

Democracy in a Post-Truth Information Age

Thursday, 18th – Friday, 19th January 2018

post-truth

ADJECTIVE

Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief

Source: Oxford English Dictionary



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REPORT

The following is a report by St George's House of discussions by twenty-three participants over two days about democracy in a 'post-truth' information age. Its statements of participants' varying views should be construed neither as facts nor consensus, nor does it constitute an endorsement or agreement by participants of any opinions it expresses. It is intended as a record of initial conclusions about possible further action, and as an aide-memoire of salient issues raised.

Participants moved between conversations in plenary and more focused work in smaller groups, in which they discussed in particular the roles, rights, and responsibilities of government, the private sector, media, and civil society (including experts) around information. Many differing views and suggestions emerged through these break-out conversations, the main points of which were fed back by a speaker for each group before Q&A and further discussion in plenary.

In conclusion, some desirable outcomes and further action were proposed, which are presented here in the form of recommendations – briefly below, and in more detail at the end of this report.

Summary

Democracy comprises people's involvement, agency, freedom of speech, freedom of choice and agreed mechanisms for electing, dismissing and holding accountable their political leadership. It describes a set of relationships between and among a community and its government which are collaborative, deliberative and process-based. It requires that people, including governing individuals, place a quantity of trust in:

- the process itself
- each other in aggregate to be making reasonable decisions in the public interest
- the information they receive on which they take decisions, including information about the process and each other

Participants noted that the prerequisite of trust cannot be regulated into existence, compelled or purchased directly. However, trust can be changed through information-processing and by manipulating how individuals perceive the relationship between the information they receive and their real world. Freedom of speech exists in tension with propaganda: trust in untrustworthy sources is part of the problem. But 'less information' is not the answer, as censorship curtails freedom. Democratic behaviour relies upon a free flow of trustworthy information, so more trustworthiness is needed alongside the analytical skills among user of information to enable them better to evaluate competing claims.

On the whole, the group felt that adherence to conventions and norms of democratic process are threatened today by:



- the utility, profitability, ease, and reach of digital mis- and disinformation
- censorship, micro-targeting, and other practices which place unannounced and usually unsuspected constraints on the information made available to individuals
- leaders, political figures, and communities who ignore democratic conventions, including proper use and protection of reliable information

The problem could be framed as a public good (trustworthy information) being endangered by (a) market structure and values, and (b) desired political sway through competition for attention along with destabilising trust in a perceived opposition. In the first case, reducing people's trust in information, each other, and political process and institutions may be thought of as incidental; in the second, it can be supposed intentional. It's not always clear to which category items such as spoof news, advertising-oriented clickbait, political campaigns, ISIS recruitment, foreign interference in elections etc. belong.

Summary of recommendations

Defining public goods and interests, and good and right behaviour to support and strengthen them, is important. To help restore democratic norms of trust, it is recommended to:

- establish a new, accessible, public-service body for information standards
- emphasise the importance of ongoing learning for all on the topic of information and democracy
- engage with government for provisions to help strengthen trust and democracy
- engage with the private sector likewise

What's new?

From the beginning of the discussions, several participants noted that the history of information shows us any problem we are experiencing now is not 'something new and digital that needs to be fixed so we can return to a golden age of truth'. Propaganda is nothing new. However, it was agreed that, until now, information control at the scale of whole populations has remained usually the preserve of governments for use in war and large commercial enterprises to sell products. Today, digital technologies makes it possible for any number of individuals and institutions (commercial, political, or otherwise) each to propagate a point of view without practical limits and to work to discredit others likewise. At the same time, audience attention can be sold to advertisers – so increasingly attention-compelling information is increasingly valuable to anyone who can publish.



What's new, then, seems to be the:

- ease, scope and rapidity of producing an effect using information
- degree and prevalence of mistrust of public institutions and power
- blurring between public and private institutions
- monetisation of information

Terminology

- 'Factual' is a standard to which informational entities can be held and which admits of objective, empirical measurement and verification.
- 'Truth' can be aspired to, and its opposites in the form of falsities are often readily identifiable, but requiring information to be 'truthful' may lead to unhelpful entanglement in conflicting, irreconcilable opinions about what constitutes truth.
- 'Fake news' is a freighted term, though it is popular. It might be thought better to use 'misinformation' (false information), or 'disinformation' (consciously falsified information) or even 'propaganda' (information intentionally manipulated to move many towards a desired attitude or mindset, and usually politically motivated). However, all these terms are vague; international free-speech standards would not permit such terminology to justify constraint of free speech.
- While recognising that digitisation for hyperconnectivity and speed of information flow is what has enabled many of these problems to arise, digitisation has also brought many benefits: what needs to change is people's management of information in a digital social environment. This is a conversation about 'information', not 'digitisation'.

