

An aerial photograph of the Houses of Parliament and the Elizabeth Tower (Big Ben) in London. The image shows the intricate Gothic architecture of the buildings, the River Thames, and the surrounding cityscape. A dark semi-transparent box is overlaid on the top left corner, containing white text.

**MEND Submission to
Culture, Media and Sport
Select Committee Inquiry
into 'Fake News'**

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Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Inquiry into 'Fake News'

Submission from MEND: Muslim Engagement and Development

7th November 2017

1.0 Introduction and Position of MEND

1.1 MEND is a community funded organisation that seeks to empower and encourage British Muslims within local communities to be more actively involved in British media and politics. For too long, British Muslims have remained on the margins of public and political debate about their religion and place in modern Britain and the level of Muslim participation in media and politics remains woefully low. As such, MEND seeks to enable British Muslims to engage more effectively with political and media institutions and play a greater role in British politics and society by instilling confidence, competence and awareness within them. Enhancing mainstream participation of communities that are under-represented and vulnerable is an important step towards deepening and strengthening our democracy.

1.2 One of the greatest challenges facing the active civic, social and political engagement of British Muslims is a current atmosphere of hatred and mistrust that has escalated over recent years and which has been fuelled by 'fake news'. In a climate lacking in respect, stigmatised communities become vulnerable to hatred – hatred that in many cases has escalated to violence and even to deaths, as has been demonstrated by this year's attack in Finsbury Park.

1.3 In addressing the existing toxic atmosphere, it is imperative that there is immediate action taken to tackle the impacts of biased and misleading media coverage through improved media regulation on a Leveson compliant basis.

1.4 Indeed, the Leveson Inquiry (to which MEND also gave evidence) directly addressed the issues surrounding 'fake news', including its prominence in established traditional media outlets, and the development of online outlets specialising in 'fake news'. In particular, the inquiry highlighted the inadequacies of existing self-regulation practices of traditional media that has led to serious media inaccuracies that are frequently published without adequate correction.

1.5 Our submission to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee Inquiry into 'fake news' therefore concludes that:

- 'Fake news' is well established both in established print media outlets, and in online outlets.
- The prominence of 'fake news' throughout the media industry is a consequence of the continued failure of traditional media to reform its ineffective regulatory system on a Leveson compliant basis.
- The continued perpetuation of biased and misleading media reporting has dangerous consequences for the safety, as well as the social, political and civic engagement of vulnerable minority communities within British society.

2.0 What is 'fake news'? Where does biased but legitimate commentary shade into propaganda and lies?

2.1 A working definition of 'fake news' must include stories (both in print and online) which:

- Contain significantly inaccurate, distorted, exaggerated or misleading information which is known to be of this nature at the time of publication, or which is not retracted and adequately corrected with equal prominence in a timely manner once its nature is known.

- Platform false statements and claims masquerading as opinions.

2.2 Furthermore, ‘fake news’ is frequently characterised by selective reporting for the sake of driving a specific political, social or economic agenda. For example, this may be for the benefit of furthering a certain position within policy making, or it may be a tactic employed by media outlets in an attempt to increase profits.

2.3 This agenda driven ‘fake news’ is readily witnessed within a variety of issues, particularly when it comes to the topics of Muslims, immigration and the decision to leave the European Union. When it comes to these issues (and many others), elements of the press have been proven guilty of publishing serious inaccuracies, which are frequently known to be untrue at the time of publication;¹ which inevitably drive public perceptions in a prescribed and intentional manner; and which necessarily have an impact on policy-making.

2.4 In the above sense, ‘fake news’ often falls within the domain of propaganda, which includes stories categorised by:

- A centralised, deliberate and agenda driven purpose.
- A basis in purposefully selective or deliberately designed presentation of evidence and information.
- Strategies that serve to glorify or demonise individuals or groups through generalisations, simplifications, distortions, exaggerations or inaccuracies.

