 23 October 2018, **retractionwatch.com/retraction-watch-database-user-guide**.

Neither is retraction a guarantee that a paper won't be cited again in future – studies have found instances where retracted studies are referenced in other works.[200]

For all of these actors, all Full Fact can generally do is make requests and hope that those involved will engage with us positively. Sometimes these attempts have been successful, and sometimes they have led to longer-term relationships that we hope help improve the information landscape beyond a single issue. Of course, at other times they have been unsuccessful.

Overall, though, we don't have enough data to make as full an assessment as we have for other actors in this report. We intend to focus some of our fact checking over the next 12 months on these actors, so we can start to develop our own understanding of the pressure points and the systems in which these groups work and how it can be improved.

200   Elizabeth Suelzer et al., 'Assessment of Citations of the Retracted Article by Wakefield et al With Fraudulent Claims of an Association Between Vaccination and Autism | Autism Spectrum Disorders | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network', **jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2755486**; Helmar Bornemann-Cimenti, Istvan S. Szilagyi, and Andreas Sandner-Kiesling, 'Perpetuation of Retracted Publications Using the Example of the Scott S. Reuben Case: Incidences, Reasons and Possible Improvements', *Science and Engineering Ethics 22*, no. 4 (1 August 2016): 1063–72, **doi.org/10.1007/s11948-015-9680-y**.

Fighting the causes and consequences of bad information

Internet companies

The role that internet companies play in the spread of misinformation has been the subject of much discussion, as has the debate about how to tackle the claims that are made online.

We don't intend this chapter to be an exhaustive look at the problem, and we have already outlined some of the main regulatory or policy approaches taken by both governments and internet companies to dealing with misinformation in Part One.

Rather, this section aims to act as an overview of our own experiences tackling the claims that spread on social media. As with the other actors discussed earlier, it is useful to first put this into the context of the use of and attitudes towards social media.

Trust in and usage of social media

The internet is an increasingly popular way for people to share and receive information, with social media a major part of many people's lives. Overall, some 49% of people say they get their news from social media, which is third most common after television (75%) and the internet in general (66%).[201]

Of those who say they get their news on social media, three quarters say they use Facebook and around one-third use Twitter and WhatsApp. In the main, people get their news from trending stories, or seeing comments or links about news stories from the people they follow, rather than because they actively follow news outlets or journalists.[202]

There is also evidence to suggest that UK adults consume news more actively via social media than in the past, in that they are more likely to comment on or share the news that they saw online, whether that was from news organisations or people that they followed.[203]

It's also important to note that news consumption on social media, and online generally, might be higher than reported as people are thought to under-estimate their own news consumption online.[204] According to Ofcom, many people tend to associate the term 'news' with traditional sources like newspapers and TV. This means it's useful to consider access to social media more generally.

---

201   Ofcom, 'News Consumption in the UK: 2019', 24 July 2019, **ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/ uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf**.

202   Ofcom, 'News Consumption in the UK: 2019', 24 July 2019,

203   Ofcom. 'News Consumption in the UK: 2019', 24 July 2019,

204   Amy Sippitt, 'UK Public Engagement with Politics, Information and News', n.d., 10.

Ofcom's 2019 analysis of adults' media use and attitudes, found that more than 90% of both 16-24 and 25-34 year olds have a social media profile, which drops across higher age ranges, reaching a low of 20% among the over 75s.[205] Men are more likely to use Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Reddit, while women are more likely to use Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat.[206]

In general, people trust the news they consume more than news in general: some 40% of the public agreed with the statement, "I think you can trust most news most of the time", while 51% agreed with the statement, "I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time".[207]

But news on social media has the lowest levels of trust: only 10% agree they can trust news on social media most of the time, and 63% disagree. People also feel that social media does a worse job than news media at "helping me distinguish fact from fiction" – with only 18% agreeing social media does this, and 44% disagreeing, compared to 41% who agreed news media did this, and 19% disagreeing.[208]

Another survey has indicated that people aren't aware of the problems associated with the information they may face online. Despite almost all internet users using search engines, only six in ten understand that not all the websites returned will be accurate and unbiased. Just one in ten internet users say they don't think about whether the content they see online is true and of those that do consider it, some 72% say they will check the information.[209]

Meanwhile, according to the Eurobarometer[210], which has been measuring trust – here the question leaves the definition of 'trust' up to the respondent – in the internet since 2006, on average across the 29 countries included, the number of people who say they trust the internet fell from 38% in 2006 to 26% in 2018. However, the number of respondents who said they didn't trust the internet also rose from 31% to 49%. The increases can be explained by a drop in the number of people answering "don't know".

