

IDENTIFYING FAKE NEWS TOOLKIT WORKSHOP

<http://www.janelawson.co.uk/gallery/how-we-got-to-where-we-are-ii/>

Saturday 4th August, Portico Library

SOLUTIONS

From Post-Truth by James Ball (2017)

<https://www.jamesrball.com>

@jamesrbuk

POLITICIANS

Don't explain

It's a very old saying in politics that if you're explaining, you're losing.

e.g. it was pointless trying to take down the £350 million a week claim by explaining the U.K.'s rebate - it just meant that Voter Leave's core message was repeated more often and more widely than before.

Learning when to engage and when not to take the bait, or to offer a rival narrative instead of an attack on details, is going to become a key political skill.

Don't Complain

Attacking the media can look weak and polling evidence shows that a majority of the population across multiple democracies are looking for strong national leaders. Such complaints also drive their own core supporters away from the centre and diminish the trust in public institutions.

Don't just focus on fake news

To focus on just this aspect of bullshit is to avoid the bigger and harder problems which won't be subject to technological solutions: distorted news, viral hoaxes and hyper-partisan memes, bullshit from political campaigns and more don't fall under the fake news umbrella and also need tackling.

Teach media literacy in schools

Basic tools of media literacy – how to evaluate sources, how to judge claims by basic rules of thumb, and even some practical statistics to help us judge what's really going on rather than what suits what we want to believe in the heat of the moment.

Don't bring down the edifice on top of yourself

Any individual politician benefits from attacking the system, but they're all hurt by the collective effect of the attacks.

Bring targeted ads into the public eye

Require any communication from a registered campaign, PAC or similar institution to be registered with an official body, who immediately makes it public and openly accessible. This would be a minor extension of current rules, such as those which state that material must show who is promoting it, but could make a big difference to keeping campaigns accountable to the public.

Don't look like part of the establishment unless you have to

Trump, Farage and Gove managed to present themselves as outside the political establishment, as figures of change, and as people somehow outside the elite.

MEDIA

Watch your headlines

Headlines need to work in isolation. If the media is reporting on dubious or untrue claims they need to be noted in the headline, if the political quote is baseless we need to say so at the top.

Complexity is not a virtue

If what we're trying to do is challenge a short and simple – but false – claim... Why not put the short answer at the beginning of the piece, then walk through the reasoning and the caveats lower down, for those who are interested? The UK habit of putting the most significant facts at the top of the story may lack the

elegance of the US investigative writing style, but it might get the facts across to a bigger audience. Lots of the people who build bullshit narratives are celebrated for being clear. The rest of us should aspire to be clear, too.

Reconsider the 'view from nowhere'

'Objective' news is a holdover from the era when people trusted authorities and had respect for brands – an era which may still exist to an extent. But there may be a new model, familiar to UK broadsheet readers, based on being clear about source material, still striving for accuracy and fairness, but being honest about the biases of staff and maybe even the institution itself.

Explain how the media works

Journalists know why all stories include statements from the target of the piece, and know what certain phrasings, in-jokes etc. mean. They know the limits imposed by laws and by regulators. Those limits affect how stories are presented and how news organisations act – and journalists should try to do more to explain these in simple terms where relevant.

Cross the bubble, and help the audience do the same

Organisations need to contain a diversity of opinion; without this they will struggle to report on e.g. Trump or Leave – and struggle to see which controversies connect with supporters, rather than just opponents, of campaigns and candidates. In the UK this also means breaking the dominance of London over the national media. News organisations can also work to break readers out of their bubbles – BuzzFeed news is trying out presenting a curated sample of Facebook posts from diverse viewpoints at the bottom of some political reports, to bust readers 'outside your bubble'.

Rethink fact checking

Could some fact checking be centralised to non-artisan outlets subject to independent audit? A solution like this ends the problem of dozens of reporters spending hundreds of person-hours scrabbling to fact check the claim made in 10 seconds – and may also prove easier for Facebook and Google to incorporate into technological fixes.

