Britain is building a wide-ranging framework to counter false information spread online. But with little parliamentary scrutiny, it could also serve to stifle legitimate political debate

THE SECRET PLAN TO CURB DISSENT

David Keighley

THE GOVERNMENT IS CONSIDERING imposing huge new restrictions upon the reporting of political controversy and debate in Britain. There will be no Ministry of Truth and no official list of prohibited opinions. Rather a raft of BBC and Ofcom powers, online safety regulation, government legislation and agreements with some of the world's biggest technology companies is being assembled to police two elastically wide-ranging words: "misinformation" and "disinformation".

The communications regulator, Ofcom, has transformed an apparently harmless statutory duty dating back to its formation in 2003 to promote "media literacy" into an operation of extraordinary scale and reach involving hundreds of participants. This is Making Sense of Media (MSOM).

It works through a fast-growing network of technology companies, broadcasters, universities, charities, local authorities, employers, even football clubs and community organisations. Ofcom declares it wants media literacy to become "everyone's business" and to be embedded in bodies with "deep reach" into British society.

THE RANGE OF THE AMBITION IS EVIDENT FROM THE participants. Google, Roblox, Pinterest, TikTok and Lego are among those signed up to Ofcom's Best Practice Principles for Media Literacy and are active in its propagation. Ofcom has also brought Meta and X (formerly Twitter) into working groups and discussions about intervention on their platforms. It researches labels, overlays, pop-ups and other notifications designed to influence the way users react to material online, and says it wants the major platforms to make media literacy a priority in their "design and decisions".

Of course media literacy and education — if properly neutral — is desirable. But this is no such thing. Ofcom is building the means by which judgments about information can travel from the regulator and its network directly into the services through which millions of people search, read, argue and exchange news. And the central target is increasingly so-called disinformation.

The Online Safety Act, which became law in 2023, specifically enlarged Ofcom's media literacy duties to include helping the public understand misinformation and disinformation and reduce exposure to them. Ofcom commissions research into the subject, funds community projects and looks for the "messages" and "trusted voices" most likely to change people's responses.

According to Ofcom, misinformation is false information spread unintentionally; disinformation is spread deliberately to deceive. Yet it concedes that "it is important to be clear from the outset that misinformation is a subjective term." That admission should stop the process in its tracks, but far from it.

A FORGED PHOTOGRAPH OR INVENTED QUOTATION ARE clearly false. A fabricated statistic can be exposed. Journalism has always done that, with much success. But what happens when "misinformation" steps from being provable falsehood and incorporates legitimate political debate? Believing those who disagree with them to be misled, deceived or deluded for failing to share their interpretation of reality, how may a government and its regulator marginalise the assumptions and arguments based upon a different prioritising and interpretation of available information?

For instance, the government seeks to promote the BBC as a reliable information source, prioritising its reporting over alternative perspectives. Following a memo from its director of news and current affairs in 2018, the BBC decided that scepticism of climate change as a primarily manmade phenomenon should be downplayed and — if aired at all — should be aggressively critiqued in a manner not required in probing those claiming climate change as a global emergency.

Whether or not intentionally, Britain's primary media source thus took an editorial position of such broad scope that it precluded a fair hearing not just to so-called "climate deniers" but to the airing of research that qualified or tempered an unyielding assertion of certainty on a science as complex and ill-understood as the world's climate. As such, it was ruling that the case was closed and any qualification to it or criticism of government-directed remedies was either based upon ignorance or deceit.



The government seeks to promote the BBC's reporting as a reliable source of information

The distinction is critical. Voters can accept that

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human activity affects climate while also opposing heat pumps, questioning electric car mandates, disputing cost projections or believing that British Net Zero policy is economically destructive. Those are political arguments. But once they are bundled into "denial" and then into "misinformation or disinformation", their status changes. First comes political denunciation, then classification, then intervention.

THAT IS WHERE MSOM BECOMES A SINISTER THREAT. Ofcom already possesses the research, training network, community connections and relationships with Google, TikTok and other platforms through which people can be taught to disbelieve information from a "distrusted" source. Platforms already use the devices Ofcom studies — labels, warnings and prompts — to change users' behaviour.