False and misleading claims on social media

Traditionally, Full Fact has focused on claims made by institutions or politicians. Of course these actors use social media. Indeed, many of the examples we've highlighted elsewhere in the report involved politicians making claims they can't support on Twitter or Facebook as they try to engage with their supporters. Others

205   Ofcom, 'Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report' (London, 2019).

206   Ofcom, 'News Consumption in the UK: 2019'.

207   Amy Sippitt, 'UK Public Engagement with Politics, Information and News'.

208   Nic Newman et al., 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017', 2017, reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf.

209   Ofcom, 'Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report'

210   Ipsos Mori, 'Trust: The Truth', 17 September 2019.

have seen newspapers over-simplify a news story or headline for the sake of a pithy tweet, but have lost crucial nuance at the same time.

But in this section, we are looking mainly at the false and misleading claims created or perpetuated by not just public figures or trusted organisations, but also by the general public, whether as part of a group or as individuals. As mentioned earlier, we joined Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking Programme in 2019, and as a result of this we have increased our focus on health-related misinformation, both on Facebook and on other platforms.

Although we have less experience checking claims on social media – of which the most is focused on Facebook and Twitter – it is clear that the way people use the different platforms, whether that is the demographics of the users themselves or the way people can interact with the posts, affects the types of claims we see and how they spread. For instance, we see more health-related misinformation on Facebook and Instagram.

But misinformation can and does spread from one platform to another; it's common to see the same posts, or versions of that post, popping up in multiple places at once, as it is spread organically by users. As we will see, this is often because they are simply keen to share what they think is useful or interesting information with friends and family. It isn't always easy to trace this sort of content back to the original source, although it is possible.

In January 2019, an image that claimed to be a leaflet warning about what could happen to medicine supplied in the case of a no-deal Brexit spread widely online, including a statement that people might not be able to get their prescriptions and "we do not yet know how long this might last". The image was shared on social media by numerous people, including former footballer Gary Lineker on Twitter, with some versions saying it had been "seen in a London hospital".

However, the government confirmed that it was not an official NHS leaflet, and we eventually traced the image back to a Twitter user who shared it in July 2018 and said it had been prepared by a private Facebook group with an aim to persuade pharmacies to post the information.[211]

Some examples purport to be based on official or accurate information. For instance, it's common for us to see text-based misinformation that points to a supposedly official – but often unverifiable – source spreading widely on social media, spreading as chain mail.

Content like this has been commonplace during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic in the UK. A post on Facebook claiming to be from a user's uncle set out a combination of accurate and inaccurate claims, some of which could have led people

---

211   Joël Reland and Grace Rahman, 'This Viral Flyer on Prescriptions after Brexit Isn't from an Official Source', Full Fact, **fullfact.org/europe/viral-flyer-prescriptions-after-brexit-isnt-official-source**.

to falsely believe they didn't have Covid-19 when they did, or to try an ineffective method of infection prevention. The post was shared over 300,000 times, and we subsequently saw many different variations of it popping up on other platforms, including Twitter and WhatsApp.

This information could well be shared with good intentions: people see something they think is useful and pass it on without much thought to its accuracy, especially in times of crisis. However, it is during these moments when it is even more crucial that we all stop and think about the content before passing it on.

Our advice is to consider the source – whether it's a trusted organisation, or an anonymous person like "a contact in parliament" or "a friend's uncle" – and look out for little clues like phony URLs, bad spelling, awkward layouts or strange articles. It's also important to think about what is missing and ask how it makes us feel, because those seeking to spread false claims will try to manipulate our feelings to get more clicks and shares.

