Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) response to the Culture, Media and Sports Committee's 'Fake News' Inquiry

Executive Summary

- The rise of fake news is not necessarily a new phenomenon but rather the proliferation through social media and easy access to the internet has allowed new publishers to enter the market and spread fake news.

- The PR and communications industry has an important role in this debate. The dissemination of accurate news is central to the mutually-beneficially and two-way relationship between journalism and PR and communications: both sides have to be trusted by the public to be valued.

- It is important to distinguish between fake news that is published with the deliberate intent of sharing untrue data and information and fake news that contains some truth but is not completely accurate because the journalist or blogger has not done a thorough fact-check.

- There is existing regulation on fake news. Bodies such as ourselves and IPSO regulate the PR and communications and publishing industry respectively, and codes of conduct have clear regulations on the importance of the dissemination of accurate news to the media and public.

- The rise of online publishers requires new forms of industry regulation by technology companies. The industry is already making important changes in the way it handles fake news and online media.

- Educating the public is equally important in combatting fake news as users on social media should be equipped with the tools and knowledge to distinguish between fake and legitimate news.

- Regulating fake news should not be an exercise in curbing freedom of speech which is why regulation and education work hand in hand.

Introduction

- The PRCA is the UK professional body representing PR, communications, public affairs, and lobbying practitioners. Our membership includes consultancies (including around 75% of the "PR Week Top 150"), in-house teams (including banks, charities, and the entire Government Communications Service), and also individual practitioners. We represent around 380 consultancies and 280 in-house teams. We are the largest association of our type in Europe with over 20,000 members.

1. **What is 'fake news'? Where does biased but legitimate commentary shade into propaganda and lies?**

When discussing fake news, it is important to distinguish between the different types of fake news. It is also important to understand that fake news is not necessarily a new phenomenon, rather, the proliferation through social media and easy access to the internet has spread the rise of fake news.

Publishers on the internet (where publishing tools such as WordPress and sharing tools such as Twitter cost nothing for most users) are also less reliant on catering to an audience that trusts them given the low cost of participation. In contrast, established journalists and publishers are reliant on their audience given that a lack of trust can result in economic consequences. Finally, the lower cost of distribution has resulted in far more publishers entering the market which are not regulated by organisations such as IPSO.

An analysis by Buzzfeed News highlights the dramatic rise of fake news on social media. In the aftermath of the U.S. Presidential Elections, Buzzfeed research showed that fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook. In the final three months of the US election campaign, the 20 top fake news stories generated 8,711,000 shares, comments in comparison to the 7,367,000 comments and shares generated by top 20 election stories from established news websites.[1]

First, we have the set of false stories that are published with the deliberate intent of sharing untrue data and information in order to increase traffic on a particular website. The United States Presidential election is a good example of the rise in this category of fake news. According to an analysis by BuzzSumo, fake news about the U.S. elections accounted for 10.6 million of the 21.5 million total shares, reactions, and comments on these English-language stories generated on Facebook in 2016[2]. This data suggests that not all engagements with politics and democracy are necessarily productive engagements. We need to concern ourselves with outcomes, rather than simply focusing on outputs. These websites are often created to mimic actual news websites, yet they only publish stories that are untrue and are very rarely fact-checked. That being said, fact-checking should not be the be all and end all of accurate reporting. It works alongside with editorial guidelines, regulation by organisations such as IPSO, and basic legal functions. Publishers must face consequences for reporting inaccurate facts even if they regularly fact-check their stories, which is precisely why IPSO has

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[1] Craig Silverman, "This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook", Buzzfeed News 2016: accessed online 28th February 2017: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.myMw78BMe9#.rvq7JymveP

[2] Craig Silverman, "Here Are 50 Of The Biggest Fake News Hits On Facebook from 2016", Buzzfeed News 2016: accessed online 23rd February 2017: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/top-fake-news-of-2016?utm_term=.go2Ea3k6o1#.iaXYOoJgjd

an important role to play in handling complaints against its members and can compel publishers to correct facts and even issue apologies.

The second category of fake news can be defined as stories that contain some truths but are not completely accurate because the journalist or blogger has not done a thorough fact-check. In many instances, these stories come from reputable publishers and newspapers.

That being said, defining fake news should not be an exercise in undermining opinion articles and commentaries. A majority of industries and journalists behave in a transparent and ethical manner when it comes to the dissemination of news. For example, many PR and communications practitioners behave in an ethical manner with regards to advertising and the accuracy of their news stories. PRCA members adhered to the PRCA Code of Conduct: adherence to this code is a condition of membership. One of the clauses requires members to "respect the truth" and to "not disseminate false or misleading information knowingly or recklessly, and to use proper care to avoid doing so inadvertently". This is central to the mutually-beneficially and two-way relationship between journalism and PR and communications: both sides have to be trusted by the public to be valued. The PR and communications industry garners trust for their products and clients through earned media which is why this is an important issue for the industry.

