



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# The role of public service media in the fight against disinformation

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# Introduction

I lead a team at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that specialises in identifying, investigating and reporting on disinformation. Since 2018, we have tracked the explosion in misinformation and seen the real world consequences of people believing untruths. Alongside other media, fact-checking organisations, and – to varying degrees – the social platforms, we work to debunk, verify and educate our audience about how to cope with this deluge of bad information.

I'm particularly proud of what the BBC teams have achieved. Much of the work is impressive and important; I'm certainly not suggesting it should stop. But I believe it could go further. There are gaps in reach: fact-checking best serves an already-engaged audience. Social media flags will only register if you are actively following the discourse of public figures. News reports need to be found or journalists followed to see their material. Many of those most affected by disinformation are simply not seeing these interventions.

To combat disinformation more fully, we need to understand and connect with this “unreached” audience. We need to appreciate that the way people are networked has radically changed. What First Draft refers to as the “broadcast model” of spreading good practice and information (i.e. top down) is no longer sufficient on its own.<sup>1</sup>

I believe public service media (PSM) – with its unique cultural and social influence, wide reach and obligation to serve all audiences – can fill that role; learning from the tactics used by the very actors successfully spreading bad information, to build peer-to-peer relationships and communities that connect directly with those currently missing out.

In this report, I'll be exploring the latest research and some of the most successful interventions from around the globe, to see how PSM can adapt to reach the unreached.

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<sup>1</sup> Dotto, C., Smith, R. and Looft, C., 2021. The “Broadcast” Model No Longer Works In An Era Of Disinformation. [online] First Draft. Available at: <<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/the-broadcast-model-no-longer-works-in-an-era-of-disinformation/>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

## ‘An army for truth’

Maldita: the word is a mild expletive in Spanish that roughly translates as “damn”. It is also the name of a revolutionary crowd-sourcing response to widespread disinformation in Spain, run by Clara Jiménez Cruz.

Most disinformation journalists monitor open source media and push out debunks to a reasonably passive audience. Maldita have created a 45,000-strong, proactive, engaged, multi-generational community of disinformation warriors; what Jiménez Cruz calls an “army for truth”.

When they first started on Twitter, Maldita simply asked followers to share any possible disinformation they saw. Their journalists would investigate and speedily share their findings. Tips flooded in from traditional and social media and – crucially – from within the closed chat app groups journalists struggle to monitor.

Jiménez Cruz is clear: “We don’t think ‘this is daft’; we answer what people are asking because they can’t find it on traditional media, and then they come back to us for things that are more important.”

They post what they find in the same places and in the same way as (in Jiménez Cruz’s words) “the bad guys”: using memes, digital videos, graphics. Their work is engaging, often playful, but in Maldita’s case always factually sound. Content is published on their website, but also on the social sites where disinformation flourishes. They have collaborative relationships that allow their work to be seeded on TV and radio platforms too, believing anti-disinformation content won’t reach who it needs to if it’s kept in a silo.

Maldita sees misinformation as a battle that they and their community are fighting together. This is not top-down, “take your medicine” education; it’s peer-to-peer learning and problem solving. Feedback, evaluation and communication all play vital roles in this

strategy. They host regular live Q&A sessions, and produce popular standalone “how the tech works” pieces (media literacy by any other name).

Their frequent user surveys show their content is liked because it is useful. And they have hit one key unreached group: a large number of their users are older than 55 and say they enjoy the practical, up-beat content, playful attitude and the “all in this together” spirit.

Maldita have created a community of like-minded people, sharing engaging information.

They are not making editorial decisions based on what a small group of journalists consider important and pushing information out, expecting their audience to find it (the linear/broadcast model). Instead, Maldita are part of a circular, dynamic dialogue, asking what their community is hearing and querying, applying journalistic rigour to answering those concerns, and putting good information back in the spaces where their community is active.

# Reaching the ‘unreached’

Information inequality exists. Even in the UK, with the combined firepower and reach of the popular press and public service media, research by the Reuters Institute last spring showed “less privileged parts of the population are significantly less likely to turn to news media than their more privileged counterparts.”<sup>2</sup>

Age, gender, income and education are all factors. Significant numbers of people are simply not exposed to quality information or current anti-disinformation interactions and interventions.<sup>3</sup>

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) is the only major UK news organisation with a strategic impact editor at senior level. Identifying and targeting audiences is an important part of their story production process. For every investigation, Impact Editor Miriam Wells asks: who are we trying to reach with this information? Who could benefit from it? Which spaces are they in and how can we meet them there? Has our work made an impact? She’s clear the onus is on the news organisation: “You can’t just publish a story and assume they’ll find it. It’s your responsibility to get it to them, and in the right way.”