Many claims on social media – as with so much misinformation – have grains of truth to them. They may even have started as mostly accurate, if misleading. This is often true for claims about health that are circulated online – as we saw in Part Two, content that seeks to stoke fears will twist the facts and use them to its own advantages. Take for instance, misleading content about vaccines that lists the negative effects of chemicals that are present, but not at high enough levels to be harmful.

Another risk is that as a claim is shared more widely, and picked up by those with more biases or malicious agendas, the content loses more of the facts and adds in some undeniably false claims. All this leads to more scandalous, and thus more shareable content, and it gets shared more widely.

A BBC investigation found that claims that the reason the Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson was against Brexit was because her husband benefited from EU money had its roots in truth, but had been badly misinterpreted. It was then twisted by social media groups with bigger audiences like "WTO Brexit Now" and "We support Jeremy Corbyn", garnering more than 47,000 interactions and reaching a potential audience of 1.5 million.[212]

Unintended consequences of platform tools

People searching for information on a subject are also good targets for those who seek to win them over to their side. As such, we have seen actors attempt to game the system. For instance, during the 2019 general election, the Conservatives bought

---

212   Joey D'Urso and Marianna Spring, 'How a Misleading Story about Lib Dem Leader Went Viral', *BBC News*, 5 November 2019, bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-50160148.

the domain 'labourmanifesto.co.uk' – which had a picture of Jeremy Corbyn's face and a list of negative statements about the party – and paid for this to be promoted to people who were searching for the party's policy proposals. Ads for the site, which are served automatically through Google Ads, also appeared on the pro-Labour website Labour List.[213]

But we have also seen the internet companies' tools surfacing bad information without anyone gaming the system. This can lend misinformation credibility, for instance through the featured snippet function, which – as mentioned in Part Two – displays information pulled from websites at the top of a search results page:

A similar example came in the midst of the 2019 general election campaign, we noticed that one of our most-read pieces was rebutting viral misinformation that Muslims can be exempt from council tax by putting a prayer room in their homes. This isn't true.

During our investigation, we found that our fact check appeared as a featured snippet when people searched queries like 'do Muslims pay council tax', but this was displaying only the claim from the structured data, not the conclusion. This might have given the impression that the claim – that Muslims who use living areas within their homes as a place of worship are exempt from paying council tax – was correct and was in some way endorsed by us.

Full Fact contacted Google to alert them to this issue, and the company fixed the issue within a few hours outside of normal working hours to ensure that the claim was not shown without the conclusion.

Separately, we found that another potential source of the misinformation was coming via the UK parliament's petitions site, where a – now archived – petition lodged by a member of the public in 2013 made the false claim that there is a council tax exemption for Muslims who also use their homes as a place of worship.

We alerted the team in charge of the petitions site, and they added a note to the top of the petition saying it had been identified as misleading and linked through to our factcheck.

They also assured us that petitions standards set in 2015 along with a centralised process for checking any factual assertions made in petitions meant that similar claims made since then would have been caught.

213   Rowland Manthorpe and Alex Martin, 'Google Breaches Own Rules with Undisclosed Tory Attack Ad', *Sky News*, **news.sky.com/story/google-breaches-own-rules-with-undisclosed-tory-attack-ad-11866416**.

Checking claims on social media

Our approach to fact checking claims on social media is slightly different to claims made by elected officials, media outlets and other institutional sources. These groups are more directly accountable to the public and there is a greater chance of what they say being trusted or taken seriously.

On social media, in general, we do not check claims made by individuals with small followings and posts that have little engagement. As we have said previously, normal people being wrong on the internet is not something that requires a heavy-handed response. It's also crucial that we balance the risk posed by the post and the danger of promoting a false claim more widely.

When we do step in is when a public figure or someone with a large following shares misleading information; when the information poses a significant harm to the public; or when the same misinformation is circulating widely or rapidly – even if each post is receiving only limited engagement.

Full Fact's experience fact checking claims on social media has to date focused mainly on Twitter and Facebook, and more recently Instagram. We are, though, seeking to gather evidence and expertise, while learning from other fact checkers' experiences, tackling claims on other platforms.