2. What impact has fake news on public understanding of the world, and also on the public response to traditional journalism? If all views are equally valid, does objectivity and balance lose all value?

The impact of fake news should not be underestimated. As the professional body for the PR and communications industry, we must stress that for the industry to function and be valuable, we have to be able to trust the news outlets and news formats. The industry relies on a properly functioning media to be able to carry out work on behalf of clients and their own organisations. If the public does not trust the media, it severely hampers the industry's ability to communicate with the public. Part of the PR and communications' remit has always been to correct falsehoods, to provide contextual information, to form public-facing partnerships, and to support and respect the independence of the media which is under significantly different pressures than our own industry.

Another issue that must be examined is the extent to which the proliferation of fake news during an election has an impact on voter behaviour. As mentioned elsewhere in this response the rise of fake news during the U.S. Presidential Elections is an interesting case for this issue. While it is hard to know for certain whether fake news influences voter behaviour, a recent survey by Ipsos Public Affairs and Buzzfeed News revealed that fake news headlines about the election "fooled" American adults around 75% of the time[3]. Similarly, a YouGov survey commissioned by Channel 4 found that only 4% of people were able to correctly identify fake news[4].

Finally, a third issue which represents a wider challenge for social media is the increasing presence of the 'echo chamber'. Users on social media tend to share news stories, whether fake or legitimate, they agree with. A recent report by Demos concluded that there is a significant echo chamber effect in online political discussions[5]. This research was based on an analysis of 2,000 twitter accounts which showed that users tended to share news from sites aligned to their party affiliation. Similarly, users were more likely to retweet users from their political party. For example, 65% of Labour user accounts retweeted Labour users, which suggests that individuals tend to interact with people who share their opinions in person or on social media.

This is not necessarily a new phenomenon either, however it is aggravated by fake news and social media. For example, the Facebook algorithm is designed in a way to filter out views users disagree with in order to create a positive user experience. Often, this positive

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[3] Craig Silverman, "Most Americans Who See Fake News Believe It, New Survey Says", Buzzfeed News 2016: accessed online 23rd February 2017: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fake-news-survey?utm_term=.eh2MPEaBz5#.il20lgKEwJ

[4] Jessica Goodfellow, "Only 4% of people can distinguish fake news from truth, Channel 4 study finds", The Drum 2017: accessed online 24th February 2017: http://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/02/06/only-4-people-can-distinguish-fake-news-truth-channel-4-study-finds

[5] Published by Demos September 2016, accessed here: https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Echo-Chambers-final-version.pdf

experience cannot be reconciled through algorithms with the need to experience material and views from combating sources. Misinformation is more likely to spread in this digital environment. This can affect the user's perception of the world and shield them from reality. It is clear that social media sites are not solely responsible for this phenomenon. The public should be educated about the difference between fake and legitimate and they should also be able to mitigate the tendency to interact within their own 'bubble'.

3. Is there any difference in the way people of different ages, social backgrounds, genders etc use and respond to fake news?

Given that the bulk of fake news is circulated on social media, young people are more likely to encounter fake news. Stanford University conducted a study of 7,804 students in the aftermath of the U.S. elections looking at how young people evaluated information found online[6]. The study revealed that 66% of teenagers could not find any problems with overtly biased content. With this in mind, it is easy to understand how many young people are unable to distinguish between fake news and real news: the problem can be structural (rather than discrete incidents) and be problematised by an audiences' own understanding and ethical system.

However, the Ipsos Public Affairs and Buzzfeed survey referenced earlier revealed that 75% of Americans could not distinguish between real and fake news. This raises an important question about how to educate the public on the distinction between fake stories and legitimate news stories.

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[6] Published by Stanford University November 2016, accessed here:
https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf

4. Have changes in the selling and placing of advertising encouraged the growth of fake news, for example by making it profitable to use fake news to attract more hits to websites, and thus more income from advertisers?

Changes in the advertising model and the rise of social media have made it more profitable to publish fake news. The Internet Advertising Bureau estimated that UK internet advertising spend reached £8.6bn in 2016[7].