To be effective in the fight against disinformation, we must ask: who are those unreached by current anti-disinformation work? Which spaces are they in? How can we meet them there? How can we measure the impact of our work?

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<sup>2</sup> Kleis Nielsen, P., Fletcher, D., Kalogeropoulos, D. and Simon, F., 2021. *Communications In The Coronavirus Crisis: Lessons For The Second Wave*. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/communications-coronavirus-crisis-lessons-second-wave>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Dotto, C., Smith, R. and Looft, C., 2021. The "Broadcast" Model No Longer Works In An Era Of Disinformation. [online] First Draft. Available at: <<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/the-broadcast-model-no-longer-works-in-an-era-of-disinformation/>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

# Understanding the audience

We are all vulnerable to disinformation. We simply couldn't function effectively if we mistrusted and questioned everything. But the mental shortcuts we use to make sense of the world can work against us when we are being fed bad information.

“Cognitive miserliness” – the rather mean-spirited term psychologists use for this<sup>4</sup> – means we prefer to use as little mental effort as possible. If we think (note: think) there's a simple explanation, our brains will grab onto it – and often hold fast.<sup>5</sup> We also tend to believe what we're told. Again, it's impractical not to. But this “truth default” makes us vulnerable to deception<sup>6</sup>.

There are some, though, who seem to be more open to believing misinformation. We typically think of those who are older as being most vulnerable. It is a more nuanced picture than at first glance, but there are factors that seem to impact on our seniors. Those who have acquired digital skills for utility later in life (contact with friends and family, online banking, etc.) are less likely to have been exposed to formal media literacy. Trust increases with age, and research has also shown older adults are more likely to believe online claims without verifying sources.<sup>7</sup> The older generation has enthusiastically embraced social media, and are seven times more likely to share information without checking its veracity, and so – inadvertently – become part of the disinformation cycle.<sup>8</sup>

Those at the other end of the age spectrum could also be vulnerable for different reasons. In the UK, critical thinking is increasingly less likely to be taught as part of mainstream, mandatory education. Research into teaching methods by the OECD shows the UK – above 11 other major countries – is most likely to favour memorisation as an educational tool,

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<sup>4</sup> Fiske, S. and Taylor, S., 1991. *Social Cognition*. New York, NY: MacGraw-Hill.

<sup>5</sup> For more, see First Draft's excellent series on the psychology of misinformation: <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/the-psychology-of-misinformation-why-were-vulnerable/>

<sup>6</sup> Levine, T., 2014. *Truth-Default Theory (TDT)*. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 33(4), pp.378-392.

<sup>7</sup> Vijaykumar, S., 2021. *Covid-19: Older Adults And The Risks Of Misinformation* - The BMJ. [online] The BMJ. Available at: <<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/05/13/covid-19-older-adults-and-the-risks-of-misinformation/>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

<sup>8</sup> Brashier, N. and Schacter, D., 2020. *Aging in an Era of Fake News*. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 29(3), pp.316-323.

rather than teaching creative problem solving.<sup>9</sup> It's a style that's effective, the OECD suggests, for ensuring exam passes and climbing league tables, but less helpful when navigating complex, nuanced issues in real life.

Critical thinking training is increasingly the preserve of those who go on to tertiary education – leaving a knowledge gap, and potentially creating vulnerability, for those who don't.

For more than 30 years, Chennai-based independent daily *The Hindu* has made it part of its mission to plug that gap in India. It produces *Young World*, a weekly on- and offline supplement aimed at pre-teens, and *The Hindu in School*, a daily product for young people in secondary education.

As a young man, *The Hindu's* Strategy and Digital Editor Sriram Srinivasan read *Young World*; it inspired him to become a journalist. He believes direct outreach to young people to introduce them to the journalistic values of critical thinking, analysis and skepticism is more important than ever. It's his view that previous generations – through regular contact with trustworthy news sources – understood the difference between good and bad information and could evaluate misinformation more readily. He says it's much harder for today's youth: "We lived in a set-piece world, but theirs is far more fluid. Technology has democratised news, but the rules of communication are not there."