2.5 Considering the above definition, it is clear that such a problem exists both within print media, and within online news outlets. However, the social impact of ‘fake news’ in print media can often be more damaging than it may be online. This is due to the fact that newspapers are largely considered to have more credibility and legitimacy than online sites, and have a wider reach when it comes to their dissemination in broadcasting and influence in political agenda setting.

3.0 If all views are equally valid, does objectivity and balance lose all value?

3.1 Opinion and debate is an important facet of a strong democracy and should be encouraged. The media therefore, plays a valuable role in providing a platform for strong democratic debate. However, there must be a distinction between fact and opinion.

3.2 Generally speaking, opinion does not qualify as ‘fake news’. However, comment pieces within print and online media news outlets are frequently replete with heavily distorted or invented ‘facts’ or opinions that are presented as fact.² As such, content that presents itself as objectively authoritative must be held to the same requirements of accuracy as any other news item, else it may fall into the category of ‘fake news’.

3.3 To give one example of a current vacuum in protection against opinions masquerading as news, pieces titled as ‘opinion’ are currently exempt from many of the clauses contained in IPSO’s editors code of practice. This has led to authors such as Trevor Kavanagh being permitted to discuss the “Muslim Problem” and no remedy for the Fatima Manji case (see below).

3.4 It would be unnecessary and even undesirable to remedy every piece of ‘fake news’ – for example, comedy for the sake of deliberate satire could potentially be classified as ‘fake news’ under the above definition – and, as such, a complete ban on ‘fake news’ is not within the realms of possibility. However, there needs to be greater consideration within journalistic output for the responsible and ethical dissemination of ideas. As such, holding opinion pieces to the same accuracy standards as other content contributes towards promoting responsible reporting, and also allows for the continuation of free and democratic debate.

4.0 What impact has ‘fake news’ on public understanding of the world, and also on the public response to traditional journalism?

¹ See *The Sun* “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” case below.

² See Kelvin MacKenzie’s comments on a “clearly violent religion” in the Fatima Manji case below.

4.1 There is a clear danger presented if the public are not equipped to distinguish between reliable and unreliable news sources – regardless of whether they are in print or online. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is presently no clear standardised method to affirm reliability beyond name-recognition.

4.2 Furthermore, it would be unreasonable to assume that all (or even most) members of the public have enough knowledge on every topic – or indeed, the time at hand – to successfully analyse the background and context of every story they read. The result of this is that print-based and online media outlets which propagate ‘fake news’ may be consumed and valued on the same basis as more reliable media.

4.3 As such, ‘fake news’ has the ability to severely damage public understandings by misinforming individuals and distorting debates surrounding important social, political and economic issues. Furthermore, the effect (and often the intended purpose of ‘fake news’) is to stir up emotive responses. This has fuelled an atmosphere of hatred and division based upon misunderstandings and personal emotional responses over evidence and reason.

4.4 Consequently, there is an ethical responsibility of those reporting to mitigate the effects of inaccurate and distorted narratives within content that claims to be news, and therefore, which implicitly claims to be objective and authoritative.

4.5 The impacts of the consumption of this ‘fake news’ is acutely felt by minority social, ethnic and religious communities, and Muslims in particular. Firstly, the level of bias, misinformation and distortion within news reporting on Muslims has fostered a sense of distrust in the media institutions amongst parts of the Muslim community, and for many individuals, has led to a disengagement from traditional media.

