

Written evidence submitted by Polis Analysis (OSB0108)

Polis Analysis is an organisation run entirely by under 30s delivering fact-based, impartial and accessible analysis of global politics to thousands of individuals across 99 countries. To protect the next generation from the harmful impact of fake news, misinformation and disinformation, Polis Analysis is committed to equipping individuals with factual information on the events shaping their lives. We believe the threat posed by misinformation is severe and the adverse impact of fake news on young people is understated. Polis Analysis is submitting evidence to the pre-legislative scrutiny committee on the Government's Online Safety Bill in an attempt to reverse the omission of misinformation from the scope of the bill and protect young lives online.

Polis Analysis' position on the Online Safety Bill:

As an organisation committed to empowering individuals, and young people in particular, with fact-based information, we are disappointed that the scope of the Online Safety Bill does not include misinformation as content that could lead to societal harm. As such, Polis Analysis believes the Online Safety Bill does not go far enough in making the UK the safest place to be online and in protecting children from harmful activity.

Polis Analysis believes the scope of the Online Safety Bill should be expanded to include fake news, misinformation and disinformation as content that could lead to societal harm. Young people are especially exposed to this harmful content. Only by including misinformation will the Online Safety Bill make the UK the safest place to be online.

Our submission of evidence to the pre-legislative scrutiny committee on the Government's proposed Online Safety Bill details the problem of online misinformation to demonstrate why it should fall under the scope of the proposed legislation. Polis Analysis' submission also details solutions to the problem of misinformation which would complement legislative action.

The problem of online misinformation:

Fake news, misinformation and disinformation are among the key challenges of our time. While these issues have always existed, online misinformation can rapidly reach wide audiences in our increasingly digital world, adding urgency to the need for credible solutions. Disinformation campaigns by state and non-state actors alike can ultimately undermine the democratic process, from swaying local election results in the UK to presidential elections in the US.¹ Fake news also presents a genuine threat to the health of democracies from within, by polarising societies. This is confirmed by the Global Trends Report commissioned by various US intelligence agencies, which outlines global challenges on the horizon for the next 15-20 years.

¹ Polis Analysis Daily Briefing: *The Influence of Fake News in the Course of Democracy* (August 2021)

The report makes clear that societies are set to become increasingly polarised as individuals become more dependent on their preferred media or social media platforms to receive information designed to suit their own world view. Algorithms will continue to deliver tailored content to reinforce the existing views of citizens.² In short, across the globe entire societies may lose the ability to agree on what are considered established facts and consider different perspectives that differ from their own worldview. This will undermine public discourse and deal a severe blow to democracy.

Fake news also undermines the health of citizens. The falsehoods peddled during the COVID-19 pandemic serve as an example, labelled a tsunami of disinformation by the then UK government minister responsible for vaccinations. The US President Joe Biden acknowledged this, saying publicly that COVID-19 misinformation on social media is leading to deaths.³ Fake news can ultimately manifest itself in life and death terms, hence the need for action to curb its deadly affects.

Young people in particular are vulnerable to fake news. When discussing online misinformation, it is often perceived as a generational problem with older, less tech-savvy individuals falling victim. However, sticking with the example of health it is evident that young people are more likely to believe misinformation on COVID-19. Vaccine hesitancy in the UK stands at 4% for over 30s, jumping to 14% among younger groups according to the Office for National Statistics.⁴ In part this is because younger individuals are more exposed to online misinformation. Facebook and Twitter are rated the most important news sources among 16-24 year olds and 58% of 18-24 year olds came across false or misleading information about coronavirus early in the pandemic.⁵ For those more digitally savvy young people who may be better at spotting fake news than older generations, they can do far more to inoculate vulnerable members of society from misinformation. According to FullFact, just one fifth of social media users who encounter false information actually do something about it.⁶ While fake news presents real risks to democracy and global health, we can take refuge in the fact that much more can be done by individuals to protect one another from misinformation.

Polis Analysis' recommendations to tackle online misinformation:

To demonstrate that the Government recognises the genuine threat online misinformation poses to young people, Polis Analysis supports the inclusion of misinformation in the Online Safety Bill as content that could lead to societal harm. This will protect individuals by compelling social media sites and search engines to remove misinformation harmful to the lives of young people.

² Polis Analysis Daily Briefing: *Global Trends 2040: What the World Will Look Like?* (June 2021)

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57870778>

⁴ Polis Analysis Daily Briefing: *Fake News and Vaccine Hesitancy* (July 2021)

⁵ <https://bbench.co.uk/2020/12/16/youth-are-not-immune-from-fake-news/>

⁶ <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/who-believes-shares-misinformation.pdf>

Polis Analysis recognises legislation can only go so far in mitigating the harmful effects of online misinformation. Calls for action by governments to regulate big tech companies are well known. The European Commission's proposed Digital Services Act (DSA) aims to make proactive action by very large online platforms to address fake news a legal obligation. While greater action and government intervention will likely be needed to ensure social media platforms do more to tackle fake news, a top-down approach alone would be insufficient in addressing the issue. Private communication channels, for example, fall outside the scope of the DSA. Any steps taken by private messaging services such as WhatsApp must be extremely wary of infringing on individual rights to privacy and confidentiality.

A top down approach can only go so far. To successfully tackle the impact of fake news, the gaps remaining after government action must be filled with a bottom-up approach that focuses on citizens. Individuals must be armed with the skills they need to protect themselves from online misinformation. This proactive approach will ensure citizens do not fall victim to fake news when it spreads in private spaces such as WhatsApp which fall outside the regulatory sphere.

Polis Analysis believes education should be the key area of focus to protect young people from fake news. Individuals should learn how to develop critical thinking skills and not readily consume information at face value. Everyone must learn in the digital age how to properly interrogate online information sources by identifying and scratching beneath the surface of misleading and sensationalist headlines. The development of these skills can be baked into national education curriculums, with workshops that teach students how to spot misinformation made available as a form of lifelong learning. Government funding combined with the support of industry experts will ensure individuals are protected early on from misinformation, saving money, lives and democratic institutions further down the line. Social media users must recognise their duty as responsible citizens to stop and think before readily sharing information to their online network. There is also a real need for individuals to adopt an open-minded approach when it comes to consuming information. A healthy information diet is balanced, comprising of a full spectrum of both primary and secondary sources, from across the political spectrum.

The provision of neutral, fact-based information delivered by trustworthy and rigorous media outlets, particularly in the online space where fake news is prevalent, makes for essential consumption. Ensuring young people are well-informed and equipped with critical thinking skills will protect the next generation from fake news in ways which regulation simply cannot. Polis Analysis will continue to play its part in delivering fact-based, impartial and accessible analysis of global politics as we believe there is no better way to fight fake news than by equipping thousands of young people with facts.

Governments and tech companies must take action to tackle fake news. That starts with a broadening of the scope of the Online Safety Bill to include misinformation. Combined with a

citizen-led approach that inoculates young people from the impact of online misinformation, the health of individuals and democracies alike will stand to benefit.

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Conclusion:

Online misinformation poses a real threat to young people in the UK. From undermining democracy to the nation's health, misinformation and disinformation must be curtailed. An effective way to tackle harmful content and protect young people is to expand the scope of the Online Safety Bill to include online misinformation as content that could lead to societal harm. In addition to legislative action, a bottom-up approach is needed that focuses on equipping young people with the skills they need to protect themselves from online misinformation.