JOURNALISTIC RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION

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Asking how journalists respond to misinformation might, in theory, appear unnecessary. After all, the ‘discipline of verification’ is widely viewed as being the essence of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007, 71). Establishing the veracity of an event or issue and accurately informing the public about it are ultimately the basic principles of journalism. They are deeply ingrained in the ‘fourth estate role’ the news media play in holding power to account and exposing abuses of authority. However, over recent decades, attempts to manipulate information and deceive the public have become ever more sophisticated, renewing the urgency of the demands placed on journalists to respond to and counter misinformation and disinformation.

False or misleading information circulates on social media, creating misconceptions and undermining public understanding of a wide range of issues. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, false news spread as quickly as the pandemic itself on social media, notably in closed private platforms such as WhatsApp (Brennen et al. 2020). Such fake news, irrespective of its absurdity or source, is hard for journalists to ignore as it is reproduced by partisan and online news media, infiltrating and influencing public discourse (Vargo et al. 2018). At the same time, disinformation is also produced and circulated by politicians and other public figures at the forefront of political reporting (Satario & Tsang 2019). Failing to challenge these tactics of manipulation can turn journalists into amplifiers of political propaganda. Meanwhile, the distraction of public agendas by false and misleading stories, attacks on established media by populist leaders as ‘fake news’, and increasing political polarisation contribute to the slow erosion of public trust in the media (IPSOS 2019). It is against this backdrop that journalists are called upon not only to report ‘the truth’ about current affairs but also to report on and challenge misinformation or disinformation they encounter. This is necessary for the protection of both civic discourse and journalistic legitimacy.

In this context, academic attention has turned to exploring the ways journalism can be renewed for public good, identifying how and where disinformation or misinformation can be countered by journalists. In this chapter we review the arguments made for the evolution of journalistic practices in the face of these challenges. Although we mostly use the term misinformation throughout the chapter to refer to the spreading of false or inaccurate information, we understand the concept as being distinct from disinformation, which describes the dissemination of deliberately false information (Wardle 2018). Despite their significant differences, both types of ‘information disorder’ (Wardle 2018) potentially mislead and influence people, as well
as shape media agendas, undermining public debate. The news media, in this context, have an important role to play in establishing the facts and identifying and challenging misinformation, in order to safeguard the quality of information and maintain journalistic standards in the face of public mistrust.

Although the issues and developments addressed in this chapter are affecting journalists at the global level, we primarily focus in this chapter on the UK context and, in particular, the challenges of reporting misinformation in public service media, defined by obligations to report accurately and impartially. After first introducing how journalism has attempted to address the challenges of misinformation, the second section turns to the British context and examines the ways UK journalists have dealt with contemporary mis/disinformation campaigns. The final section will address the challenges associated with effectively countering and communicating misinformation in ways that might, we argue, reinforce and promote public legitimacy in journalism.

### Changing journalistic practices

The acknowledgement of disinformation as a new challenge for journalism is reflected in recently updated training and educational initiatives. UNESCO (2018), for example, published its ‘Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation’ handbook on the assumption that misinformation has constructed new conditions for journalism, requiring new skills and training. Besides the development of digital skills, in order to verify social media sources and content and fact check and combat online abuse, the handbook also focuses on definitions of truth, disinformation, misinformation, and fake news inviting journalists to rethink these concepts in the context of new technological, sociocultural, and normative developments. The need for this renewal and re-focus of journalistic attention stems from the fear that mis/disinformation not only renders news journalism malleable to hoaxes and political manipulation but also contributes to the weakening of public trust in the media. In this context, it is argued that journalism needs to take up a new mission to ‘proactively detect and uncover new cases and forms of disinformation’ (UNESCO 2018, 11).

