

Fact Checking the Fact Checkers

By Dr. Judith Brown, PhD., M.Sc., M.Sc.Econ.; M.Research (Journalism).

Fact checking itself is not new. It is and was a function of the press and broadcasters; journalists check sources and content of stories to ensure that published news stories are realistic, in order to protect the reputation of media outlets. This does not mean that the news is always accurate or unbiased, as story selection, perspective and external and internal influence inevitably alter the way that information and news are presented. In most news outlets there is also an opportunity to comment on news stories, adding a subjective perspective to published or broadcast items. Journalists inevitably have a close relationship with governments and powerful institutions, and they often work in partnership to shape the contents of media output.



The advent of social media altered the relationship between power, the media, and the public; Facebook was launched in 2004, followed by Twitter in 2006, and since then social media has continued to grow. This gave the opportunity for citizen journalism – for ordinary people to share with others their uncensored view of world events. The response to the loosening control of information was for the development of a new industry – independent fact checkers. One of the first fact check platforms was Politifact, in USA, in 2007. In UK Full Fact was launched in 2010; fact check platforms began to proliferate throughout the world, such as Africa Check in 2012; and BOOMlive in India in 2016. The Poynter Institute in Florida began to network with these new platforms, and in 2015 launched the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN), by 2016/17 they established a Code of Principles. There are 171 fact checking groups listed as verified signatories in May 2023, of which 41 were first verified in 2017, demonstrating the industry's growth.

About 500 active fact check platforms have been located; about half of these linked to media outlets. Some have developed specialities – fact checking media personalities; health; climate, and online games. Independent (non-media) fact check platforms' focus is to review content on social media and internet news sites. Fact checking occurs all over the globe; in European, Asian and African languages, including minority languages for hard to reach communities. Fact check platforms were mainly located if they were listed on international lists of fact checkers, including IFCN; Credibility Coalition; Duke University Reporters Lab; LatAm Chequea for Spanish and Portuguese fact check platforms; or Facebook Third Party Fact Check Program, although internet searches revealed a small number not associated with international listings, for example, Chinese platforms are usually not found on Western fact check platform lists, and Indonesia has a national

network, Cek Fakta. It is likely that the numbers of fact check platforms is far greater than those located; for example, PesaCheck via the Africa Fact Check Alliance claims a fact checking network of 174 newsrooms but none were listed; and only three fact check platforms were found in UK linked to the media although there are thousands of media outlets, many may be using the new fact checking code.

The new systems of fact checking extends across all media forms; newspapers, radio, television, online news; online games; social media; and encrypted platforms. A journalist from the *Washington Post* described how fact checking changed to the new methodology in that newspaper in 2012. Other influences on newsrooms include copy received from news agencies - Agence-France-Presse (AFP) a French news agency, became a verified signatory of the IFCN code in 2018, and now has fact checking branches in many countries throughout the world; its ready fact checked copy circulates to newsrooms across five continents. Other global news agencies including Reuters and Associated Press also are signatories to the IFCN code. Fact check platforms train journalists in their procedures, for example, Africa Check claims it has trained 10,000 persons in fact checking and media literacy, many are African journalists. Newsrooms from all over the world have registered with the IFCN thus demonstrating that they fulfil the criteria of the IFCN Code of Principles. Whilst it is commendable for journalists and fact checkers to have a professional standard, looking at the website of the owners of the IFCN, the Poynter Institute, content is expected to be moderated in line with mainstream Western narratives on hot button issues, such as climate and health.



The fact check industry does not produce a product – it censors and moderates content. Few fact check platforms are independent of external funders; occasionally a small fact check platform states that it has no overheads because all staff are volunteers, and looking at their operations this is probable. Many fact check platforms that belong to a large media outlet state that the fact checking arm is funded by the owner. When a fact check platform earns income for fact checking or media literacy services, the funding is usually from large corporations such as Facebook, or Google. A for-profit fact check company, Logically, states

it has been paid for fact check services by multiple governments. The funding information of fact check platforms is not always available on their websites, or some only have vague details; by comparison others are very open relating to their funding sources. Where fact check platforms do not disclose their sources on income, funding information may be found from internet searches.