Now the government is moving to lock another restriction on free speech into place. Published in June, its 94-page Green Paper, "Watch This Space" proposes legislation by next year requiring social media platforms to make news from supposedly "trustworthy" providers easily discoverable. Ministers say this is "crucial for countering misinformation".

The paper acknowledges that online news has allowed a much wider range of independent commentators to reach audiences previously dominated by established broadcasters and newspapers — but worries that trusted providers are losing their capacity to shape public debate.

Think about what that means. The government is contemplating using law to affect the hierarchy of news online. Some sources could receive preferential prominence on no greater objective grounds than that they satisfy an official definition of trustworthiness, while an increasingly elaborate regulatory structure is simultaneously deciding how misinformation should be identified and countered.

In his recent online article for *The Critic* ["Misinformation about Misinformation", 15 September], David Rose, research director of the Free Speech Union, described the programme as the most far-reaching machinery for controlling public speech Britain has seen in peacetime since the seventeenth century. He also challenged the quality of the research being used to justify the supposed misinformation emergency.

DAYS LATER, ANDY BURNHAM, IN HIS ADDRESS TO THE UN General Assembly on 22 September, announced that he had tasked security chiefs with developing a National Centre for Information Defence to detect and disrupt hostile state information attacks. Russian operations involving forged articles, fake websites and impersonation of British institutions are very much a legitimate security concern, though there are already state agencies and initiatives at work to counter them.

But the prime minister also accused such actors of promoting a "negative, corrosive narrative about life in Britain" and said that narrative had allowed been allowed too much ground. The proposed centre's stated remit is hostile state activity; it has not been given a general mandate to police domestic opinion. Even so, when ministers describe an unwelcome account of national life in the same passage as foreign information warfare, the test for separating deception from dissent becomes all the more important.



Andy Burnham told the UN he had tasked security chiefs with countering hostile disinformation

The BBC's present Royal Charter expires at the end of 2027, and Burnham's government is now deciding what will replace it. The Charter Review Green Paper, published in December 2025, sets out the government's proposals and describes the corporation as "uniquely placed to support a balanced and trusted news environment", while presenting misinformation and disinformation as threats to democratic cohesion.

These are not yet binding charter obligations, but they are the government's declared direction of travel. A White Paper and draft Charter are due, yet the government's Green Paper acknowledges that trust in BBC News has fallen by 15 percentage points since 2018 and that serious editorial failures have damaged confidence in the corporation

FOR 27 YEARS THE MONITORING UNIT I FOUNDED, NEWS-watch, has documented a BBC complaints system in which the corporation is effectively its own judge and jury. Since the present Charter began in 2017 until the end of 2025, the BBC's Executive Complaints Unit upheld or partly upheld only 38 cases about due impartiality. In the same period, Ofcom — supposedly the independent external safeguard — has found the BBC in breach of its due impartiality rules only once. That is not meaningful external accountability; it is a system almost perfectly insulated against challenge.

BBC Verify, set up to tackle disinformation and accuracy, takes the process another step. The corporation increasingly casts itself not merely as a reporter of events but as an arbiter of what is true, misleading or deprived of context. Such judgments may be legitimate when they affect a television bulletin. They acquire a wholly different significance when the BBC is simultaneously elevating itself to being a pillar of an officially "trusted" news structure intended to combat misinformation across the wider public debate.

Matt Brittin has now made the BBC's ambition explicit. In his interview with Laura Kuenssberg, broadcast on 27 September, the director-general said BBC news content should appear on Netflix, YouTube, TikTok, Spotify and Instagram, as part of what he called part of "disinfecting misinformation". "It's our job to be everywhere," he said.

Distribution across those services is one thing; treating the BBC's own journalism as the disinfectant for the wider

TOBY MELVILLE/WPA POOL/GETTY IMAGES

information environment is another. Combined with the Green Paper's proposal to favour officially "trustworthy" news, it would extend the reach of a corporation whose impartiality record is so poorly tested by independent scrutiny.