Private messaging platforms like WhatsApp pose a particular challenge to fact checkers, as we have to rely on these posts being shared with us directly. In the UK, there were fewer reports of misinformation circulating on WhatsApp compared with other countries – despite concerns that it would be problematic during the 2019 general election.

However, that appeared to shift as the country faced the novel coronavirus pandemic – which was ongoing as this report was published – and posts of bad advice spread widely on WhatsApp. In a bid to reach the public where they were sharing information – and where they most needed good information – Full Fact launched a WhatsApp service where community groups and individuals can receive fact checks directly. We will discuss this, and other approaches to checking claims about the coronavirus, in more detail in future reports.

Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking programme

As mentioned earlier, Full Fact has been one of the UK partners in Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking programme since January 2019. This now applies to content on both Facebook and Instagram. Because Facebook runs this programme, we have gained a greater insight into the types of false information on its platforms than of other platforms, and it is for this reason that we are able to include a detailed section on this in this report.

As we discuss below, the programme is not perfect, but it is an important step in the process. We strongly recommend that other internet companies set up similar programmes. We believe this would not only help tackle misinformation, but also give fact checkers and academics greater insights into what methods do and don't work for different platforms and audiences.

Facebook's programme provides us with a "queue" of content that has been identified as possibly false, based on a combination of users flagging it as suspicious, 'disbelief' comments, and Facebook's own algorithms. Detail of these algorithms, as with many of the internet companies' methods, are not available to us, meaning we know little about how these systems work or whether, and how, they can be gamed. We have previously recommended that more data is provided to fact checkers to give us a better understanding of the overall programme.

Full Fact then chooses what content to check, during which we must assign a rating to the piece of content: False, Partly False, False headline, True, Not eligible, Not Rated and Prank Generator. If we identify other false content on Facebook, we can add it into the queue so it is treated in the same way as these posts. Posts rated 'false' or 'partly false' are downrated by Facebook's algorithm and if it contains an image, a grey overlay will appear with a notice to users and a link to the fact check.

Since March 2020, we are also able to attach the rating to specific parts of the post, for example, just the image or video, just the text status, or just that combination of text and photo or video.

Such ratings have obvious implications on freedom of speech, and we therefore think very carefully before applying these ratings to posts. Previously we were able to rate posts as 'Opinion' to avoid downrating on newsfeeds, but Facebook removed this option in 2019. Now, the limited number of ratings means we sometimes have no option but to rate something as Partly False. To help us deal with this, we want to see Facebook introduce a 'more context needed' rating that would not downrank posts but would flag the potential problems to other users.

We have also called for more data to be shared with us and other fact checkers on the programme, so that we can understand more about the reach of the content that appears in the queue and what benefits it has for users. This would allow us to be better informed when choosing what to fact check, and when, and would help us assess our impact.

Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking programme currently represents the high watermark of internet companies actively supporting and using independent fact checking to serve and protect their users. It has already brought greater transparency where it was badly needed and helped many Facebook users, even if we cannot say how many.

The programme needs to continue to develop including in its transparency and we will continue to make public recommendations on how it can improve. Nevertheless, other

internet companies should be running similar programmes that learn from and build on what Facebook is currently offering.

Such programmes are vital, but we must not allow them to become the sole focus of efforts to tackle online misinformation. Ultimately, every country needs to decide for itself how to balance the benefits and harms of information online, through open, democratic, transparent processes.

Conclusion and recommendations

Bad information ruins lives: it can dissuade people from engaging in democracy and risk their finances, health or personal safety.

This has been brought into stark focus these last few months, as we and many others around the world fight the battle against harmful misinformation surrounding the novel coronavirus outbreak. We have seen false information about symptoms, attempts to profit from fake cures, and spurious claims that use the crisis to deepen pre-existing prejudices.

What we can say with certainty is that it is essential anyone making a decision – be it officials deciding the best response to a crisis or where to invest public funds, or a member of the public choosing whether to vaccinate their child or who to cast their vote for – needs accurate, reliable information.