In January, Google announced that it would increase the regulation of false ads and fake news. For example, it banned a number of sites that use the ".co" domain – an attempt to mimic the ".com" domain to mislead potential readers. Additionally, Google announced that it would prevent fakes news websites from using its AdSense advertising network[8]. Similarly, Facebook announced that fake news websites would be prohibited from using Audience Network Ads[9]. Both advertising networks are programmes designed to allow publishers to place targeted text and images on websites and earn money when visitors view or click the adverts. Industry-led initiatives are key in the free market landscape to ensure the end-user has confidence in the search engine or network they choose to use; it gains heightened importance when we consider again the position of Facebook algorithms and their attempts to create a positive user experience.

Given this key policy change, it is clear that the rise of advertising in the digital space has made it more profitable for web publishers outside of the mainstream to solely rely on fake news as a source of income. However, the spread of fake news should not undermine the value of digital advertising. Many practitioners in the PR and communications industry rely on the digital advertising model to assist their campaigns. Furthermore, publishers and websites rely on digital advertising as a revenue stream; any regulation in this area should therefore specifically target false advertising and fake news websites using adverts rather than targeting the entire digital advertising network.

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[7] Published by Internet Advertising Bureau UK April 2016, accessed here: https://iabuk.net/research/library/2015-full-year-digital-adspend-results

[8] Charles Warner, "Google Increases Regulation Of False Ads And Fake News", Forbes 2017: accessed online 23rd February 2017: https://www.forbes.com/sites/charleswarner/2017/01/25/google-increases-regulation-of-false-ads-and-fake-news/#3a7e704913f2

[9] Ibid

5. What responsibilities do search engines and social media platforms have, particularly those which are accessible to young people? Is it viable to use computer-generated algorithms to root out 'fake news' from genuine reporting?

Search engines and social media platforms have a responsibility to address the rise in fake news for a number of reasons. First, the majority of fake news is circulated and shared online, especially on social media. Second, research by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism revealed that 28% of 18-24 year-olds cited social media as their main news source. The survey also suggested that 51% of people with online access use social media as a news source[10]. Whilst print media sits on the periphery of this discussion, it should be noted that IPSO's rules – and various outcomes – have indicated that the enforcement of high ethical standards continues to be fit for purpose, especially when it comes to the prominent positioning of corrections in newspapers.

It is no surprise that social media platforms such as Facebook recently announced that it would partner with fact-checkers to remove and flag fake news in the Facebook news feed; in the same way, they are restricting fake news websites from using its advertising network. It is encouraging to see that Facebook has also added a feature that enables users to report news stories as fake which will prompt fact-checking[11].

Search engines like Google have an important role to ensure that websites that publish fake news are not suggested as top searches. They can also prevent websites that misrepresent content from using its AdSense advertising network.

Ultimately, end-users should be media literate and be able to distinguish between fake and legitimate news. Algorithms and editorial policies have a key role to play but they will not, nor cannot, always be completely accurate. More importantly, we should not have to solely rely on them: it is important to educate the public on media literacy.

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[10] Jane Wakefield, "Social media 'outstrips TV' as news source for young people", BBC News 2016: accessed online 24th February 2017: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36528256

[11] Amber Jamieson, "Facebook to begin flagging fake news in response to mounting criticism", The Guardian 2016: accessed online 2nd March 2017: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/15/facebook-flag-fake-news-fact-check

6. How can we educate people in how to assess and use different sources of news?

As mentioned elsewhere in this response, educating the public on the different sources of news is key as we cannot and should not rely on algorithms to combat fake news. It is important to issue guidance on what constitutes as fake news and what does not. The Government should work with key stakeholders, such as IPSO and publishers, to give the public a step-by-step guide on what they should look out for when reading a news story.

The public should be educated on the existing regulation on fake news, which distinguishes publishers and industries which are committed to upholding standards from those who are not. For example, signing up to the PRCA code of conduct is a condition of membership, which has a specific clause on the dissemination of fake news. Clause 2.2 of the PRCA Code of Conduct states that all members "have a positive duty at all times to respect the truth and shall not disseminate false or misleading information knowingly or recklessly, and to use proper care to avoid doing so inadvertently". The PRCA complaints procedure is open to all members of the public, therefore if a member of the public has reason to believe that a member is not complying with the code of conduct they can file a complaint. Following a review last year, the PRCA now also has the power to take-up complaints and evidence from whistle-blowers and pursue the complaint ourselves: for ethics to function, it has to be properly enforceable. To be properly enforceable, we cannot always put the burden of a complaint on an individual in a precarious position (for example, as an employee with clear evidence of misconduct).

The PRCA has the power – as defined in our PRCA Arbitration and Disciplinary Procedures – to, alongside termination of membership, warn, admonish, or reprimand. These may be published and we have chosen to do so in every recent case. Fuel PR, for instance, had its membership terminated in September 2015 and their managing director was stripped of her PRCA fellowship. At every stage, the PRCA published information relating to the case. The PRCA's robust code of conduct ensures that our members are clearly committed to upholding standards and behaving in an ethical manner. This allows members of the public to distinguish between PRCA members and other members of the industry who are not committed to ethical standards in the same way. Given we function in a free marketplace, this vital information allows the public to make an informed decision about the companies and work they encounter.