There is an important distinction to be made between information and opinion. Opinion is free in any democracy but should be clearly distinguished from fact. However, factual information itself can be used in a mis-informing way. The intent is what counts: using or abusing information to manipulate people for an end which is not in the public good.

Strengthening democracy

Democracy, politically, is not just 'choosing who we want' but also being able to get rid of bad leaders without civil war and hold leaders accountable in between elections. It depends upon conventions and process. When participants (including leaders) prove unwilling to abide by agreed conventions and process, problems arise.

We fear the loss of agency and choice which is threatened by a diminution of democratic norms through erosion of public trust and confidence in process and people. We see a need to assert and strengthen agency and choice in political engagement, quality of information, responsible handling of information, proper or agreed-upon process, and the informational commons.



It is hard to debate when information sources are numerous, highly decentralised, and of equal status. Facebook (for example) might be able to implement a broadly influential action, but coordinating even thousands of independent news sources (let alone millions of individual bloggers) would be a daunting challenge. At a political level, representative democracy is apparently the least worst solution. What is the equivalent in informational terms? Apart from voting, in what concrete events is democracy instantiated?

It was noted that online forums demonstrate many graduated powers to control, rebuke, block and ban informational disorder (fighting, trolling, off-topic or ill-informed comments etc.) through authorised moderators and, importantly, members of the community of interest, assisted by tools such as 'report this post' or 'report this user'. The tools and platforms for elections arguably involve education for voters, responsible engagement by candidates, and government shaping itself to adapt to social and technological changes which can affect democratic process. In the face of increasingly reckless information campaigning before elections, helpful pre-election actions might include:

- media and social-media blackouts to generate a 'cooling-off period', as in Singapore and France
- distribution of neutral, factual information on, for example, health spending
- (possibly) redesign of the voting experience to be as good as possible

How and who

It was posited that, if people prefer to receive their information free, they can expect that it may be shoddy or paid for by someone with an agenda or both. *The Guardian*¹ and Wikipedia model of seeking donations may work for some information enterprises. Public service broadcasters such as the BBC spend public funds or licence-fees to deliver television, radio, and now digital services. Other models might include:

- consumers pay directly for access (paywall, subscription, per-article, etc.)
- private foundations and trusts pay factcheckers (already happening to some extent)
- those who benefit from information flow support their own ecosystem (for example, FB could pay 1% of profits to an independent foundation for local news)



¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/07/25/guardian-explores-paywall-plan-b-turnaround-effort-cuts-costs/>

To move things forward, must government get imaginative, or is this an initiative better pursued in academia, or handed to the private sector? It was agreed by many participants that progress has to involve a conversation between all three, which must happen fast. Speed and simplicity are very important. Agency, choice, process, and community are key elements in the answer. Taking all this into account, the conversation should probably be initiated first from a civil society perspective to rapidly involve all the other sectors.

Government

Government is that which has coercive power to back up popular agreement that it is the entity in charge. It is 'that which is able to and enabled to make things happen'. It may mean Parliament; devolved or local government; (when speaking of borderless information) foreign powers; the UN and other international institutions; the legal system; parties and candidates; and the civil services here and abroad, as interpreters of government.

Government responsibilities include:

- safeguarding democracy (though government alone cannot achieve this)
- ensuring security
- ensuring education for resilience in the 21st century including 'informational resilience'
- transparency about its actions
- preserving access to public goods: climate, environment, etc. and, arguably, information

We desire deliberative government, characterised by self-critical, rigorous, reflexive process, capable of assessing and understanding the problem of misinformation and knowing what can be done. Possibly government must be reshaped to meaningfully engage in the conversation or refresh its underlying principles or 'source code'.

Government does perhaps recognise that it is on a reshaping journey. However, it is early days, and government's component individuals are, arguably, distracted by Brexit, and limited in scope by party line and what they consider popular reaction (including media response) may be to their actions. New centres of power have arisen in the private sphere through technological innovation and development. Lastly, importantly, participants noted that government is not fairy-dust (as some seem to imagine) which can simply 'make' an innovation change the world.

At the same time, government does possess various powers along with reasonable expectations about how it should or may use them regarding information: to defend the rule of law, including in and among social-media platforms; and to raise taxes and levies, which might offer a lever in negotiations with private enterprise about ways to safeguard access to reliable information. It can, too, exert influence through legislation, policy



mechanisms, public-information campaigns, and national educational curricula for digital literacy, critical thinking and other information skills.

