

# **Weapons of Mass Deception: How Pugwashites might deal with fake news**

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### **Introduction**

Over the last few years, the term ‘fake news’ has entered everyday language. For many, it means wildly inaccurate news stories that are shared and read on the internet. For others, like Donald Trump, it means the output of the entire mainstream media.

This paper is about the first part of a research project I am conducting about so-called ‘fake news’, particularly as it relates to stories about weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The impetus behind this project was the controversies around the nature of the suspected chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun in north-western Syria in April 2017. While reading about this incident in various media, including posts on social media, I came across a huge number of contradictory, accusatory and conspiracy-assuming accounts of the incident. Whatever the actual truth, it was clear that a lot of people (for whatever reason) were writing and sharing articles with versions of events that could not possibly be accurate.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this project is to better understand the nature of so-called ‘fake news’ and consider how established experts on WMD, such as leading members of British Pugwash, can operate in a media environment apparently awash with misleading and false stories. It will ask questions about the scale of the problem, the possible impacts of fake news about WMD and how individuals and organisations can provide credible, evidence-based assessments in a fast-paced, evolving information landscape.

The first piece of research in this project is a survey of individuals connected to British Pugwash, including its Executive Committee and student members. Respondents were asked to give their experiences and assessments about the nature of fake news, as well as suggestions about appropriate responses to this phenomenon. This paper is about that piece of research.

Having considered the survey data and noted key themes and proposals, I hope this paper will form the basis of further research on the topic and dialogue within the wider Pugwash community.

### **What is ‘fake news’?**

Lies and conspiracy theories are a fact of political life. From the press reporting of the forged Zinoviev letter in 1924 to the countless websites claiming 9/11 was an ‘inside job’, inaccurate reporting of political events has been happening for a very long time.<sup>2</sup> However, it may be that the digital age – which allows people to

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of claims / stories can be found on PolitiFact here: <https://tinyurl.com/y8awylmy>

<sup>2</sup> D. Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: How conspiracy theory has shaped modern history*, (Vintage, London, 2010), p.9 - 15

cheaply 'self-publish' and distribute content through social media - has changed the nature and scale of the problem.

The phenomenon I am interested in is the publication of stories that have little or no connection to the truth and whose authors are intentionally or knowingly misleading. I am following Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who define fake news as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers."<sup>3</sup> This definition rules out what I would call 'wrong news', which includes many close cousins of fake news, such as reports that are ideologically slanted or include factual errors resulting from sloppy journalistic practice.

The 2016 US election campaign season saw a number of stories, which reached audiences of millions on the social media platform Facebook, that would fit my definition of fake news. These include the online news articles stating that Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump for President and that an FBI agent suspected of leaking Hilary Clinton's emails committed suicide (the latter article even included quotes, people and town names that were completely invented).<sup>4</sup>

### **What are weapons of mass destruction (WMD)?**

Although the scope and meaning of the term has evolved and been disputed over the years, this project will define WMD as 'nuclear, radiological, chemical or biological weapons'.

### **The survey**

A survey was sent to individuals with some connection to British Pugwash (BP). This includes members of BP's Executive Committee, members of Student / Young Pugwash (SYP) UK, people who have attended events organised by BP or SYP, and members of International SYP's Executive Committee and the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. Of those who responded, twenty respondents were selected, representing a range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds, including scientists, academics, NGO staff members, former diplomats and campaigners.

The survey had two main sections. The first section asked about the respondent's media consumption in recent years and perspective on the media landscape. This included questions about the extent of their social media use, any stories or news outlets they considered to be 'fake news' (particularly relating to WMD), and whether they feel that fake news is a new phenomenon. The second section considered the impact of and potential responses to fake news about WMD. This included questions about whether fake news can actually influence public opinion / government policy, whether fake news websites should be regulated and how genuine experts should respond to fake news in their field.

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<sup>3</sup> H. Allcott, M. Gentzkow, 2017, *Social media and fake news in the 2016 Election (Journal of Economic Perspectives - Vol.31, No 2, p.211 - 236)* - <https://tinyurl.com/jx437tp>

<sup>4</sup> ABC News, *When Fake News Stories Make Real News Headlines*, Published 29<sup>th</sup> November 2016 - <https://tinyurl.com/n7ee894>

A goal of the research is to open up a dialogue on the aforementioned topics within the Pugwash community of experts. When reviewing responses, I have looked for shared experiences and views among respondents, potentially interesting areas of disagreement and thoughts or themes that may be worth further research and consideration.

## **Survey data / themes**

### ***Section One***

#### Defining fake news

When responding to survey questions, many respondents either explicitly or implicitly defined the term 'fake news'.