4.6 Secondly, the spread of ‘fake news’ and media negativity towards British Muslim communities (studies have demonstrated that there are 21 negative references to Muslims within British media output for every single neutral or positive reference)³ has led to feelings of a lack of social value and accusations that Muslims have no place within the national identity. MEND’s recent submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement highlighted the need to promote balanced media representations of British Muslims and other minority groups in order to maintain a sense of belonging and national membership. This is compounded by the need to implement industry initiatives to promote positive and diverse representations of Muslims and minorities within the mainstream media and broadcasting. As Riz Ahmed warned during Channel 4’s annual diversity lecture at the House of Commons in March 2017, the lack of diverse voices and stories displayed in broadcasting led those from minority backgrounds to “switch off and retreat to fringe narratives, to bubbles online and sometimes even off to Syria... If we fail to represent, we are in danger of losing people to extremism... In the mind of the Isis recruit, he’s the next James Bond, right? Have you seen some of those Isis propaganda videos? They are cut like action movies. Where is the counter-narrative? Where are we telling these kids they can be heroes in our stories, that they are valued?”⁴

4.7 Thirdly, focus groups performed with Muslim communities in compiling evidence for MEND’s submission to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement revealed that there is a strong sense that the basic values which all British citizens should support are the principles of universal humanity; respect, understanding, empathy, and good manners to name but a few. However, the toxic atmosphere created by hatred and division is threatening these values which all British citizens should be fighting to uphold. This threat is specifically coming from far-right politicians, journalists and commentators; and takes the form of sensationalist, misleading and exploitative media reporting – much of which can be classified as ‘fake news’.

4.8 As such, this overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Muslims within the media is detrimental to any integration strategy based on creating and maintaining common-ground and a sense of collective British identity. Such negative misrepresentations are clearly incredibly harmful

³ See Baker, Paul, Costas Gabrielatos, and Tony McEnery. Discourse analysis and media attitudes: the representation of Islam in the British Press. Cambridge: University Press, 2013.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/mar/02/riz-ahmed-warns-lack-of-diversity-on-tv-will-drive-young-to-isis>.

to social cohesion strategies, as irresponsible and sensationalist reporting works to propagate stereotypes and further fuel an atmosphere of hatred. This is particularly so considering the tendency within some parts of the media to promote an “us vs them” dichotomy in reporting stories about Muslims. This is clearly a mechanism for stoking tensions and division, and excludes Muslims from the perceived national identity of “us”.

4.9 The resulting effect of this toxic atmosphere is the stigmatisation of vulnerable communities, including Muslims and other social, ethnic and religious minorities. This leaves innocent people open to attack, insult and abuse in the form of hate crime. Indeed, amidst the vicious media battle that surrounded the vote to leave the EU, statistics from 30 police forces across England showed an 89% increase in hate crimes and hate incidents in schools during the month preceding the referendum.⁵

4.10 Beyond online news sources, these obvious dangers to public understanding and the resulting consequences are exacerbated when newspapers continue to disseminate ‘fake news’. The increased danger in newspapers’ participation in propagating ‘fake news’ exists for a variety of reasons:

4.10.1 Newspapers are also prominent online and possess significant readerships that far outreach the readership of many of the online news outlets.

4.10.2 Newspaper headlines are physical and frequent sights in everyday life – regardless of whether individuals actually read the newspaper, the act of seeing a headline in passing (in a shop or on a train) is often enough to digest the message presented.

4.10.3 Newspapers frequently set the agendas of broadcasting and other forms of media.

4.10.4 Newspaper editors and stakeholders have unique access to government officials and those in political power. For example, it is well known that the Daily Mail was instrumental in Theresa May’s ascent to Leader of the Conservative Party,⁶ and that the Prime Minister and Daily Mail editor have had close relations throughout her tenure.⁷ In terms of media regulation, this has led Brian Cathcart to conclude that Theresa May must make a difficult decision between “*standing up to the corporate national newspapers and becoming a political leader in her own right, and on the other, accepting that, for as long as they allow her to remain in Downing Street, she must be their doormat... Received political wisdom and recent history suggest that she will choose the doormat option and will abort the entire Leveson process as the corporate press is demanding. This is not because she enjoys being trodden on by Rupert Murdoch and Paul Dacre, but because many think the press bosses are so powerful that she has no alternative.*”⁸ Consequently, within these relationships, newspapers have a proven ability to influence political events, policies, and debates. Thus, the danger of the ‘fake news’ they propagate is heightened.