Most immediately promising is the possibility that government can adjust the 'sliders' of regulation (by analogy with a mixing deck) to encourage more truth-seeking behaviour among big information handlers. Can government oblige, through regulation, sites responsible for content provision to ensure they uphold fact-checking and other journalistic standards? What areas of regulation should be tweaked, by how much? Who can and will do the tweaking? And can it be done 'on the hoof'? This is necessary, because there is not enough time to study all consequences and plan far in advance.

Does the challenge of misinformation catalyse a need for a written constitution? There might be apparent advantages, but significant disadvantages include a lack of flexibility and adaptive capacity. Once a constitution is established, authorities can only shrug when social rules are broken. Some felt it is useful to be able to take discretionary action against threats to social order. But this flexibility requires the unofficial structure provided by conventions and trust, which rest in turn upon whatever responsibility for maintaining conventions is assumed by individuals.

How shall politicians in general be held accountable for the information they use? Not misleading Parliament is a ministerial duty which, some thought, would bear public repeating. Making political advertisements transparent could be a step in the right direction.

Private sector

Private enterprise is an ecosystem containing some, conspicuous big players and also myriad small and medium-sized businesses involved in information transmission. More attention and most responsibility (fairly or otherwise) is accorded to the big players. Among the various platforms, content- and ad-providers ('online publishers'), advertisers, trade organisations, business schools, other professional bodies and shareholders, is any one responsible for 'promoting truth'? They can, possibly, be held accountable for behaving in a truth-seeking way and for being factual.

The private sector (it was felt) is constrained by its profit motive and limited attention span. Some participants suggested that the most influential players (Google, Microsoft, Facebook) engage only sporadically with civil society and government, the latter often when requested to help with the provision of economic and efficient services.

It was proposed that businesses should enjoy rights to profit; operation free of excessive interference (define 'excessive'); government help if they are attacked from, for example, abroad; limited liability; reasonably coordinated regulation dealings; and to be allowed to set their own priorities. Responsibilities include: making known a clear mission and purpose (with accountability for that), showing up and engaging publicly (which requires that civil society be polite in return); adhering to the spirit of the law, not just the letter; self-regulation (which requires the setting and promotion of standards); transparency (plain language, being comprehensible); and investing in innovation and social good.



Businesses were also considered to have a responsibility to pay taxes, including a civic responsibility to pay taxes in the place where they are operating, as an expression of intent to support their own location, with potential positive effects on democracy and information as a public good. This seems particularly relevant for information platforms at a time when social and economic inequalities are being fed or exacerbated by the effects of poor-quality information. Ideally, too, advertising would move away the clickbait model, and digital capitalism would evolve to decouple information from the economy. But can we expect business responsibility to increase? Is the onus not on tax authorities to (somehow) cause private enterprise to adhere to the spirit as well as the letter of the law?

Rethinking these issues requires a business perspective. An important next step is conversation with representatives of the private sector and businesses engaged with the flow of public information.

Media

State and private media responsibilities include: fact-checking and factual reporting; editorial control; transparency as to how decisions are made at a high level; and maintaining standards and rules of behaviour. (Publicly funded media have more of a responsibility to represent diverse perspectives, whereas private media are freer to take up and promote particular positions.) By contrast, aggregators and distributors of information online are mainly concerned for artificial intelligence; automation; asserting community responsibility for maintaining standards of discourse and content; a California-tech mindset (cf FB's mantra, 'move fast and break things'); and urgent-priority phenomena within their purview such as suicide rooms and terrorist recruitment.

Some participants proposed that information platforms should be encouraged to position themselves more clearly to users, either as publishers with the responsibilities and limitations thereof, or as informational free-for-alls. Google is info-sharing with some smaller social media platforms which experience tensions around freedom of expression vs controlling for community- or advertiser-acceptable content.

Lest nostalgia for traditional media and its high standards swamp realism, participants noted that tabloids in particular were rigorously criticised for publishing whatever would sell – the hardcopy equivalent of clickbait. However, media does traditionally separate salaried content-creators from sales and advertising profit, which is not the case with digital publishers, social media platforms and information aggregators. Aggregators now appear to be making money – or experiencing growth translated as worth – while journalism appears to be losing money and shrinking.

The relationship between traditional and social media seems tense, with neither wanting to be endangered by the other. Can they strike deals that include civil society's interests? Is it useful or even possible now to separate creators of information from its suppliers? How to reconcile high informational standards with a hackathon mentality, or persuade private media to take on responsibility for representing diverse points of view?