In fact, the huge and swift cultural shift from set-piece news consumption (reading a physical newspaper, watching an "appointment to view" bulletin) to absorbing news alongside cat videos and daft memes leaves us all in danger of not being mentally prepared to be skeptical of bad information – and, in contrast, also potentially to dismiss important, accurate information as mere entertainment.

If – as digital natives – young people are particularly vulnerable in this area, those wanting to promote good information need to actively reach out to them with

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent-Lancrin, S., et al. (2019), *Fostering Students' Creativity and Critical Thinking: What it Means in School*, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/62212c37-en>

age-appropriate, engaging material that gives them the skills to evaluate what they're consuming, and how to be alert to this need to code-switch when online.

Of course, the issue of communication change affects all ages. We have become a community where information ripples out in circles, not straight lines. The "bad guys" get this. They know and exploit an environment where social capital is gained by sharing engaging, entertaining or apparently useful content; where (seemingly) hyper-local insights are trusted, and where emotive, personal stories are often valued over professional expertise.

Offline, it's the same playbook: they build like-minded communities which rally together through mistrust of authority to disparate but emotively-expressed causes. 5G conspiracy theories are pushed through letter boxes, anti-vaxx rhetoric is shouted from stalls in town centres, regional rallies to "save our children" from wild, unsubstantiated claims are held and attended by thousands.

These tactics work. The anti-disinformation organisations having the biggest impact understand this, and use the bad actors' tactics against them. And they consistently return to the same themes: understand the audience, be part of a community, focus on story-telling.

## An agile response

To combat disinformation, we need to be bold and on the front foot.

Telling stories is what journalists do; we should certainly be able produce material that is more appealing than the fakes. But we need to be able to do it at pace, using the most effective language (sometimes literally) and then put it in the right place.

Digital news lab Fathm has created a toolbox of engaging graphics and video templates for countries where literacy is an issue, and made it available to local community groups. Maldita uses memes and TikTok-style videos to dispel disinformation, planting material where it will reach the relevant audience. Before Covid restrictions, the BIJ held outreach events guided by community leaders in the areas most affected by their investigations to feed back the impact of the stories.

The more easily we are able to process information, the more likely we are to believe it is true. This phenomenon – known as “fluency” – is why repetition is so powerful; if our brain is familiar with something, we find it easier to absorb. Allegations of voter fraud and election rigging were mentioned more than 70 times in Donald Trump’s Twitter account in the eight months prior to the 2020 US election.<sup>10</sup> The idea was seeded, repeated and stuck. Those promoting good information can learn from this: keep it simple, put it where you know your audience will find it, and repeat.

As an editor, one of the questions I am asked most frequently is about amplification concerns. “Are we spreading the disinformation in our effort to dispel it?” Of course, due consideration needs to be given to coverage of disinformation – particularly if you have the wide reach of PSM – but if the intent and impact bars have been passed then robust research says do not be afraid to correct.

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<sup>10</sup> Spring, M., 2021. ‘*Stop The Steal*’: *The Deep Roots Of Trump’s ‘Voter Fraud’ Strategy*. [online] BBC News. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-55009950>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

The “backfire effect” – where people believe or double-down on bad information when they’re told about it in a corrective context – has not been proven.<sup>11</sup> However, the manner in which corrections are made is important.

Briony Swire Thompson is a cognitive psychologist who investigates what drives belief in inaccurate information. She says we should “fill the gap” created by disinformation with good information. But that it must be completely clear – even to the casual or headline reader – what is true and untrue: “[you must] saliently pair the corrective element with the misconception.”<sup>12</sup> This is particularly important for older audiences.

A word here about working at pace and being proactive. The disinformation ecosystem evolves incredibly quickly, and we need to at least keep up, and ideally stay ahead. Whilst some stories come completely out of left-field (like 2020’s Wayfair conspiracy<sup>13</sup>), others we can see coming and could preempt with creative, strategically-placed content.

Prebunking select stories and exposing consumers to general tools for inoculation – such as “nudges” – have been proven to be effective. In a working paper by researchers at MIT, early results show that drawing attention to the concept of accuracy before people were exposed to misinformation was shown to decrease the amount of inaccurate information they then shared.<sup>14</sup>

Again, tone is important: this is not a top-down alert to danger, it is sharing information in your community on issues that could affect everyone, and providing tools and techniques to enable each other to separate fact from fiction.

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<sup>11</sup> Swire-Thompson, B., DeGutis, J. and Lazer, D., 2020. Searching for the backfire effect: Measurement and design considerations.