This call to take proactive action entails a number of suggestions for the improvement of journalistic practices. Transparency takes a central place in such debates as a tool for increasing accountability and, by extension, public trust in journalism. Understood as openness in how journalists work, both by providing explanations about how news is made and inviting the public to partake in news-making (Karlsson & Clerwall 2018, 1923–1924), transparency has been approached with renewed interest by academics and journalists as a way of tackling misinformation and its challenges. Relevant initiatives include publicly verifying sources and facts, asking news readers to help with fact-checking, and explaining and showing audiences the processes of fact-checking. This openness about how news media deal with misinformation can allow journalists to either ‘publicly and swiftly respond to valid critiques of their work’ (UNESCO 2018, 60) or pre-emptively address any criticisms. However, although such initiatives are on the rise and have been recommended as part of an effort to regain public trust, recent research has suggested that news audiences are indifferent to journalistic transparency and even evaluate negatively user participation in the news (Karlsson & Clerwall 2018).

One long-standing practice that has been criticised in light of debates about journalists effectively countering disinformation is the ‘he said, she said’ approach to reporting, which has long been employed as a way of constructing balanced reporting, allowing for at least two sides of a story to be heard. Such a way of approaching every issue, however, can lead to false equivalence
by framing the debate in misleading ways that can undermine the evidence or scientific basis of an issue. The convention of the ‘he said, she said’ reporting style has been criticised for enabling the spread of mis/disinformation in debates about vaccines (Nyhan 2013), climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007), and the Brexit referendum (Damazer 2019). Even when journalists point out the facts that discredit fringe claims, the framing of the issue as a genuine debate has long-term consequences, legitimising falsehoods as valid opinions. Attempts to balance reporting in the style of ‘he said, she said’ can help inoculate journalists from accusations of bias, but it can also add to public confusion.

Actively resisting the practice of false balance (Amazeen 2019), the use of fact-checking has become a significant journalistic weapon in the fight against mis/disinformation. Of course, journalists have always sought to verify facts. But it is the concerted focus on determining the accuracy and truthfulness of claims, notably from political elites, that characterises fact-checking initiatives (Amazeen 2019, 543). The essence of fact-checking is the reporting of mis/disinformation itself; it aims to proactively detect and uncover it. This distinguishes it from traditional internal fact-checking in news organisations, which aims to verify reporters’ sources in order to correct mistakes and falsehoods before the publication of a story (Graves 2016, 7). Fact-checking has been broadly celebrated as a professional movement of a ‘new style of political news’ that revitalises traditional journalism by holding public figures accountable for spreading disinformation and falsehoods (Graves 2016, 6). Not only can it act as a journalistic mechanism of accountability; it also constitutes a tool to help the public navigate through misinformation and falsehoods circulating in high-choice media environments. It is viewed as a central development in restoring public trust in journalism and enhancing the quality of public debate.

This turn to a proactive style of exposing falsehoods is not new as the first fact-checking organisations emerged in the US in the early 2000s, with the website FactCheck launching in 2003 and PolitiFact and Fact Checker following four years later (Graves 2016). What has been renewed in recent years, as sources of misinformation multiply in numbers and expand in reach, is the interest in fact-checking as a tool for countering disinformation in routine news reporting. This entails the move of fact-checking from the margins of independent initiatives to established media organisations. However, fact-checking is still largely discussed separately from the conventions and practices of mainstream journalism, considered to overlap with, but distinctive from, the day-to-day role of being a professional journalist. This discussion is arguably skewed by US-centric research on fact-checking (Nieminen & Rapeli 2019, 306) as American fact-checking is characterised by a distinction between professional and partisan fact-checkers, as well as the proximity of the field to academic and non-profit organisations (Graves 2016). As fact-checking initiatives soar around the world, they also display wide variations, expressive of the journalistic and political cultures within which they are embedded.

As of April 2020, according to the Duke Reporters’ Lab, there are 237 fact-checking organisations in nearly 80 countries (Stencel & Luther 2020). The differences among these organisations vary from their form and style of reporting – such as the use of rating systems to rank false claims – to substantial institutional characteristics, including levels of professionalism and funding sources. In some countries, fact-checking is conducted by the ‘fifth estate’ of bloggers, activists, academics, and NGOs (UNESCO 2018, 10). In others, fact-checking initiatives are embedded within and operated by legacy media (Graves & Cherubini 2016). This is the case in the UK, with some of the most prominent fact-checking produced by public service broadcasters. It is this journalistic context that the next section focuses on.
Reporting misinformation and journalism in the UK

