Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Data Transparency and Accountability: Covid 19 inquiry

List of fact checks

As at 1 December, Full Fact have published 563 articles this year (of which 345 were about the pandemic). This includes fact checks where there is a specific claim that we are assessing, and explainers, which are usually longer and focus on a number of claims or go into more detail on a particular topic. We check claims from a wide range of sources, including in traditional media, on social media, in parliament and in press releases from universities, charities and other organisations.

The committee asked about claims that we had checked in the media and below are 12 examples of potentially harmful claims we checked in the media (three per quarter). A full list of our checks about coronavirus can be found on our dedicated coronavirus page.

It's important to note that there has been some high quality journalism throughout the pandemic, bringing valuable information to light or helping the public navigate through this very complex topic. We also recognise the pressures the media is under both in general and at the moment, and that mistakes can and do happen - so it's to be welcomed when outlets correct the record quickly and fully. Such instances are also detailed below.

Q1
- The Metro, the Daily Mail, the Daily Express and The Sun incorrectly claimed that heat maps forecasting sulphur dioxide levels in Wuhan were actually satellite images, using this to suggest there were mass cremations in the region. We contacted the newspapers, and Metro and Mail changed their articles entirely, focusing on the fact the images had been debunked, while the Express and The Sun deleted the articles.
- The Express claimed that coronavirus had been genetically engineered - i.e. that its genetic makeup had been deliberately altered by humans - for "efficient spreading in the human population". This was based on a misunderstanding of an academic research paper that was reporting on differences between the virus causing Covid-19 and other coronaviruses. We contacted the paper and it corrected the article.
- The Daily Star and the Metro both ran stories uncritically covering celebrities' claims that coronavirus was related to 5G, which we had fact checked before. Both papers amended the articles when we contacted them.

Q2

- Newspapers including the Telegraph, the Sun, the Mirror and the Mail reported that a study had concluded that there had been no cases of children transmitting the new coronavirus, but the claim was taken out of context: it was the finding of one study among a review that found contradictory evidence about transmission of the new coronavirus in children. The review concluded that "the role of children in passing the disease to others is unknown".

- A number of newspapers, including the Evening Standard, the Express, the Mirror and the Telegraph reported on a statement about the number of air passengers that had entered the country with Covid-19, made by Professor John Aston during a select committee hearing. Prof. Aston appeared to have misspoken as he made several attempts to correct the statement during the hearing. Only the Mirror corrected its article when we asked.

- The Sun and the Manchester Evening News ran stories reporting that hand sanitiser left in cars could burst into flames, based on a notification sent to staff by NHS Property Services, which itself was based on information from Unison, who had raised media reports from US fire authorities. However, hand sanitisers can't catch fire at the temperatures found in cars without a spark. NHSPS issued a formal alert to clarify this, and both newspapers corrected or deleted their articles.

Q3

- The Telegraph, the Mirror, the Metro and the Mail covered a study press released by the University of Manchester that suggested that people over six foot tall are twice as likely to get coronavirus. However, there were flaws in the study - for instance, in the UK, taller men were more likely to report having had coronavirus, but this trend was the opposite in the US. The Mirror, Metro and Mail corrected their pieces.

- Newspapers picked up a study from King's College London and reported that one in six people will refuse a vaccine. The survey question actually asked whether people felt they would be "unlikely" to be vaccinated, which isn't necessarily the same as measuring who will refuse a vaccine, if offered it. We contacted KCL and it altered the language in its press release, and the Telegraph amended its article.

- We saw a lot of articles and commentators compare the number of deaths from "the flu" to the number of deaths from coronavirus. This is based on a misunderstanding of an ONS release reporting the number of death certificates that mentioned "influenza and pneumonia" or Covid-19. This isn't the same as these conditions being the underlying cause of death. The Sun and The Spectator added lines into their stories to clarify this. Given the apparent confusion, we also spoke to the ONS and were pleased that future releases included a clear statement explaining that a mention on a death certificate didn't mean it was the underlying cause of death.

Q4

- The Mirror and the Mail reported that a study had found that walking your dog could raise your risk of catching coronavirus by 78%. However, [the study had a number of flaws](#), and both newspapers amended their articles to make these clear after we contacted them.
- The Express [published an opinion piece that claimed](#) data on causes of death isn't published when they are, which had the potential to reduce the public's trust in government statistics. The article was later deleted.
- We saw a number of outlets using Public Health England releases as evidence about how Covid-19 spread in different places - for instance [pubs and restaurants](#) and [schools](#) - but this wasn't substantiated. The releases in question only cover outbreaks and clusters where more than one person has or is suspected to have a respiratory infection, and doesn't necessarily confirm where a new case was picked up.

A short explanation of Full Fact's misinformation crises framework

Will Moy mentioned this project in his remarks to the committee on 24/11/20, and we wanted to take this opportunity to share a bit more information about it with members.

Full Fact is developing a framework to help senior decision-makers respond to and mitigate information crises in proportionate, effective ways.

Incidents such as the coronavirus pandemic, some elections and natural disasters often require a greater or different response to misinformation than during 'business as usual' times. These incidents often act as a prompt for new measures from organisations involved in tackling misinformation, such as internet companies, fact checkers, governments, civil society and expert bodies.

Sometimes these new measures are welcome improvements, but there are downsides: ad hoc responses can be contradictory, inconsistent or incomplete. Without sufficient scrutiny and public debate, principles such as transparency or freedom of speech can be threatened.

Full Fact is bringing together experts from different backgrounds and global regions to create a framework to agree principles for preventing and mitigating the harm caused by bad information, including:

- Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (UK)
- Privy Council Office (Canada)
- Facebook

- Twitter
- Google
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University
- First Draft (UK/US/Australia)
- International Fact-Checking Network
- Africa Check (South Africa/Nigeria/Kenya/Senegal)
- Boom (India)
- Chequeado (Argentina)
- Maldita.es (Spain)

The misinformation crises framework will give clear direction when the next crisis occurs, enable credit to be given where due, and create a structure for learning and improvement.

Full Fact has convened two meetings and is publishing papers setting out our thinking in order to be transparent and to encourage wider feedback on how this framework is developing. Paper 1 (available here) covers the type of incidents in scope, and a set of indicators to assess the severity of incidents.

A paper is forthcoming which will set common challenges caused by information incidents and aims for responding.

The first iteration of the misinformation crises framework will be launched in January 2021.

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