Full Fact works to improve public debate and ensure everyone has access to trustworthy information. This report is the first in a series of annual reports that combine evidence gathered from more than 5,000 of our fact checks with other expert views to identify opportunities for improvements and barriers to trust.

This year, we have provided an assessment of the landscape, using examples of the biggest challenges we've faced in checking claims over the past decade, while setting this work into the context of other efforts to tackle the harms caused by bad information.

The report highlights some of the most common reasons good information can't reach the people who need it, when they need it; and identifies institutions and groups of people who have a major role to play in what we describe as the 'unlikely journey of good information'.

Much of the current debate is understandably focused on the part the internet companies have to play in preventing harm from bad information, but the responsibility is far wider and deeper than just the platforms.

The report describes unpublished evidence, unsubstantiated claims and facts misrepresented. It might be an honest mistake. Perhaps there is no data that tells the story, or the data that exists is inaccessible. It could be a misunderstanding about what questions a statistic or a poll is capable of answering.

But we also give examples of politicians presenting numbers without caveats when they know they are important; of government departments failing to answer basic questions about policy announcements; and of the media writing headlines that don't

come close to representing the story. Equally disappointing are the failures to correct the record, often in spite of there existing a clear process by which this can be done.

Each of these groups face their own pressures, and we are not so naive as to imagine a world where people don't gravitate towards the facts that suit their own narrative.

And of course there are counterexamples of newspapers that properly convey nuance in a headline; government departments that provide the evidence behind their claims; and politicians who go out of their way to correct the record.

But it is clear that many people and organisations who demand or rely on the trust of the public are not holding up their side of the bargain.

To address this, we propose three simple principles: get your facts right, back up what you say with evidence, and correct any mistakes you make. These should form the building blocks for bigger change, because if we really are to rebuild trust in our society and foster honest public debate, urgent action is needed in a range of areas.

Throughout this report we have made suggestions for how the situation could be improved along with more specific recommendations about what needs to happen now in order for us to reach the wider ambition of truly open and honest public debate.

This section brings them together as a set of 20 recommendations. They are divided into three.

The first group are recommendations based around our three core principles and are aimed at the actors that we have identified as producers, users or disseminators of information and propose ways in which they could help speed good information along to the public. These are concrete proposals that we believe will improve both the quality of the information used in public debate and boost public trust, often by increasing transparency. Next year's report will assess progress against these recommendations and offer ways to build on them.

We recognise, meanwhile, that a number of the problems of bad information need to be addressed through internet regulation, which is a rapidly moving topic with no existing legislation and that at the moment relies on policies set by overseas internet companies. To address this, we secondly set out proposals for policy changes from the government, public bodies and internet companies that we believe should be fundamental considerations.

Finally, we outline recommendations for further work to build on this report. One part of this is how Full Fact plans to continue contributing to the debate, and we cover the areas we intend to focus our fact checking and advocacy work over the next year as we seek to widen and broaden our evidence base. We will assess our progress in next year's report.

Full Fact's principles:

Get your facts right

1. **Every government department should take steps to encourage a culture that emphasises the importance of transparency and evidence** to ensure that announcements and speeches contain accurate information, including:

   - Introductory and regular refresher courses in statistics for staff at all levels, alongside greater emphasis on the important role of statisticians in producing public-facing documents
   - Staff working on major policy announcements and speeches should use a fact checking and sourcing template document to ensure work is accurate

2. **Political parties should be more transparent about whether, and how, they fact check and source announcements and speeches.** This should include the publication of reports and press releases, including notes to editors, in a defined section on party websites.

3. **A cross-Whitehall best practice guide for costing policy proposals should be produced** for use in speech writing and policy development, developed in collaboration with the Office for Budget Responsibility and the UK Statistics Authority.

4. **The UK Statistics Authority should lead on the development of a horizon-scanning function** that will help decision makers to answer the big societal questions of the future. This should assess what the major decisions of the next five years will be; ask whether we have the data, statistics and analysis we need; and whether they are being communicated effectively. Where gaps are identified, there should be work done to gather the right information.