If the election of Donald Trump in 2016 was a key moment in the US for alerting the public to the consequences of disinformation and fake news on democracy, the EU referendum campaign a few months later had similar repercussions in the UK. The now-infamous claim of the Leave campaign that the UK sends the EU £350 million per week has become emblematic of a campaign rife with mis/disinformation. Tabloid newspapers actively participated in the spread of such misinformation (Bennhold 2017), continuing a long-held tradition of hyperbolic and misleading reporting. Other media, however, have taken active steps against misinformation. Having already launched a Reality Check section in 2011, The Guardian, for example, introduced a regular ‘Factcheck’ feature assessing all political claims during the 2019 election campaign. Sky News introduced a similar ‘Campaign Check’ section on its website, which often featured on their television news coverage. The news channel also launched the ‘Under the Radar’ project with the aim of tracking political activity, advertising on social media during the campaign, and identifying possible disinformation (Manthorpe 2019). The broadcaster, as well as other major news media in the UK, such as The Independent and The Telegraph, have also cooperated with Full Fact, an independent fact-checking service, to check the validity of stories and report on misinformation during the election campaign and beyond (Graves & Cherubini 2016). Full Fact, the UK’s largest fact-checker, launched in 2010 and is a registered charity with trustees who include journalists as well as members of the main political parties (Graves & Cherubini 2016, 11).

The most evidently active position against misinformation and disinformation, however, has been taken by the two main public service broadcasters: the BBC and Channel 4, which have established their own fact-checking services. BBC Reality Check started with somewhat limited resources in 2015, only to be reinvigorated during the run-up to the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Graves & Cherubini 2016, 9). Since then, and in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and its preceding campaign, a permanent BBC editorial team was allocated to Reality Check in 2017 (Samuels 2017). Channel 4 launched FactCheck, the first initiative of political fact-checking in Europe, as a blog covering the 2005 general election and turned it into a permanent feature in 2010 (Graves & Cherubini 2016, 6). Both fact-checking initiatives position themselves as watchdogs of political actors and their claims, with BBC Reality Check describing its mission as ‘cut[ting] through the spin and concentrat[ing] on the facts’ (BBC RealityCheck n.d.), whereas FactCheck is ‘testing the claims of people in power’ (FactCheck n.d.). They are, together with Full Fact, the main fact-checkers in the UK and the only ones bound to impartiality due to their public service status.

As their relatively short and rather fragmented history illustrates, Reality Check and FactCheck gain significance during election periods and moments of crisis. Both fact-checkers extensively challenged the Leave campaign’s ‘bus claim’ of the UK saving £350 million per week both before and after the referendum. These fact-checks were further broadcast and discussed in the main news bulletins of the respective channels (Goss & Renwick 2016). During the 2016 election campaign, despite accusations and perceptions of political bias by mainstream media against the Labour leadership (Cammaerts 2016), the evidence suggests fact-checkers paid fairly even-handed attention to both Labour’s and Conservatives’ claims (Birks 2019b, 52) and effectively questioned official claims and reports on crucial campaign issues (Birks 2019b, 77). In the 2019 snap election, Reality Check and FactCheck were given regular slots on flagship news programmes (Birks 2019a). During the COVID-19 pandemic, both Reality Check and Channel 4 focused almost exclusively on the health crisis, regularly updating their content and challenging misinformation (Cushion 2020).
Allocating resources and attention to fact-checking during periods of crisis can be seen as part of the public service mission of BBC and Channel 4 and their commitment to providing citizens with facts, set apart from misinformation and spin (Jackson 2017). Both Reality Check and FactCheck, however, are mostly online operations at present, with dedicated websites and Twitter accounts. When Reality Check was set up as a permanent feature, the then-director of BBC News, James Harding, committed to turning the fact-checking service to ‘more than a public service, we want it to be hugely popular. We will aim to use styles and formats – online, on TV and on radio – that ensure the facts are more fascinating and grabby than the falsehoods’ (Jackson 2017). Despite informing some broadcast news programming, especially during election campaigns, how extensively and effectively television news draw upon their fact-checkers remains open to question. This relationship is not necessarily straightforward, no less because online content does not easily translate into broadcasting, which does not favour contextual information or hyperlinks (Mantzarlis 2016). For fact-checking to reach mass audiences, broadcasting will need to find more creative ways to embed it in its routine conventions and practices. At the same time, fact-checkers have sought to make their presence stronger on social media platforms so that they reach and appeal to younger generations. Channel 4, for example, has a series of YouTube videos titled ‘FactCheck Explains’, while Chris Morris, the main Reality Check presenter, makes occasional appearances on BBC News’s Instagram account with short videos and explainers.