Respondents to the survey that explicitly defined the term 'fake news' did so in a limited way, tending to focus on the intention of the authors of fake news articles. For example, Hans Kristensen, from Federation of American Scientists, characterised fake news as articles that are 'intended to distort or mislead' rather than simply the conveyance of incorrect information. Dr Jacob Parakilas, a researcher from Chatham House, thought that the term should 'be reserved for sites offering clearly inaccurate news headlines, usually promoted through paid advertisements'. Similarly, several respondents used the term 'clickbait' when referring to fake news websites – 'clickbait' being online content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular webpage. These definitions and comments are consistent with the definition I am using (see 'What is fake news?'), in that they focus on stories for which the authors have little to no interest in the truth. Elliot Higgins (the Director of Bellingcat) also touched on the issue of intention by stating that 'social media allows for news consumption to be gamed, for profit and propaganda.'

Nonetheless, when asked for examples of fake news, many respondents offered news stories that they had read in the 'mainstream media' and it was repeatedly noted that governments, politicians, lobbyists, campaigners and journalists are all capable of promoting misleading information, such as through spin, lack of balance or omission. Two respondents actively defined such activity as fake news. For example, an experienced former UK diplomat claimed that Western mainstream media coverage of conflicts in the Middle East 'has become extremely unbalanced, which is a form of fake news'.

#### Examples of fake news

Respondents were asked to give examples of stories or news outlets that they considered to be 'fake news'. In terms of outlets, a wide variety of formats and publications were offered as examples. These included mainstream but partisan outlets, like the Daily Mail and Fox News; non-mainstream, partisan websites, like Breitbart and the Canary; so-called 'clickbait' webpages, like 'One Weird Trick' advertisements; news organisations with close connections to governments, such as RT (formerly Russia Today); websites that arguably promote conspiracy

theories, such as *globalresearch.ca*; and websites that are satirical but are not clearly advertised as such, including the Chicago Civic Tribune. It was also claimed by one respondent that the BBC sometimes carries or repeats claims that may originate from unreliable sources. The four most mentioned news outlets that respondents characterised as fake news were Sputnik, formerly The Voice of Russia (mentioned by five respondents), RT (mentioned by four respondents), Fox News (mentioned by four respondents) and the Daily Mail (mentioned by three respondents).

Several respondents gave examples of fake news stories that, arguably, supported the objectives of the Russian state. One example given, by Hans Kristensen, was of a story carried by RT that included false information that US tactical nuclear weapons in Turkey had been moved to Romania. He claimed that Russian news media approached him for comment on the story but withdrew their approach when they realised he intended to rebuke the story. Another respondent claimed that local news agencies in Russia were knowingly repeating the Russian government's claims, which the respondent felt were incorrect, about Russian compliance (or lack thereof) with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Treaty.

On the 'Western' side of things, two prominent British Pugwashites felt that the mainstream media had a history of inaccuracy in reporting on Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programme, with one claiming that many stories were 'designed to alarm and to prejudice the West against Iran'. It was also claimed by a number of respondents that states, politicians and lobbyists (including opponents of arms control) regularly 'spin' or 'hype' stories to fit their agenda. One US-based analyst claimed that it is common to read or hear statements about a Russian 'build-up' of nuclear weapons without evidence to back it up. There was also a mention of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, that has been *accused* of making false claims about Syrian chemical weapons use.

One respondent relayed an interesting example of fake news, which involved an author on the website Veterans Today repeatedly claiming that Israel used a nuclear weapon in Yemen, using video footage purporting to be from the alleged incident and various 'scientific' claims to back up his case.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Veterans Today has repeatedly been accused of being a conspiracy theory website and blatantly anti-Semitic (claims this author supports).

### Is fake news new?

Respondents were asked to what extent they thought fake news was a new problem, particularly whether new technologies were affecting the credibility of news outputs. Almost 50% of survey respondents expressed the view that the internet had created unique problems or exacerbated pre-existing issues in the media vis-à-vis the spread of fake news. A number of respondents noted that the internet had increased ordinary people's ability to create or reproduce online content and reach very large audiences through social media, which helped

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<sup>5</sup> Background on this story from Bellingcat here: <https://tinyurl.com/y7gchh6k>

'spread' and 'fuel' the fake news phenomenon. Pugwashite Vincenzo Camporini, from the Istituto Affari Internazionali, put it as such, "The birth and development of the net and of social media has blurred the line between competent and reliable sources and incompetent and unreliable sources, making it easier for fake news to spread without being effectively challenged." Conversely, one respondent felt that the internet provided new opportunities for citizens to conduct their own investigations which, in theory, could help counter politically-motivated lies.

The most recurrent sentiment expressed in this section was that the main problem with online news content was institutional rather than technological. It was repeatedly claimed that the mainstream media, while biased in places, still maintained basic journalistic standards and processes. Similarly, one respondent noted the sense of prestige and competition among professional journalists, which resulted in high-quality work. It was widely felt that these standards did not apply to many online authors and publications.

However, some felt that the 'traditional', mainstream media also had problems with fake news, even preceding the internet age. One member of the BP Executive felt that, historically, the mainstream press has been an unreliable source in times of war. Another felt that the 'marketisation' of the UK media, particularly the advent of the market-orientated The Sun newspaper in 1969, had led to a decline in editorial standards and educational content.