Disclosed grants and donations that are given to fact check platforms are usually from large institutions associated with Western governments for example, National Endowment for Democracy; European Endowment for Democracy; German Marshall Fund; as well as from large Western foundations or trusts including Asia Foundation, Craig Newmark, Ford Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Knight Foundation, Luminate, MacArthur Foundation Omidyar, Open Society, and Rockefeller Fund, etc.; from EU, American, European and UK embassies or foreign offices; from large Media Corporates; Google; Meta; IFCN; and from UN departments such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNDP. Earned income from large corporations, and grants and donations are the main sources of income for most fact check platforms not linked to a media outlet. The sums involved are significant. For example, Full Fact received just under five hundred thousand pounds from Facebook, and around two hundred thousand pounds from Google in one year; Poynter's IFCN received a grant of \$13.2 million US dollars from Google to cover a five year period. These earnings and grants are only a part of a much larger income for both platforms.



Meta, Facebook's parent company, operates a third party fact check program (FB3PFCP); platforms are subcontracted to fact check in 119 countries. There were 253 contracts in May 2023, some platforms having several contracts. This includes AFP (France) (83 contracts); Fatabyyano (Jordan) (17); Pesacheck (Africa) (9); Reuters (7); Africa Check (7); dpa Germany (6); Re Baltica (Latvia) (6); Delfi, (Latvia) (6); FactCheck Georgia (4); Patikrinta (Lithuania) (4); Demogog (Poland) (4); Myth Detector (Georgia) (4); and others with one or two external contracts each. Facebook only accepts those that are verified signatories of IFCN as fact check partners, giving a lucrative initiative to comply with IFCN's system. Facebook states that it removes misinformation during public health emergencies, naming

Covid-19 as one such event. This includes posts that downplay the severity of Covid-19; that question official Covid-19 death statistics; that name certain treatments for Covid-19; that discourage testing; mask wearing, or social distancing; there is also a list of vaccine injuries that cannot be mentioned. Facebook expects its fact check partners to comply; for example, NU.nl (a Dutch newspaper) that was part of Facebook's fact check partnership in 2013 resigned in 2019 because of restrictions placed on its fact check activities. Although Facebook claims that its partners act independently, and its partners state that they are not influenced by Facebook's funding, it is hard to see that fact check platforms could oppose Facebook's policies without losing their contracts.

Some fact check platforms earn income from designing fact check tools, such as a \$2 million grant to Africa Check . AI tools include products that monitor text, to find target words or phrases; turn spoken words into text for analysis; prediction tools to predict current and future trends in conversations online and offline; to analyse visual images; to identify whether text has been altered; to check whether stories, statements or pictures have been used previously. Most independent fact check platforms offer media literacy courses and fact check courses in association with Google or Meta; their main targets are children; students and journalists although courses may be offered more widely.