4.10.5 Newspapers are largely considered within public opinion of being more credible and objective. This gives the impression of greater authority and adds value to the analysis they present.

4.11 However, the actual credibility of newspapers is often a product of their perceived ability to enforce responsible standards of reporting. Newspapers have a well-developed PR strategy to give the appearance of being subject to independent regulation. However, after the media’s continued inability to effectively self-regulate was exposed during the Leveson Inquiry, the

⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hate-incidents-crimes-schools-89-brexite-campaign-figures-students-pupils-xenophobia-racism-a7720551.html>.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2016/jul/01/paul-dacre-daily-mail-plays-tory-kingmaker-theresa-may>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/mar/30/paul-dacre-theresa-may-private-dinner-daily-mail-editor-no-10>

⁸ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/brian-cathcart/theresa-may-press-and-lesson-from-history>

industry attempted to reconstruct the same system (effectively rebranding the PCC as “IPSO”) in order to continue to avoid accountability.

4.12 While significant energy has been exerted in attempting to give IPSO the appearance of independence and effectiveness, their significant failings exposes their ineffectiveness – in particular, IPSO’s failure to tackle ‘fake news’ within newspaper reporting. These failings will be discussed further below. Despite the lack of any meaningful accountability that IPSO provides, the presence of such a body gives the industry an illusion of accountability, which affords publications the impression of greater credibility.

5.0 IPSO’s failings and the spread of ‘fake news’

5.1 The ineffectiveness of IPSO contributes to the spreading of ‘fake news’ in a variety of ways:

5.2 **Pointless remedies:** the corrections demanded by IPSO for breaches in the editor’s code of practice are typically severely delayed and far less prominent than the original inaccuracy. This is especially so where the whole story is false or the headline is part of the breach. A case in point is that IPSO has never ordered a front-page correction for a front-page breach. Therefore, their contribution to regulation is no deterrent to the publishing of ‘fake news’ as there is no real consequence for publishers.

5.2.1 An example of this can be found in IPSO’s dealing with the Sun in 2015. In November 2015, the Sun published a front-page story with the misleading and inflammatory headline ‘1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis’. This article was run 10 days after the Bataclan terrorist attack, during a time when British and European Muslims were experiencing increased anti-Muslim suspicion and hostility. The Sun’s article did not accurately report on the poll that it cited. The actual poll asked individuals whether they had sympathy with ‘young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria’. The *Sun*’s reporting failed to point out that ‘sympathy’ is not the same thing as ‘support’ or ‘agreement’ and that not all fighters in Syria are jihadis. The [polling company](#) itself stated, ‘Survation do not support or endorse the way in which the poll’s findings have been interpreted.’ Four months after complaints were lodged to IPSO, they required the publication to print a short piece buried on page 2 with the vague title “Ipsos ruling upheld”, in which the nature of the complaint was obscured. Given the misleading and deeply damaging impact of the original headline, a more appropriate response would have been for IPSO to require a prompt front-page correction in the Sun. The failure to give the correction equal prominence in a timely fashion did nothing to limit the damage that this piece of ‘fake news’ had already done.

5.3 **Inaction:** IPSO frequently does not act upon complaints in a way that seems to defy common sense and their duty to regulation.

5.3.1 In August 2017, the *Times* printed a story headlined “Christian child forced into Muslim foster care”. The article made a number of misleading statements and provided an inaccurate account of the situation. For example, the article falsely claimed that the child was fostered by a family who “don’t speak English”, while the London Borough of Tower Hamlets stated that the child was fostered by an “English-speaking family of mixed race in this temporary placement”. In response, MEND submitted eight individual concerns to IPSO regarding the inaccurate and distorted content of the article under Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editor’s Code. IPSO stated that it would not investigate any of these complaints due to its concern about the effect investigating the facts of the case would have on the child. This justification for refusal to investigate is unreasonable, given that the *Times*’ had already published stories on the subject, and given the extensive wider public debate that had subsequently occurred. For IPSO, taking no action to verify the information published is an abdication of its responsibility and demonstrates inadequate commitment to upholding press standards and ethics.

