

Democratic Assault by 'Alternative Facts'

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It is, unfortunately, a matter of fact that less than half of UK adults say the news media is doing a good job at getting facts right, the [worst rate for trustworthiness](#) in western Europe. It is also a sad fact that the British press is not just the most politically unbalanced, it is [regarded](#) as the most right-wing and biased in Europe as well.

It is these two facts, untrustworthiness and bias by the mainstream media that has allowed Britain to shift from a fairly consistent idea of the political realities of their country, communities and people they interact with – to one dominated by propaganda and disinformation. This seismic shift has taken less than a decade to take a real grip on Britain's political discourse and is now driving not just public opinion but political policy.

Hannah Arendt, widely considered one of the most important political philosophers of the twentieth century [wrote](#), –

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.’ So to defend our democracy we need to analyse the assault on our shared reality by those who would seek to create a world of [‘alternative facts.’](#)”

And ‘alternative facts’ is something you already know something about because the media space is full of it. In reality, it is proving to be little more than an intervention on democracy by those with a hidden agenda.

As MEP Molly Scott Cato says on the [The Brexit Syndicate](#) –

“Any attempt to criticise the purveyors of disinformation – or to assert a right to limit the use of propaganda within a democratic system – is met with accusations of oppression and claims that creating a legal structure within which a genuinely free media might flourish are attempts to deprive the propagandists of their freedom. But, as Winston Smith observes in 1984 by George Orwell, ‘Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four’ and not to enable those who would claim that it equals five. I examined some of these issues in a [report](#) about the Leveson Inquiry, concluding that our media system is anything but free.”

By the nature of politics, the right-wing will always have more money, resources and power than the left-wing. One is fundamentally capitalist and the other socialist – albeit that rather binary description has many caveats.

This is evidenced by the 'alt-right' being considerably louder, (certainly in Britain) than its opposing movement – and has managed to permeate the mainstream media to such an extent that entirely false claims like the £350 million Britain would save by not being a member state of the EU would go on health spending. The message there was clear, Britain was made poorer by membership and could therefore not afford to look after its own. Rich and powerful people who promoted this idea knew then that this claim was entirely false. The [evidence](#) provided by the OBR was clear. It was fake news – but millions were taken in by it.

No matter what your political allegiances are, this next fact is at best very disturbing. Academics at the London School of Economics analysed the content of eight national newspapers between 1 September and 1 November 2015, when Mr Corbyn was first elected. That information was then published in [The Independent](#), the only paper to have done so.

“The media researchers found that in 52 per cent of articles about the Labour leader, his own views were not included – while in a further 22 per cent they were “present but taken out of context” or otherwise distorted.”

The results were in fact even worse when looked at from a different angle.

In just 15 per cent of 812 articles analysed, Mr Corbyn’s views were present but challenged, and in only 11 per cent were they present without alteration. Think about that – only 11 per cent of reports about the comments and thoughts of the opposition leader in Britain was unaltered.

Dr Bart Cammaerts, the project director concluded –

“Allowing an important and legitimate political actor, ie the leader of the main opposition party, to develop their own narrative and have a voice in the public space is paramount in a democracy.”

Other good examples of politically pinpointed deceit in the mainstream media are demonstrated no better than [false newspaper reports](#) from the right-wing press that have included claims that Jeremy Corbyn’s ancestor was the “despotic” master of a Victorian workhouse (Daily Express), that he rides a “Chairman Mao-style bicycle (The Times) and that he will appoint a special minister for Jews (the Sun). Whilst just personal smears – all these claims are designed to blur what is fact and what is not.

We are now seeing this false narrative at the very forefront of British politics. The breakaway faction of mainly the Labour party, the Independent Group, justifies its action by saying anti-semitism has become so endemic in the party since Jeremy Corbyn became leader, that they had no choice but to quit. And yet, an in-depth report by none other than the Commons Home Affairs Committee, [found](#) there was “no reliable, empirical evidence” that Labour had any more of an anti-semitism problem than any other British political party, the Tories included. Two ways to look at that is that either there is no anti-semitism issue in the first place or that the Tories are just as bad. Either way, the accusations are unfounded and therefore false.

A big part of the problem is that this era of ‘alternative facts’ and fake news have ultimately

been advanced and then accelerated by social media. Their own false narrative is that due to free speech rights they should not be responsible for the content their platforms share, irrespective of the damage they do. The reality is they simply do not want to spend the money to moderate the content on their own product properly.

For example, In 2018, General Motors employed 180,000 people producing cars. It made \$147 billion in revenue. Facebook's revenue last year was [\\$56 billion](#) – and it employs 35,000 people globally. Facebook spends half that of GM (per \$billion) on people to do the job. Facebook's workforce tasked with reviewing the most offensive content on the web is [underpaid, overworked, and poorly supported](#) – GM can't afford for their workforce to fail otherwise the people who buy their product could get hurt. Many, many people are mentally and physically hurt by social media. The comparison may not be great – but you get the point.

The result of the failure of social media platforms is that the 'alternative facts', the fake news, was then followed up with very public animosity and hostility, which has now become the common normality of our political discourse.

The truth is, that in this environment the level of false information impairs society's ability to absorb facts so real evidence-based knowledge declines – and the reality of a genuine and public democratic debate literally dissolves without us noticing.

It is common knowledge that the Daily Mail is perhaps the most untrusted newspaper in Britain. It is a point of fact that it also happens to be the [most right-wing](#). It should be disturbing to know that the Daily Mail's website is now the largest English-speaking newspaper website in the world and has been since about 2011. But somehow it isn't. In 2017, Wikipedia editors even [banned the Daily Mail](#) as a source for its website after deeming it "generally unreliable". And yet, it's powerful influence over the political narrative in Britain is equally valid as a claim.

And as Molly Scott Cato says –

"The structures of propaganda, making use of the classic techniques of the [Big Lie](#) and of constant repetition of a false narrative as honed by authoritarians in the last century, are flourishing on the hard right."

Like the beginnings of road rage in the early 1990s, [Britain then soared](#) to worst incidents by numbers by 2000 in Europe, moving to last year where over 60 per cent of drivers in a [survey](#) reported a verbal or physical attack in the last 12 months – the political narrative is now getting out of control and causing real harm.

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