The growth of fact-checking journalism within public service broadcasters represents an important development. Unless reported by the media, independent fact-checking remains significant only for an engaged and, most likely, educated minority. In their mission to influence public discourse and increase their reach and impact, fact-checking organisations depend on their relationship with established news media (Graves & Cherubini 2016, 25). At the same time, fact-checkers try to avoid having their material used by partisan media for political purposes (Graves & Cherubini 2016, 25–26). In this context, public service media and fact-checking are ideal partners, due to their commitment to impartiality. In contrast to many independent fact-checkers, public service broadcasters, such as the BBC and Channel 4, have more resources and a bigger platform to communicate their challenging of misleading claims and disinformation. They are well placed to move fact-checking from the margins to a mainstream source of information, news, and analysis.

Such developments represent a way of enhancing journalistic legitimacy and reinvigorating trust in public service broadcasters. While ostensibly criticising public actors for their misleading or false claims, independent fact-checkers also constitute a thinly veiled, if not explicit, critique of mainstream media and their assumed failure to directly engage with such claims and point out their falsehood. If fact-checking is only referred to as external to mainstream journalists, this can further undermine trust in established media institutions (UNESCO 2018, 11). The adoption of fact-checking services and practices by public service broadcasters can be seen as an indication of legacy media utilising this critique by bringing fact-checking where ‘it has always belonged, at the heart of good journalism’ (Full Fact 2019).

Despite high levels of trust in public service broadcasting in the UK (Nielsen et al. 2020), recent political developments have left a bitter aftertaste about the role of broadcasting in reporting politics in a ‘post-truth’ era. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, in particular, and despite the work of fact-checkers before the referendum (Goss & Renwick 2016; Mantzarlis 2016), debates often focused on mainstream media not doing enough to rigorously challenge disinformation during election campaigns (Sambrook 2016). In strengthening their fact-checking services and placing them centrally in their news reporting, public service broadcasters appear to be taking the countering of misinformation more seriously.
Challenges in reporting misinformation

Public service broadcasters, however, face a number of challenges in reporting misinformation. The first has to do with maintaining a balanced and impartial news service while also making clear judgments about the veracity of claims and counter-claims. Analysis of the 2017 general election coverage discovered that 67 percent of fact-checks included a clear verdict about the validity of the claims examined; the rest were mostly ‘explainers’, ‘similar to news analysis articles in mainstream journalism’ (Birks 2019b, 41). When the analysis was undertaken again during the 2019 election campaign, the decisiveness of fact-checking verdicts increased (Birks 2019c). But the research revealed both the difficulties in unpacking non-factual claims that are part of an election campaign and the reluctance of public service media to ‘label’ politicians ‘as liars’, leaving that ‘judgement for audiences to make about an individual’s motives’ (Jordan 2019). Without explaining the reasoning behind claims, however, and being limited to narrow empirical clarifications, fact-checking can do little to improve the quality of public debate (Birks 2019b, 83). Furthermore, in attempting to treat political parties impartially and pay equal attention to dubious statements, journalists risk constructing a false equivalence between competing claims. Such an approach can contribute to the public’s feeling of mistrust and helplessness about understanding which political actors and parties lie to them the most (Rosen 2009).

A second challenge has to do with the choice of claims being fact-checked. This is a difficulty intrinsic in fact-checking as a journalistic practice. Narrow empirical facts, such as the numbers of hospitals being built by the government (Hutchison & Murray 2019), are far easier to fact-check than broad promises such as ‘getting Brexit done’ (Morris 2019). While fact-checking empirical facts is important, it does sometimes overlook the ways these facts are being employed in political argumentation. The political significance of facts is defined by the political context within which they are instrumentalised. In our view, fact-checking could do more to engage with both in order to help the public understand competing political claims. Furthermore, research suggests broadcasters focus largely on fact-checking political claims, especially during election campaigns, which is of limited scope. Moreover, this focus can reproduce elite discourses (Birks 2019b, 92) while ignoring the politics of everyday life. Political misinformation is not restricted to campaign promises or statements of the most prominent politicians. Furthermore, misinformation and fake news are proliferating in social media and online partisan media (Vargo et al. 2018) and play an important role in public understandings of politics. Neglecting this type of misinformation dismisses the diversity of ways media users become informed about the world and risks further alienating the public from legacy media. Identifying and challenging such types of misinformation, however, is a difficult task for public service broadcasters.