5. In light of the way that content is consumed online, **the Editors' Code of Practice and similar Codes should explicitly state that headlines should not be misleading when read separately from the text** and include mention of the importance of ensuring that social media text meets the same standards. **IPSO, other industry self-regulators, and outlets' own standards processes, should consider whether the headline on its own is materially misleading**, not just the accuracy of a headline in the context of the full text.

6. **University, charity and think tank press offices should assess the accuracy of coverage of their work and include this alongside any other targets, such as volume or reach of coverage**. This should encourage accurate press releases and press statements and reduce the potential for misunderstandings or misrepresentation of reports or research findings. Releases should include all

important caveats along with relevant links to primary or source material, and quotes should accurately represent that material.

7. **Internet companies should take positive steps to reduce the spread of harmful information online**, including by ensuring their platforms allow users to easily flag potentially misleading content; sharing this content with independent fact checkers; and sharing the results back to users, akin to Facebook's Third Party Fact Checking Programme.

8. **Internet companies must ensure they fund and carry out active evaluation of any artificial intelligence work that has the potential to impact information given to individuals**, to understand how this affects the accuracy of content, whether this relates to algorithmically generated content or automatic enforcement tools.

Back up what you say with evidence

9. **Politicians and government ministers or officials who make claims in and to the public should be ready to show the data they rely on to others for scrutiny**, to ensure they can be held to account and to help build public trust. The expectation should be that releases are accompanied with an evidence document. An investigation of the factors that would prevent officials and departments from meeting this standard should be launched by a suitable committee of parliamentarians.

10. **Briefings provided to MPs by the House of Commons Library should be published if they are referenced in public**, so they are open to scrutiny by the press, fact checkers and other political parties. This should encourage all political parties to hold each other to account.

11. **The British Polling Council should adopt in its code a commitment that members take reasonable steps to ensure that findings from a poll are not incorrectly or misleadingly presented**. Putting the onus on polling companies should also encourage better use of polls from those that commission them.

Correct your mistakes

12. **Government and parliamentary authorities should establish a system that allows non-ministerial MPs to correct the official record**. Meanwhile, the efficacy of the existing system for ministerial corrections should be investigated, including consideration of improvements in the way third party requests for corrections are dealt with.

13. **Media outlets that publish content online should develop a standard system for publishing correction notices online** to ensure consistency and make it easier

for the public to identify a correction. This should include ensuring that correction or clarification notes are not hidden behind paywalls and having a single, well signposted page for all corrections.

14. **Media outlets, including online, print and broadcast, should provide clear information on how they deal with correction requests.** This should include specific information on who to contact, how a request will be dealt with, and how long it usually takes for a response. This should be held on one page and a typical reader should be able to find it quickly from an article's page and the outlet's homepage.

Policy recommendations

15. **The government should urgently implement reforms to electoral law.** This includes extending imprint rules to online campaign material; ensuring that information on the content, targeting, reach and spend on political adverts is publicly available and updated in real-time; and expanding the timeframe of regulated campaigning beyond the current pre-election period.

16. **The Electoral Commission should consult on requirements for how imprints – which show who is responsible for the production of campaign materials – appear**, with a view to mandating that they are in proportion to the size of the campaign material and in a specific, consistent location and format on all materials, so as to make it more difficult to produce misleading or deceptive campaign materials.

17. **The government's forthcoming online harms legislation should prioritise requirements for improving transparency from the internet companies through providing regular, standardised information on bad information being shared online, and the action taken to prevent this.**

18. **Internet companies should, in advance of any legislation reaching royal assent in the UK, start to implement transparency principles as soon as possible.** This should include detail on how much content is flagged (both manually and through automatic tools) as false or misleading, what proportion of flagged content has action taken against it, and what this action was.

Recommendations for further work

19. We would like to see the government and academia establish a centre of excellence, with participation from the internet companies and media, to research, evaluate and critically summarise best practice on how high quality information can best be communicated to the public.

20. Over the course of the next year, Full Fact will seek to:

- Widen our evidence base on all the actors identified in this report, including those where we have identified gaps in our knowledge, primarily: online and broadcast media outlets; and universities, charities and think tanks

- Work to better understand how effective existing corrections processes are

- Evaluate the effectiveness of our interventions

Full Fact