OTHER ORGANISATIONS HELPING TO DEFINE THIS territory are not politically neutral. On 11 September the government confirmed that the leftist Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) had participated in official-level DCMS roundtables on online-harms policy in both 2024 and 2026. CCDH campaigns actively for stronger measures against material and platforms it regards as harmful.

And News-watch appears to have hit a brick wall in establishing the full scale of Ofcom's operation. Our Freedom of Information request sought to identify simple basic facts: the organisations participating in MSOM, the membership of its advisory, steering and expert groups, grants and contracts since January 2023, governance documents and a stakeholder map or organisational chart.

Ofcom disclosed that around 700 individuals were signed up to the MSOM network but refused to identify them. It did not provide the requested list of participating organisations, said it held no stakeholder map or organisational chart and supplied only a partial picture of the programme's governance. It did provide a spreadsheet of 32 contracts worth more than £3 million, but the response still left News-watch unable to establish the financial scale, reach and relationships of the operation. Our attempt to solicit fuller disclosure is currently being considered by Ofcom. This resistance to scrutiny adds hugely to concerns about MSOM.

Ofcom has spent seven years building a huge infrastructure under the innocuous label of "media literacy" without real parliamentary debate. Now legislation, BBC Charter reform and Ofcom's post-Online Safety Act powers are on the edge of consolidating it. The danger is that this becomes hard-wired into delegated, unaccountable power.

PARLIAMENT MAY APPROVE BROAD WORDS SUCH AS safety, trust and media literacy. But the decisions that make those words bite can be taken elsewhere — in Ofcom codes, advisory committees, BBC editorial procedures, research programmes, agreements with technology companies and the algorithms and interventions governing online platforms.

George Orwell's great insight in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was that political control does not begin only with banning ideas. It begins with controlling the language through which ideas can be expressed and understood: "denier", "harm", "misinformation", "disinformation" and "trusted" can become the vocabulary through which that process operates.

Once political dissent can be moved through that linguistic chain, outright censorship becomes almost unnecessary. An argument can remain legal while being attacked, discredited, labelled, downgraded, deprived of reach and eventually dropped down an oubliette where only the determined will find it.

Ofcom has built much of the infrastructure. Google, TikTok and other giants give it extraordinary reach. The BBC is being prepared for a larger role as guarantor of "trusted" information. Andy Burnham's government is now processing the legislative framework that could lock the pieces together. ●

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EVERYDAY LIES WITH THEODORE DALRYMPLE

BRITISH JOURNAL OF MEDICINE

An article in the *British Medical Journal* comes with the title "How patients explain and make sense of their decision for assisted suicide in Switzerland (The Exit Project)."

Death as "Exit"? I am rather reminded of "Special Treatment", the Nazi term for mass murder, execution and genocide, or "Community Transport", the words painted on the sides of the buses that took the inmates of mental hospitals to the gas chambers.

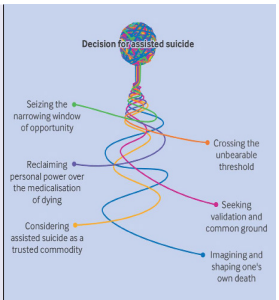
The article was a survey of 30 patients who asked for assisted suicide, only 14 of whom went through with it. Since in some jurisdictions, the Netherlands and provinces in Canada for example, thousands of people are shuffled off this mortal coil annually, one may wonder how representative this sample was.

But – if one may also be permitted to mix a metaphor – all is grist to the mill when one has an axe to grind.

The researchers found six main reasons for the decision, among them the reclamation of personal power over the medicalisation of dying. This was indeed odd, a tribute to Man's capacity to overlook the obvious, namely that assisted suicide is perhaps the supreme or ultimate medicalisation of death. Doctors have to give their permission for it, and death occurs as a result of a medical procedure.

Other reasons for seeking assisted death were the consideration that assisted suicide was a "trusted commodity" (I am not making this up), and that it allowed the patient to search for "validity and common ground". It allowed him to cross "the unbearable threshold" and to "seize the narrowing window of opportunity." No doubt it also promoted blue skies thinking and thought outside the box.

All that was missing were the lessons that have been learned – obviously better never than late. ●



The *BMJ* surveyed 30 patients who sought assisted suicide in Switzerland