Fact checking can backfire: for example, dozens of news outlets tried to rebut Sean Spicer's claim that they'd reported 78 terror incidents less than they merited and created highlights reels of attacks connected to extreme Islamic terror; they couldn't definitively debunk his claim because they couldn't prove they'd covered them 'enough' but by broadcasting compilations of their footage they did spread his narrative about the threat from Islamist terror. According to Guardian social and new formats editor Martin Belam, "to really challenge the spread of this nonsense we need to work out what we are going to do about more effectively spreading the truth."

If you want to be trusted, be trustworthy

if outlets are going to carry on running viral pieces without checking, and without correction, then one fix might be to find a new way of presenting or flagging such stories – using different colour coding, branding or other visual signals to try to make a clear distinction between what is being presented as matching top editorial standards and what is not.

Media outlets should make it really clear if they've published something which turns out to be untrue.

Find ways to push corrections as far and wide as errors

Facebook can either give a few trusted outlets (at first) the ability to push corrections or retractions to anyone who saw an original post, or even look for volunteers to sign up to a third party independent arbiter who could send them out. In turn, Facebook could reward such outlets with slightly better visibility on the platform.

Think about where you get your content

... Viral agencies who don't check content themselves are a point of weakness for anyone trying to get bullshit or fake news into the mainstream media: if a hoaxer or guerilla marketing campaign targets the agency, they can get into every newsroom. Outlets should be on guard against this risk.

Stop funding fake news outlets

Don't show the recommendations from content promotion agencies such as Outbrain; the recommendations drive content directly to fake news sites.

Talk to science reporters

Science desks have tackled issues where a vocal but evidence-lite minority has challenged fact-based consensus frequently over the past few decades, and if we're looking for lessons on what to do – and what not to do – we could do much worse than looking at the rise (and partial fall) of the anti-vaccination movement, and of how the mainstream media reporting of climate change.

Build a new public media

Emily Bell, director of the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, suggests that the four or five leading technology companies donate \$1 billion in endowment each for "a new type of engine for independent journalism". Bell argues this endowment could produce a new form of public service journalism outlet, the 21st-century answer to the BBC or NPR, unburdened by the legacy of their old business models and structures.

Look at why parts of the audience are leaving

Following the Iraq War, the financial crisis and the MPs expenses scandal there has been a massive decline in trust in the traditional establishment. Many people feel abandoned or rejected by the political class. The mainstream media has failed to capture the public anger that these collective crises have created.

READERS/VOTERS

Burst your bubble

Make an effort to hear from people you don't agree with, via social media or seeking out other news sources.

Engage System Two

Even just a few seconds' thought lets us make several quick assessments. What's the source of the information – is it from a major news outlet? Unnamed politician? An anonymous account? Can we verify the claim that's made? If we're about to share a screenshot, does it seem credible – would the person concerned really say that? If we have doubts, we can easily and quickly Google for facts or rebuttals. Slowing down for even just a few seconds makes us much less likely to share bullshit.

Learn some stats

Even a very basic grasp of statistics makes you much harder to fool. This is about being able to build up a series of mental shortcuts about whether or not numbers are plausible or big. So if we hear that the cost of benefit fraud is £1.3 billion a year, on its own this doesn't tell us much. But if we know that the rough amount the government spends on working age benefits, or even just the total amount of government spending – around £780 billion – we can put it in context. Knowing the basics of how averages work, how percentages work and how to put figures in context gives us a lot of power to independently assess what we read – and doesn't even require us to do too much maths. If this grabs your interest, the 1954 book *How to Lie with Statistics* by Darrell Huff is a great (and accessible) place to start.

Treat narratives you believe as sceptically as ones you don't

Try not to succumb to conspiratorial thinking

A shared sense of reality, a counter to conspiracies, and some basic consensus are vital to healthy democracy.