The call for a more alert approach to journalism, exemplified by but not restricted to fact-checking, rests, of course, on the assumption that such a development will have a positive impact on public knowledge and engagement with politics. Research on the efficacy of such journalistic practices, however, is inconclusive. Public misperceptions do not seem to always be the result of misinformation. Experiments have shown that people engage with motivated reasoning when confronted with misinformation (Schaffner & Roche 2017) and are, therefore, prone to reject corrective messages that challenge their worldview (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Exposure to misinformation may cause ‘belief echoes’ that remain, even when misinformation is corrected, because of the reasoning that ‘where there’s smoke, there’s fire’ (Thorson 2016, 461). Despite, for example, fact-checkers’ producing clear-cut judgments that the UK does not send £350 million per week to the EU, nearly half the British public still believed the
claim days before the EU referendum vote (Stone 2016). Birks has shown how, during the 2017 general election campaign, accusations of bias against @BBCRealityCheck by Twitter users were expressive of motivated reasoning and a broader mistrust of the BBC overall as, in some cases, it was evident that these users had not even read the tweets they were attacking (Birks 2019b, 56).

At the same time, however, evidence shows that people tend to have more favourable attitudes towards the media when fact-checking is employed (Amazeen 2019, 543). Research also suggests people have generally positive views of fact-checking and that randomised exposure to it helps them become better informed (Nyhan & Reifler 2015). Despite the inconsistencies of the findings and the mostly experimental nature of the research, there is evidence that particular forms of fact-checking can be more effective than others (Thorson 2016). Adopting a more forensic approach to fact-checking in day-to-day news reporting represents a longer-term process of change in journalism. As a consequence, how audiences respond to new conventions and practices will be understood in the longer term, rather than in relation to short-term effects that many fact-checking studies measure.

Conclusion

The challenges described in this chapter are not unique to public service broadcasting nor should they be approached as being confined to fact-checking. In the critical juncture of the current disinformation order, the reporting of disinformation and misinformation should take centre stage in all types of professional journalism. This is not only necessary for holding the powerful to account but also essential in safeguarding journalistic legitimacy. The circulation of misleading information in the public sphere has grave consequences not only for manipulating public opinion and influencing political choices but also for corroding over time public trust in news media, reproducing a culture of cynicism and mistrust. In high-choice and polyphonic media environments, journalists need to convince the public that they hold the cultural authority to identify and challenge falsehoods in order to help them understand contemporary politics.

The role of research is also central in this endeavour. In this chapter we focused on the UK context and, in particular, the ways public service broadcasters have attempted to tackle misinformation. We discussed BBC Reality Check and Channel 4’s FactCheck as illustrations of these attempts, which represent, in our view, positive steps towards a journalism that challenges falsehoods and misinformation in a direct way for audiences. More research, however, is necessary to explore the diversity and effectiveness of these practices not just in the UK but globally. Such research should investigate good practice in terms of fact-checking in different political and journalistic contexts. It should also move beyond fact-checking in order to identify alternative ways journalists can tackle misinformation in their routine reporting. Similarly, more research is necessary to understand the effectiveness of these practices in relation to news audiences and users. Most research so far has been experimental and episodic, focusing on elections and campaign misinformation. Different approaches are needed to help understand how news audiences encounter and deal with misinformation in the context of their everyday lives, as well as how they understand what constitutes misinformation. Such insights can further promote public and academic debates on misinformation and form the basis for transformative changes in journalism. For journalists to enhance their legitimacy, we argue, they need to not only report accurately and authoritatively but also play a leading role in tackling misinformation and disinformation both in routine instances and high-profile events and campaigns.
References


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