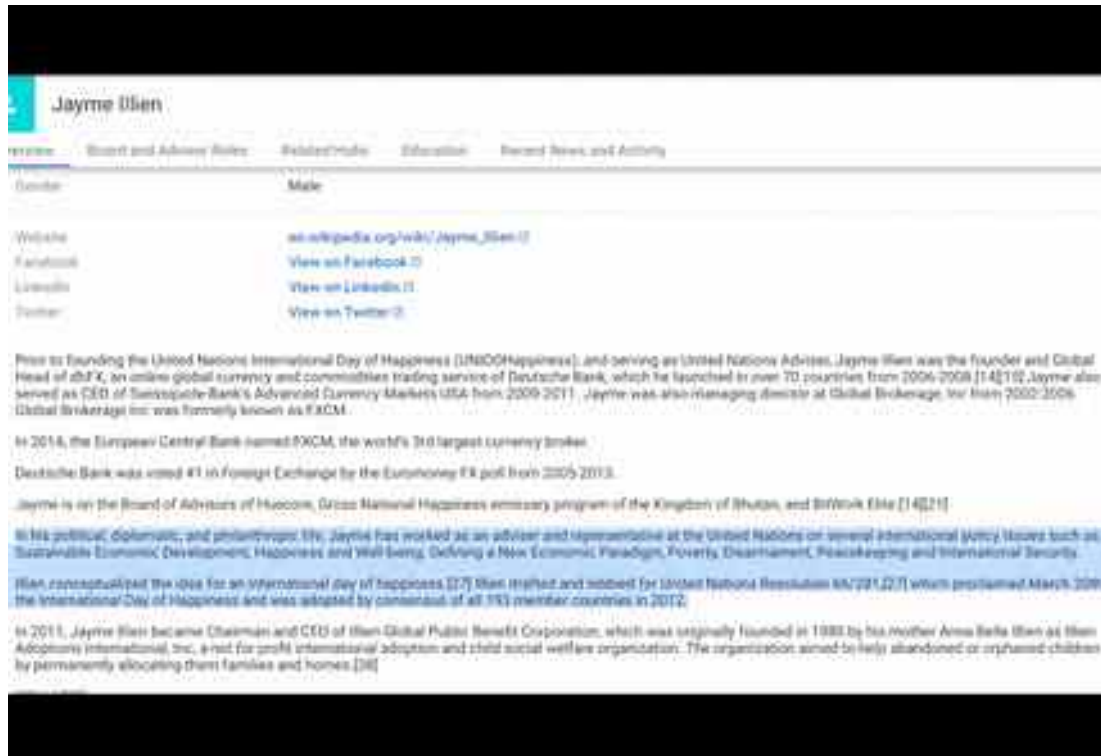


Many fact check platforms are linked to media outlets; most media owners in America and Europe are part of large media conglomerates, with a limited number of wealthy owners. Journalists who do not agree with content moderation and censorship have very limited choice of alternative paid employment within the media industry. Across the globe, Internews that collaborates with the World Economic Forum, together with its partner Ads for News, and Google with its AdSense programme encourage local media in Africa and Asia to move online where content can be more readily checked, with an incentive of advertising revenue for online news platforms if content is considered to be 'trusted'. One study of Indonesian media outlets found editors thought that the local media had been 'colonised', with Google now being one of the most important news values that influenced story selection. The fact checkers working for these online news platforms moderate content that may otherwise put advertising revenue at risk.

When independent platforms apply for grants and donations to support their organisation, donations that they attract are likely to be from organisations that support a specific kind of content moderation. Fact-checking platforms, whether for profit, not-for-profit, or charities, need to have a business model; they need to persuade donors to continue to support their activities. They need to employ staff or volunteers that have the same mindset; new employees and volunteers are offered media literacy and fact check courses to ensure that they understand what is required of them. Courses include critical thinking; searching techniques; sourcing; and methods including use of fact check tools. Staff working in fact check platforms across the world are trained to think and operate in a similar fashion. If any staff member or volunteer feels uncomfortable with content moderation or

censoring, they either have to conform, or leave that employment; the fact check platform cannot change its activities without undermining its business viability.

Additionally, through investigations such as Big Brother Watch's 'Ministry of Truth' report, the Twitter files and subsequent investigations, and statements made on the website of Logically, a for-profit fact check platform, it is clear that American, British and other governments are directly and generously funding social media and fact check platforms to modify content in order to suit their agenda. Reported accusations include illegally hacking sites and distorting information obtained to smear those with different opinions; demonetising activities, and removing accounts.



Although many fact check platforms internationally are funded by Western institutions whose aims may be different from other national governments, one country has tried to restrict activities of overseas funded fact check platforms. In Georgia a law was passed on 7 March 2023 requiring any nongovernmental organisations, civil society groups, and independent media with more than 20% of its funding from foreign sources to register as 'agents of influence'. The two main fact check groups in Georgia, Myth Detectors and Fact Check Georgia receive most of their income from Western sources; however, pressures caused Georgia to rapidly withdraw its legislation. Whatever view one takes on the proposed law, the Georgian government challenged foreign funded organisations operating within Georgia's boundaries that it perceived as a threat to its power; the rapid forced withdrawal of legislation demonstrates the weakness of the government when faced with fact checkers.

This is not the only country that has recognised that foreign funding may cause political challenges; In November 2022 Indian fact check platforms, many funded by overseas donors, complained of harassment and threats of litigation. In April 2023, the Indian government announced it was taking on the Indian fact check industry by creating its own verification programme "The Misinformation Combat Alliance", involving the cooperation of social media platforms and directly competing with IFCN. It was stated that this was to

overcome foreign influences in Indian fact check platforms. This is at an early stage of development.

