

19012 The Guardian view on the fight against fake news: neutrality is not an option

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House of Commons select committees often do useful work. Yet very few of them produce reports with the potential to reshape the political landscape. The new report by the Commons digital, culture, media and sport committee on disinformation and “fake news” is one of these exceptions. The future of journalism and digital advertising has evolved into a battle for power with the digital tech companies and partisan campaigners over the future of democracy. The result is a report that deserves to be described as essential reading because it deals with issues demanding essential action. For this is subject-matter on which neutrality is not an option. The government’s reaction to it will be a defining statement of its own moral seriousness and worthiness to govern.

Even so, there will only be any kind of international solution if national parliaments and governments grasp what is at stake first. What is at stake is the threat from unregulated social media monopolies and from bold and well-funded activist conspiracies. The report has many new and disturbing things to say about Russian dirty tricks and destabilisation, Facebook’s consistent refusals to acknowledge its practical, moral or legal responsibilities, and the reckless audacity and contempt with which groups like Cambridge Analytica – as well as the Vote Leave and Leave.EU campaigns – defied the regulatory authorities. It is not impossible that this audacity and defiance enabled the leave side to win the 2016 referendum with its anti-immigration messages. If that isn’t shocking, then the word has no meaning.

Yet what is ultimately at stake here concerns the future even more than the past. The report is a wake-up call about the failures of traditional governance. The need for rules and enforcement can be tackled by absolute clarity about the threat and its impact on every future electoral contest. This will require not just modernised regulation but education about digital literacy and truthfulness. Only government can ensure this.

The democratic crisis is all around us in the era of Trump and Brexit. The systematic unaccountable manipulation of data is a sleepless reality of the digital era about which the public and public bodies remain naive. The lack of consent goes to the heart of an unequal relationship in which public control is lacking over a too-often lawless and amoral space in people’s lives. And the campaigns of disinformation and messages of hate – unchecked and uncontrolled – threaten the rational basis of discourse and policy-making without which mutual trust cannot function.

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