



Fake News



The need for **digital literacy** and **critical analysis** skills.



WebRoots Democracy submission to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry into ‘fake news’.

In response to the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry into so-called ‘fake news’, WebRoots Democracy (the Institute for Digital Democracy) would like to emphasise the need for the focus not to be on fact-checkers or algorithms but on education and digital literacy. It will not be possible to fact-check every story or meme on the internet, but it will be possible to ensure that every student leaves school digital literate.

In our recent report, *Democracy 2.0*¹, we set out the following recommendations on this topic:

- The Government should create a new post called the Digital Democracy Czar. The Czar would have responsibility for advancing a progressive digital democracy agenda and lead on the Government’s response to issues such as fake news and internet trolling.
- Political education should be made compulsory across all schools in the UK up to and including GCSE level. The Government should look into introducing this as a distinct subject with a qualified teacher. With regards to tackling the rise of fake news, students should be taught how to critically analyse what they read on the internet and in the media.

Further to this, we would like to submit the following recommendations to the Committee on mandatory political education, critical analysis skills, and digital literacy skills.

Mandatory political education

Recommendation 1: Political education should be made compulsory across all secondary schools in the UK up to and including GCSE level.

The problem with fake news is not a novel one. Whilst there has been a surge in exclusively fake news websites due to pay-per-click advertising, the problem essentially boils down to readers online being unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. This equally applies to internet memes and even some mainstream publications that spin facts in order to fulfil a political agenda.

Algorithms, white-lists, and fact-checkers will be unable to tackle this problem on their own. They are secondary, reactionary, measures, and it is questionable whether it should even be the responsibility of social media companies to solve a problem that results from a failure of state education.

Currently, citizenship education is only compulsory at certain state comprehensive schools, and with a move towards forced academisation and expanded grammar schools, the subject is at risk of being dropped altogether. It would not be overstating

the matter to say that it is a subject which is not taken seriously by students and teachers alike, despite the best efforts of many teachers, NGOs, and campaigners. Equally, GCSEs in subjects such as politics are not widely available, which leaves few students able to choose to study politics at A Level. This becomes a problem at elections and referenda, when we expect young people to cast an informed vote.

WebRoots Democracy has been gathering views on various digital democracy issues, including this problem of fake news. Our initial findings (based on 93 participants) have shown that 55% believe the 'best way' to deal with fake news is to ensure that citizens are able to critically analyse what they read online, through education in schools. 17% have said the best way is for individuals to use fact-checkers, 11% back censorship by social media companies, and 3% support creating a list of verified news outlets.

97% of our participants support mandatory political education in schools.

Critical analysis skills

Recommendation 2: Young people should be taught how to critically analyse what they view on the internet and in the media.

Citizens both online and offline should be equipped with basic critical analysis skills in order for them to recognise potential biases, unlikely news stories, and unverified 'facts'. Whilst it may be too late to teach those who have left full-time education, we should ensure current students, and thus the future electorate, leave school well aware of how to properly read news sources both on the internet and in print publications.

Since the popularisation of the term 'fake news', a light has been shone on all types of claims made by politicians and news outlets. It is not simply limited to wild stories about Donald Trump being born in Pakistan, but encompasses important claims made by the Leave and Remain campaigns in the EU referendum, and stories published by mainstream media outlets.

Without key critical analysis skills, it is questionable whether users will even think to use fact-checkers when reading stories or sharing content online. Fact-checkers and Facebook can provide no long-term solution for what is a crisis of education.

Digital literacy skills

Recommendation 3: Digital literacy education should be made compulsory in all secondary schools, and a nationwide campaign should be undertaken to encourage adults to take part in digital literacy classes.

We believe that the problem of fake news, should form a part of a much wider curriculum of general digital literacy skills for both children and adults. Knowledge on how to respect others on the internet, how to use the internet safely, and how to make the most of the internet will help tackle related issues such as trolling, data breaches, and digital exclusion.

Whilst this is easier to do for children still in full-time education, it is a much more difficult problem for adults. It is encouraging to see that the Government is making steps² to roll out digital literacy education for adults, we would encourage the Select Committee to back this measure and to call for a full nationwide campaign to encourage adults to take part in digital literacy classes.

Conclusion

We welcome the Select Committee's investigation into this important issue and are happy to provide further comments or evidence in person.

We urge the Select Committee to support and prioritise the three recommendations made in this submission as long term solutions to the crisis of fake news.

WebRoots Democracy

WebRoots Democracy (also known as the Institute for Digital Democracy) is a youth-led think tank focused on the intersection of technology and democratic participation. Its aim is to modernise, enhance, and future-proof democracy in the United Kingdom.

With the advice of industry experts and academics, and the support of an all-party group of MPs, WebRoots Democracy intends to deliver evidence-based tech policy to sustain the future of British democratic participation.

WebRoots Democracy is an independent, non-partisan organisation.

References

¹ [Democracy 2.0: Hitting refresh on the Digital Democracy Commission](#) – WebRoots Democracy, 26 January 2017.

² [Written question 65031](#) – Cat Smith MP/Matt Hancock MP, 22 February 2017.





webrootsdemocracy.org

For enquiries, please email
hello@webrootsdemocracy.org