Some projects are already under way to improve the transparency of information, including flagging where articles are funded from. Perhaps searching for topics around elections should trigger multiple article recommendations covering a spread of points of view. Removing micro-targeting in areas such as political advertising would reduce filter-bubble/echo-chamber effects within democratic process. Other desirable private-sector initiatives could include:

- screening for deliberately mislabelled content (e.g. 'children's videos' which are not).
- less opacity around personalisation of information provision, especially micro-targeting
- fewer 'take-it-or-leave-it' terms and conditions around personal-data use (where there may be little choice)
- more opportunity for individuals to control and limit porosity between the private sector and government around personal data

All media can help to shape change as well as be affected by it and obliged to adapt to it. If the model of commercial media success 'requires' the degradation of standards of informational accuracy, something in the model has to change. The free press and public-service broadcasters have been obliged for decades to follow laws regarding impartiality and factuality of content; the same rules can apply to social media.

Civil society: role, rights, responsibilities, limitations

Citizens means people: individuals and communities, and organisations representing civil society such as NGOs, social movements, and universities and academia. Citizens' rights and responsibilities around information are interlinked, as they are in diet and health, lifestyle and environmental impact, etc.: the right to personal choice carries some responsibility for aggregate effect, and aggregate effects may in turn strongly influence what choice is available.

Thus, there is a choice not to interact with a social media platform, but the pressure to engage socially and the addictive potential of the medium may make this hard. Shareholder action, likewise, is a choice, but short-term cash return may be at odds with longer-term sustainability. We can choose search engines or pay for email accounts that don't track us and collect personal information for micro-targeting, but it may not be as convenient or economical to do so as we would like.

It's meaningful to refer to 'citizens' rather than 'consumers' or 'customers' in relation to digital information. For many years, efficiency has dominated the digital agenda. Some suggested that the stimulation of human flourishing is not necessarily coincident with the greatest systemic efficiency.

Likewise, with regard to democracy, it may be helpful to think of 'saving public money' rather than 'saving taxpayers' money' and so move away from the implication that government is just another service. This helps illuminate democracy as an expression of mutual trust embodied in non-market



transactions (tax and good citizenship as contributions to the public good, government and good leadership as contributions to the public good) which pure market-transactional values can corrode.

It was suggested that angrier, more fearful, isolationist points of view appear to shout louder, crave attention, disparage norms of diversity, trust, and conventional institutions and process, and are cynical (cannot but disbelieve) rather than sceptical (inclined to check facts). Individuals arguably have a right to lie, but not from a position of power. Simply, though, it is much easier to behave badly online without consequence. How do we bring the responsibilities which we expect from editors and advertisers into the broader general public? How do we achieve a sense of shared narrative and reconciled identity where, currently, there is none?

Some participants noted that people have always liked living in filter bubbles, and there have always been those readers of the Guardian and those of the Daily Mail whose views will not coincide. Perhaps filter bubbles and echo chambers are not in themselves the problem. But there was broad agreement that better tools are needed, to enable people to:

- better evaluate information and its trustworthiness
- know and understand the consequences of sharing personal information which can then be used to target them

Even the attempt to bring informational standards under control may reinforce people's inability (or desire not to) trust 'wrong' sources, so they have to be the right tools; someone must define that; and who will trust the tools themselves? The wiki model has issues around diversity of contribution, and any officially sanctioned instrument will be suspect, so a broader model or platform is needed, with a way to prevent it being hijacked, which presents social and economic challenges. In the long term, people need ongoing, good education about information use.

Recommendations

Information standards body

We need information intermediaries of the type that characterise the (highly credible and trusted) Institute for Fiscal Studies: fact-checkers, statisticians, wikis. An information-standards body, akin to a public-health body, is attractive, to educate and highlight public harms and goods. It must be independent of government but have reach, and teeth. In the first instance it would convene a forum of traditional and digital producers and distributors of media to discuss the role good information plays in maintaining democratic norms.²



² Cf the National Security Information Unit which has just been proposed: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-politics-fakenews/britain-to-set-up-unit-to-tackle-fake-news-mays-spokesman-idUKKBN1FC29C>

Emphasise learning

A particular emphasis is needed on the learning dimension over the next ten to twenty years, for children and adults: critical thinking skills, awareness of the consequences of mis- and disinformation, and the underpinnings of government by consent and democracy.

Engage with government

It is vital to engage now with government ministers and civil servants to make a case for rapid ongoing action which can be adjusted as circumstances change.

Talk with, not at, the private sector

Strong, ongoing engagement with the private sector is necessary. This requires comprehension and collaborative thinking rather than blaming individuals at individual enterprises for adverse global effects of market forces. That said, it must be recognised that successful and powerful individuals can make large differences.³

Speak up

It is important to continue to assert and act upon the principle that mis- and disinformation undermine the emergence of the benign, connected society in which we desire to live, and are against our ideals, and we are prepared to work to lessen the risks associated with bad information.



³ See, e.g., Larry Fink's recent letter to CEOs: <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/en-no/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter>

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