Universities also play an important role in the fact checking processes. For example, in Europe twelve organisations supporting fact checkers were found, funded by EU, the European Commission or the IFCN, and these involved universities, AI companies, and fact check platforms. Some of these organisations are very extensive; for example, the European Digital Media Observatory claims it has a branch in every EU country and ten subgroups were found; its aims are to map all fact check platforms; coordinate research; building a portal for the media, fact checkers, and the public to check and coordinate information; develop a framework for data collection; and support public authorities. Other EU funded organisations perform tasks such as setting EU fact checking standards; designing fact check tools, creating complaint content; distributing data; or coordinating journalism departments in universities throughout Europe. Universities and fact check platforms receive payment from EU/EC for being part of these fact check networks. It is likely that universities in other parts of the world operate in a similar manner.

It also emerged that there are many civil societies that are part of the fact checking industry, performing different functions, from providing fact check tools, aiding recruitment, offering grants or assistance with grant applications, offering network opportunities, setting up meetings and summits, assisting with media literacy and fact check training, offering a 24 hour helpline, offering legal advice, undertaking research, and helping to set up new platforms or to extend existing platforms, one example being the African NGO Code for Africa.

Networking is an important function of fact check platforms; they can earn income by partaking in local forums such as NORDIS in Scandinavia and LatAm Chequea in South America. Fact checkers also meet at local and international summits, such as the IFCN annual summit; FB3PFCP annual summit; and APac (Asia Pacific) summit. They form a powerful network that reaches to all corners of the globe; even where Western funded platforms do not have wide access to countries like Belarus, Russia, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen, fact check platforms in neighbouring countries fact check across borders, as demonstrated by Facebook FB3PFCP contracts.

Fact checkers are the mechanism of censorship. They can only do this with immense sums of money that come from the rich and powerful to support their industry. Of course, the media and social media needs to moderate illegal content, such as pornography and violence; this is not contested. But legal content, especially by experts such as doctors and climate scientists who are qualified to join in the debate, even if their opinion differs from that of governments and world institutions, is an important part of scientific investigation and the democratic process. It is not a question of whether they are right or wrong; they have the right to be heard and the fact check industry has not explained why adults need to be shielded or protected from an educated and thoughtful opinion. Many fact checks are so trivial – such as offering an opinion on whether a politician has a bruise, or whether a footballer has lost his sponsorship – that they infantilise their audience. The most important component of democracy is free speech and free expression; that enriches us all. The fact check industry's access to wealth and power undermines democracy throughout the world.

Judith Brown is an independent researcher. The information in this essay is part of a larger study into censorship conducted on behalf of PANDA.

The BBC isn't exposing disinformation. It's peddling it



[Jonathan Cook](#) - 2 June 2023 09:20 BST | Last update: 1 week 1 day ago

The state broadcaster says its new Verify service will subject its own journalism to more rigorous fact-checking. But a far less neutral agenda appears to be concealed beneath this lofty aspiration



'A state broadcaster telling the public that it has special insights into truth has a long and ugly pedigree.' BBC headquarters in Portland Place, London (AFP)

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To much fanfare last week, the [BBC](#) rolled out its latest public service: [BBC Verify](#). The [British](#) state broadcaster promised that a team of dedicated reporters would work on behalf of viewers to counter “the growing threat of disinformation”.

On the plus side, the BBC claims it will subject its own journalism to more rigorous fact-checking and data analysis “in the pursuit of truth”. But a far less neutral agenda appears to be concealed beneath this lofty aspiration.

Introducing the new service on the *BBC Breakfast* morning show, “disinformation and social media correspondent” Marianna Spring gave a flavour of what was in store. The BBC’s own, all-too-visible failings appeared far from her thoughts.

She [drew digital arrows](#) on a screen, creating a sinister network of ties between “far-right figures” with “foreign links” on one side, and a “UK conspiracy movement” and “alternative media” on the other.

If anyone assumed [Verify](#) would be scrutinising the long track record of the BBC and the rest of the UK's establishment media in misleading audiences, they look set to be sorely disappointed. Even Spring's job title connects disinformation specifically to social media rather than to the so-called "legacy media" to which she belongs.