<sup>12</sup> Swire-Thompson, Briony & Ecker, Ullrich. (2018). *Misinformation and its Correction: Cognitive Mechanisms and Recommendations for Mass Communication*. See also: First Draft, 2020. The Psychology Of Misinformation - Webinar. [video] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7q6VLXha9OM>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

<sup>13</sup> Spring, M., 2021. *Wayfair: The False Conspiracy About A Furniture Firm And Child Trafficking*. [online] BBC News. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-53416247>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

<sup>14</sup> Pennycook, G., Epstein, Z., Mosleh, M., Arechar, A.A., Eckles, D., Rand, D.G., 2019. *Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online* [WWW Document]. doi:10.31234/osf.io/3n9u8

# Creating communities, building trust

We are more likely to accept information as true from someone we trust – of course we are. One of the reasons disinformation spreads so effectively is that it often comes through friends, family and groups we have already validated. Trust in the press is waning, but it is still highest for public service media.<sup>15</sup>

Maintaining and re-building trust by producing good quality information and interventions, and ensuring they reach the right audience, creates a virtuous circle: your output is trusted because it has proactively proven itself to be trustworthy.

Some practical suggestions:

## Break out of silos

Disinformation is a universal and pernicious problem. It doesn't stay in one place. A successful response needs to mimic its spread and reach. Don't think of this as a "news" issue; it's lifestyle, children's, finance and more. Consider a pan-department/topic approach. And/or build collaborations with like-minded providers and platforms to produce and seed appropriate material throughout native and external content streams.

## Use, make local connections

Local is trusted. The BBC has a network of journalists already embedded in communities throughout the UK. Local radio stations become part of the communities they serve, and – in my experience as a former English Regions producer – are often closer to their listeners than any other part of the corporation. Can your organisation tap into a similar network: a Facebook community that could be grown? Could you collaborate with other media organisations or community groups in target areas who share your values?

Ahead of the 2020 US election, Fathm created an anti-disinfo brand with six local radio stations across three key states. These stations were provided with high-quality assets

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<sup>15</sup> EBU, 2021. New Report Shows Broadcast Media Are Most Trusted. [online] Ebu.ch. Available at: <<https://www.ebu.ch/news/2020/04/new-report-shows-broadcast-media-is-most-trusted>> [Accessed 25 January 2021].

they could tailor to their local market. They were supplemented by short live on-air hits directly addressing local callers' concerns – peppered with some empowering media literacy into the bargain.

What could your organisation do to become, create or support that local voice we know to be so effective in disseminating information?

### Create a community

Make this a circular, peer-to-peer conversation and ask your audience to help you report the story. Could Maldita's model be used in your territory to create a network of "disinformation warriors"?

In 2015, I was the launch editor of the BBC's first major crowd-sourcing initiative. We asked people to join the BBC Weather Watchers community, and help tell the story of the UK's notoriously changeable conditions by uploading simple data and photos of the weather where they were.

The community is now 250k+ strong and they post around 2,000 reports a day, providing invaluable user-generated content across BBC outlets. (It was also part of a BBC digital literacy campaign, and made learning digital skills an integral part of the journey.)

A dynamic, two-way conversation is vital. Maldita and other organisations use a WhatsApp tip line for their community to report disinformation – it's a great place to start.

### Learn from the "bad guys"

Who are you trying to reach, and with what key message? Remember: the more easily we process material, the more likely we are to believe it. This is invaluable intel for our own content production. Keep design simple and engaging, put corrections and interventions on- and offline where your target audiences already are: schools, social networks, chat apps, etc., and keep repeating the main points.

## Review impact

We must work collaboratively to find out what is effective. The Trusted News Initiative has brought together some of the major global players to harness their combined firepower. It has already done important work, particularly around elections. Further collaboration around the impact of interventions would be incredibly helpful.

The BIJ has found the Center for Investigative Reporting's open source code Impact Tracker effective. Collaborating and sharing data with like-minded organisations – at any scale – would be invaluable in planning and producing effective content.

The fight against disinformation, to win trust and report truth, has only just started; we are all trying to find our way. Speaking recently, the BBC's Director General Tim Davie called for those who believe in universal access to good information to be proactive: "We do believe there is a truth... We are activists for impartiality. If we care, now is our time."

With public service media's unique position in the cultural environment, access to diverse audiences, creative skill, and rich history of outreach and education, I believe it has the ability and mandate to play a vital part in the fight, both within the industry and for the audience – all the audience – as a whole.