5.4 **Lack of impartiality:** This is an issue that is well highlighted in the cases of Fatima Manji and the “Muslim Problem”:

5.4.1 In July 2016, Fatima Manji reported on the Nice terror attacks for Channel Four. In response, Kelvin MacKenzie wrote a piece in the *Sun* attacking Channel Four for having a Muslim woman wearing hijab while reporting on a terrorist incident. Musing on why Channel Four chose Manji for this TV slot, MacKenzie asked, “Was it done to stick one in the eye of the ordinary viewer who looks at the hijab as a sign of the slavery of Muslim women by a male-dominated and clearly violent religion?” When Manji and ITN filed an IPSO complaint on the basis of discrimination, harassment, and inaccuracy, [IPSO rejected](#) the complaint, stating that MacKenzie’s comment that Islam “was clearly a violent religion” was his opinion and could not, therefore, be deemed inaccurate. Furthermore, IPSO board member Trevor Kavanagh publicly defended MacKenzie and stated that Manji had “[made a fool of herself.](#)” A cross-party group of MPs and peers subsequently wrote to IPSO, expressing concern that Kavanagh made these comments while sitting on the regulator’s board. [IPSO responded](#) that while Kavanagh sits on its board, he is not a member of the Complaints Committee that passes judgements and therefore “has no involvement in any rulings made by IPSO. The views expressed by Mr Kavanagh in his column following the IPSO ruling on Manji v The Sun were made in a personal capacity and do not represent the view of IPSO”. This response from IPSO brings into question its ability to function as a genuinely independent and effective regulatory body.

5.4.2 In August 2016, Trevor Kavanagh penned another inflammatory and Islamophobic piece in the *Sun* referencing “The Muslim Problem.” The article generated 150 complaints to IPSO and an [open letter](#) to the editor of the *Sun* signed by over 100 cross-party politicians. [Jewish, Muslim, and interfaith groups](#) also lodged complaints to IPSO, stating that the use of the phrase “The Muslim Problem” clearly evokes the Nazi phrase “The Jewish Problem” and establishes a dangerous precedent with great potential to harm Muslim communities. The fact that this incendiary column was written by Kavanagh, who is the former political editor of the *Sun* and current IPSO board member, once again calls into question whether ISPO can address complaints in a way that is fair and assures individuals that that they can seek redress without fear of victimisation.

5.5 Considering these failings in preventing the spread of ‘fake news’, while IPSO operates in its current form, newspapers are effectively without regulation. This leaves the public vulnerable to misinformation in the form of media distortion and inaccuracy. As such, by blocking implementation the Leveson system by delaying the triggering of section 40, the Government is permitting the media industry to avoid regulation, and is thus facilitating the perpetuation of ‘fake news’.

5.6 It is imperative that the press be either heavily incentivized or required to join a recognised Leveson-compliant regulator, in order to protect the public interest and stem the influence of ‘fake news’ with its inevitable consequences.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 MEND maintains that, in light of present challenges, we would advise the committee to:

- Recommend media reform and the full implementation of the Royal Charter on a Leveson compliant regulator through the commencement of Section 40, whilst also holding the Government to account for its failure to do so thus far.
- Consider further steps to encourage media membership of independent regulators as demonstrating those publications meet a minimum standard of accountability and accuracy.
- Support industry initiatives to promote positive, diverse representations of Muslims and minorities in the mainstream media and commit to improving ethnic diversity in media through schemes encouraging BME recruitment, mentoring and promotion, as well as through greater diversity within broadcasting.