

Full Fact—written evidence (FOJ0079)

Submission to House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry on the Future of Journalism

1. Full Fact fights bad information. We're a team of independent fact checkers who find, expose and counter the harm it does.
2. Bad information can damage public debate, pose risks to public health and erode public trust. We tackle it in four ways. We check claims made by politicians, public institutions, in the press and online and 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.
3. Full Fact has been doing this for a decade, and has built up a broad evidence base that allows us to understand the causes and consequences of bad information; how they differ depending on who is responsible for it reaching the public; and the challenges in getting those organisations or people to correct the record.
4. Our submission focuses on our experiences fact checking and following up on claims made in the media. We also set out changes we think will help improve accuracy of coverage and ensure that the public can put its trust in the media. These issues are discussed in more detail in our recent annual report, *The Full Fact Report 2020*.¹
5. We also set out our support for a more constructive interpretation of charity law that would allow charitable status to be recognised as appropriate for more journalism where it can be shown to be done for the public benefit.
6. We thank the committee for the chance to respond to this consultation and would be happy to provide oral evidence if that would be helpful.

Trust in the media and media literacy

7. When talking about trust in the media, we must consider how trust differs between different groups of people and across the sector, which is broad and includes more generally trusted groups, such as TV newsreaders, as well as online news sources.
8. While there is reason to be concerned about low levels of trust in the media, there is still time to act. There are concrete changes that could improve levels of trust in the media, by demonstrating the system works to protect against and correct mistakes.
9. These should be combined with efforts to improve media literacy, so that people are better equipped to understand what affects media coverage, and can be more confident in identifying and challenging false or misleading claims.
10. There are various media and information literacy programmes in the UK and around the world. Full Fact has done a significant amount of work in this area including developing a media literacy campaign with other fact checking

¹ The Full Fact Report 2020 <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/fullfactreport2020.pdf>

organisations Correctiv (Germany), Maldita.es (Spain), and Pagella Politica (Italy) that Facebook ran across 28 countries during the latest EU parliamentary elections. We are glad to be members of Ofcom's Making Sense of Media advisory group which is helping to bring more coordination to many excellent initiatives in this area.

11. Full Fact has published a briefing looking at examples of such interventions and found good reason to believe that proactive interventions can be successful.² However there is a lot we don't yet know. We therefore want to see an emphasis on research and evaluation to help us better understand what works. We are members of the evaluation working group of Ofcom's advisory group for this reason and glad to see Ofcom considering how best to apply its serious research expertise to this area.
12. The government's promised media literacy strategy should, at a minimum, include: better coordination and oversight of existing initiatives; support for a range of initiatives in children and adults; and a programme of evaluation to assess effectiveness over the short and long term.

Pressures the media faces

13. It is important to acknowledge the pressures the media is facing - which have become more acute as we are facing the coronavirus outbreak - ranging from the impact of the changing media landscape on finances, competition and time, to potential challenges to the role of a free press.
14. Much of the time, fact checking organisations and the press are working on the same side and face the same problems. Journalists play a crucial role in challenging public figures when they use misleading or false information, and we were concerned that - before the coronavirus outbreak - some senior political leaders appeared to be attempting to avoid direct scrutiny by the press outside of pre-arranged interviews.³

Fact checking claims made in the media

15. Full Fact's experience of fact checking claims made in the media has identified various problems that lead to bad information reaching the public. The most obvious is possibly misleading headlines, and our research has identified five main types:
 - 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
16. This may be due to space constraints; that the headline wasn't written by the journalist who wrote the story; that other outlets copy another's without checking it properly; or that it has been customised for social media.

² Dora-Olivia Vicol, 'Media and Information Literacy Lessons from Interventions around the World', 2020, <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/media-information-literacy-lessons.pdf>

³ 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/>

17. We are concerned that headlines are increasingly read without the context of the full article, for instance when the headline alone is shared on social media, either by the newspaper or when others share the article. This makes it even more crucial for newspapers to ensure that the headline, on its own, is accurate.
18. We believe 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 this standard. Regulators and outlets' standards processes should consider whether the headline on its own is materially misleading, not just its accuracy in context.
19. Another concern for Full Fact is what we would describe as uncritical reporting, for instance when faced with subjective reports or surveys from organisations with obvious vested interests, or polls with small sample sizes.⁴ This may be because of time constraints, or because a certain slant on the story suits the publication's biases.
20. However, this risks leaving the public with a false impression about the authenticity or reliability of the source material. We believe the media can, and should, be more clear about what is and isn't backed up by evidence; about the limitations of a survey, report or research paper; and about the potential biases of the information's source.

Correcting the record

21. Compared with many other countries, the UK benefits from a media that is generally committed to accuracy and will correct the record when necessary.
22. Full Fact would ask the committee to consider the systems for correcting the record, as we believe that such processes demonstrate accountability to the public, and will be essential in earning the public's trust.
23. In 2019, Full Fact made 62 correction requests to UK media outlets, with 39 resulting in the article being fully corrected or, in some cases, deleted. Of these, 37 were to outlets regulated by the Independent Press Standards Organisation or Independent Monitor for the Press, and 23 resulted in a correction or deletion. In other cases, outlets made partial corrections, disputed our assessment or did not reply.
24. In general, newspapers provide online forms or email addresses, but these are not always easy to find or understand. For some online outlets there is often no clear route at all.
25. Full Fact wants all media outlets to provide clear information on how they deal with correction requests, including 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 that a typical user can quickly find from an article's page and the outlet's homepage.
26. We also want to see outlets that publish content online 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.

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Various examples are given in The Full Fact Report 2020.
<https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/fullfactreport2020.pdf>

Public interest journalism and charitable status

27. Finally, Full Fact believes that charitable status should be recognised as appropriate for more journalism where, as charity law requires, it can be shown to be done for the public benefit.
28. There is general agreement that new sources of funding for journalism are needed to ensure sustainability for the industry, and one way to ensure this would be to take a more flexible approach to charity registration for public benefit journalism.
29. Charitable status restricts the kind of journalism a charity can do. These restrictions - such as the requirement to be non-partisan - are why Full Fact decided to be set up as a charity. We recognise that not all journalism intends to maintain the qualities of impartiality or even accuracy, and so this will not be suitable for all journalism.
30. However, the current process for becoming recognised as a charity presents an artificial constraint and risks preventing important charitable journalism from happening. We believe a clear statement of what aspects of journalism can be accepted as charitable and on what basis would simplify future applications.
31. We are grateful for the Public Benefit Journalism Research Centre's submission to this inquiry, which sets out in detail how a more constructive interpretation of charity law could work, and its benefits, including provision of more public benefit journalism and encouraging the creation of new journalistic enterprises.

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