IPSO also plays an important role in regulating the existing network of publishers. It handles complaints and makes rulings on inaccurate articles. Raising awareness about this complaints process is crucial because for this process to function properly, the public needs to know how to access it. Publishers need to ensure that there is a section on their website on how to make complaints about the accuracy of a story. IPSO already has a robust policy on accuracy and fake news that members must comply with. Clause 1 of the Editor's Code of Practice states that the "the Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text"[12]. More importantly, any significant inaccuracy must be corrected and where appropriate – an apology must be published.

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[12] Published by Independent Press Standards Organisation January 2016, accessed here:
https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/

A key requirement of memberships is that publishers must communicate the existence of IPSO's Editor's Code to any complainant. They also require all members to make a public declaration about their compliance with the Editor's Code. Therefore, members of the public can make a judgement on publisher's commitment to ethical journalistic standards based on their knowledge of IPSO's Editors' code.

8. How have other governments responded to fake news?

The German government is targeting social media companies such as Facebook in its response to fake news. Facebook works with an independent fact-checking company, Correctiv, which monitors and flags stories from questionable sources. Once the source has been verified, all German users on the social media platform will be alerted about the veracity of the story in question[13].

In addition to this, social media platforms such as Facebook will be legally required to operate a legal protection office in Germany, which allow victims of fake news to contact the platform and ask for Facebook to take action and remove the post within 24 hours. Failure to remove a post could result in fine of up to €500,000[14].

Countries such as Italy have urged the EU member states to establish an independent network public agencies to tackle fake news. The European Commission has signalled that it could regulate social media platforms if they fail to self-regulate accordingly. Additionally, the European Commission has pushed Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Microsoft to sign up to a code of conduct to tackle online hate speech, with the possibility of taking down potential illegal content within 24-hours[15].

Efforts in France with the upcoming Presidential Elections in mind have resulted in a coalition of technology companies such as Google, Facebook, and Buzzfeed News to combat fake news by helping the public assess the accuracy of online media. The coalition of 17 partners, Crosscheck, will find and verify online media content. Alongside this, Facebook is using its own fact-checking initiative, partnering with local fact-checking organisations to verify stories reported as illegitimate by users. Any content that is considered to be misinformation by at least two fact-checking organisations will be labelled as contested on the social media platform[16].

With this in mind, we must make a commitment to preserve freedom of speech. Policies and regulation that focus on fake news should not be an exercise in curbing freedom of speech, whether it is Government officials who hold that power or technology companies. A logical and reasonable starting point for any policy would be to encourage technology companies to

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[13] Amol Rajan, "Germany leads fightback against fake news", BBC News 2017, accessed online 24th February 2017: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-38991973

[14] DW News, "500,000 euro fines for fake news on Facebook in Germany?", DW News 2016, accessed online 24th February 2017: http://www.dw.com/en/500000-euro-fines-for-fake-news-on-facebook-in-germany/a-36806244

[15] Jason Horowitz, "Spread of Fake News Provokes Anxiety in Italy", NY Times 2016, accessed online 24th February 2017: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/world/europe/italy-fake-news.html?_r=0
[16] Madhumita Murgia, "Facebook and Google team up to fight fake news in France", FT 2017, accessed online 1st March 2017: https://www.ft.com/content/ffe4994a-ec8f-11e6-930f-061b01e23655

flag stories that come from a questionable source, allowing the public to decide whether the story is correct. Throughout this response we have stressed the importance of educating the public and providing them with the tools and contextual information to handle and evaluate fake news.

Regulation clearly has a role to play in combatting fake news and in many ways it is already well established. Regulators like IPSO have a key role to play in ensuring that publishers deliver accurate information, in the same way that industry self-regulation such as the PRCA Code of Conduct holds PR and communications practitioners accountable. The recent phenomenon of fake news requires news forms of regulation, which is where technology companies can play a significant role. Companies like Facebook and Google have already made key changes in this area without compromising freedom of speech. Ensuring that fake news websites are not profiting from ads severely restricts the imperative to run these websites. Facebook's policy of flagging up fake news without removing such stories is ensuring that technology companies and the public are equally responsible for the dissemination of fake news.

Above all, we want to make sure that the public and social media users are equipped with the knowledge and tools to evaluate the stories they read online. Not only will this limit the spread and impact of fake news but it will also result in productive political engagement online.