## ***Section Two***

### Does fake news matter?

Respondents were asked to consider if it mattered whether the public had an accurate understanding of WMD related issues and whether the fake news phenomenon could actually affect policy debates, at the societal or government levels.

All survey respondents felt that it was important for the general public to be well-informed about WMD and related issues. A number of respondents stated that the extreme importance of the subject meant that it required input and consideration from all levels of society. Others felt that an absence of public knowledge could lead to government's 'downplaying' their own activities or using inaccurate information to justify their own policies. However, the majority sentiment among respondents was more straightforward: that an informed population, particularly in a democracy like the UK, helps produce the best policy decisions. For example, Dr Ian Crossland, from the BP Executive, said: "Governments respond to the electorate - especially just before elections - and if the public is misinformed this could slant government policy in the wrong direction."

An interesting contribution came from Sebastian Brixey-Williams, a researcher at British American Security Information Council, who said: "What really matters is the narrative we use to construct the world: over a long period, repeated use of fake (or partially fake) news can mould that narrative, and as ever, narratives are

the basis for policy. Further, in a crisis, when adrenaline is high and news reports are few and far between, fake news reports could have significant implications, such as miscalculation or distraction.”

### Regulating fake news

Respondents were asked to consider whether websites believed to produce fake news should be regulated. Overall, there was little appetite for government intervention in this area. Six of the respondents explicitly or implicitly appealed to free speech principles. A similar number felt that government-led regulation would be unlikely to work, either for technical reasons or because of the subjective nature of what constitutes ‘fake news’.

However, some respondents offered suggestions for measures short of government regulation, particularly involving providers of online content. Jacob Parakilas, from Chatham House, argued that, “codes of conduct and delisting/deprioritizing in search engine results - if done responsibly and transparently - can have an important and useful role to play in limiting the spread of fake news.” Another respondent, who works in policy for a major political party, said, “Distributors of reputable content, have an obligation to check the reliability or accuracy of a particular source so they do not perpetuate fake news. Therefore the emphasis should be on encouraging sites such as Facebook to flag content accordingly, rather than banning the content outright.”

Others felt it was important to focus on the consumers of fake news, using either the media or education to help the audience become more critical. Comments included “we need to find a sufficient pedagogic solution so that people have the critical faculties to identify fake news themselves. If more of these issues were raised in the syllabus then maybe it would be less likely that people would believe them”.

### How should experts respond?

Respondents to the survey were asked to consider how experts on WMD, like Pugwashites, should respond to or operate in the context of fake news stories about their specialist topic.

Eight respondents felt that experts on WMD should actively and publicly ‘fact-check’ and challenge stories they consider to be fake news. When asked how experts should behave, responses included ‘clear, quick, verifiable rebuttals’, ‘publicly dissect fake news reports to demonstrate their falsehood’ and ‘repudiate and challenge in the press’. A related suggestion was to ‘create resources to provide actual verifiable facts, preferably in a systematic manner (eg. a website / database, rather than one-off tweets)’.

However, three respondents, with a significant amount of experience, raised concerns about the difficulty in successfully challenging popular fake news stories. Professor David Caplin, from the BP Executive, felt that fake news is often more dramatic (and thus more compelling) than efforts to correct it, citing the

example of widespread fears about MMR vaccines. Professor John Finney, from BP Executive, argued that to counter fake news with evidence requires finding a way to reach the 'consumer' of the fake news. Similarly, as mentioned early, Hans Kristensen relayed how difficult and time-consuming it was to challenge a totally false story about the removal of US nuclear weapons from Turkey, as Russian news media were uninterested in sources who wanted to rebuke the story.

Finally, Dr Heather Williams (King's College London) made a proposal worthy of further consideration. She called for a 'fact-checking think tank or organisation that is committed to providing a balanced perspective'. Her view was that the majority of NGOs have a political agenda and only 'check the facts' that they disagree with. Furthermore, many research NGOs produce accurate information and analysis but spend little time on fact-checking the work of other organisations and media sources.

### **Final remarks**

This initial investigation into the views and experiences of Pugwashites, vis-à-vis fake news, has raised some interesting comments, examples and questions.

It is clear from the responses that the fake news phenomenon includes stories and claims about WMD, at least in terms of chemical and nuclear weapons, and that there is some appetite among leading Pugwashites to find appropriate responses to deal with either individual 'fake news' stories or the problem as a whole. It is also clear that, while many believe the internet has exacerbated the problems of 'fake' or misleading news on WMD, there are also issues with the mainstream, 'traditional' media. There have always been people interested in promoting erroneous stories for 'profit and propaganda'.

Some interesting questions raised by this research, include:

- How are these issues perceived by experts and individuals in countries outside of the UK and USA, particularly Russia?
- How practical are the proposals for expert responses to fake news, such as a think tank specialising in fact-checking on WMD?
- What are the real-world implications of 'fake news' consumption? While there is a lot of fake news content out there, it is unclear how people value it in relation to other types of evidence / news.
- How does age relate to one's understand of what is meant by 'fake news'?