Spring airily [dismissed as "trolling"](#) those on social media who pointed out that the BBC had itself peddled [plenty of disinformation](#): from echoing the deceptions about WMD that justified Britain's [invasion of Iraq](#) in 2003 to amplifying the evidence-free and highly politicised claims of antisemitism in the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn that turned its socialist leader into a pariah.

For that reason if no other, there are good grounds to believe that BBC Verify will soon become central to the very disinformation problem it claims to be seeking to stamp out.

'Ministry of Truth'

It is worth remembering that it was the BBC's all-too-real Ministry of Information, where George Orwell worked during World War Two, that became the model for the fictional "Ministry of Truth" in his dystopian novel [Nineteen Eighty-Four](#). The Ministry of Truth's slogan ran: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

A state broadcaster telling the public that it has special insights into truth - and anyone who disagrees is dangerously promoting "disinformation" - has a long and ugly pedigree.

Far from prioritising "independence" as it proclaims, the BBC was originally set up as a vehicle for promoting British establishment interests, as its founder confided in a diary entry in 1926 concerning that year's General Strike. [Lord Reith wrote](#) of the British government: "They know they can trust us not to be really impartial."

Emily Maitlis is right about BBC bias - but for the wrong reasons

Jonathan Cook

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In 2009, a former director general of the BBC, Greg Dyke, suggested [nothing had changed](#) eight decades on. He argued that BBC news coverage was part of a Westminster "conspiracy" designed to keep a failing British political system from being subjected to "radical change" - a characterisation that was even harder to dismiss after Corbyn became Labour leader six years later.

The BBC also appears to have secretly colluded with the British government in its information warfare campaigns abroad.

A batch of leaked documents, published by the Grayzone website in 2021, showed that the BBC had [joined efforts](#), in the words of the Foreign Office, to "weaken the Russian state's influence on its near neighbours". How does that square with BBC claims of impartiality in covering the subsequent [war in Ukraine](#)?

As journalist [Glenn Greenwald observed](#), the very idea of bestowing the title of "disinformation expert" on a journalist is "a fraud, a scam" meant to falsely impart a scientific basis to their highly partisan role. Greenwald added: "If you can convince the public that this is a real expertise, then you can justify censorship."

‘Kremlin asset’

In the wake of 9/11, the BBC, like the rest of the establishment media, embraced a rash of pundits, often with hidden government or security industry ties, who branded themselves “[counterterrorism experts](#)”.

Invariably their job was to explain why the West should invade foreign countries in the oil-rich Middle East and North Africa, from Iraq to [Libya](#) and [Syria](#). The claim was that the West would be welcomed by the region’s oppressed peoples, that there was a “humanitarian duty” to intervene, and that such invasions would snuff out a “terrorism threat”. These so-called experts were consistently proved wrong.

Now the 2020s looks set to be the decade when the BBC cuts out the middleman and subjects us to a parade of its own employees posturing as “counter-disinformation experts”.

The agenda always neatly fits the interests of western establishments: obscuring the crimes committed by the West and its allies

Their job will be to explain why some people must be denied a platform, to protect the public from “thoughtcrimes”. It will be essentially the same counterterrorism agenda, with similar goals but dressed in new garb.

We already know how this works. Show solidarity with [Palestinians](#) against the [apartheid](#) rule of [Israel](#), the West’s key military ally in the Middle East, and you are dubbed an “antisemite”.

Question the legality of the West firing missiles at a sovereign Middle Eastern state like Syria without United Nations’ authorisation - the supreme crime of “[aggression](#)” in international law - and you are denounced as an “Assad apologist”.

Prioritise peace talks to end the Ukraine war rather than promote a bloodbath, as well as arms industry profits, by flooding the battlefield with weapons to “weaken” Russia and you are outed as a “[Kremlin asset](#)”, one echoing “Putin talking points”.

The agenda always neatly fits the interests of western establishments: obscuring the crimes committed by the West and its allies, and justifying the West’s crimes to weaken supposed enemies.

Skeletons in the closet

Why the BBC is launching its Verify service is all too clear. Trust in the establishment media, and the BBC in particular, has hit an all-time low. That itself poses a threat to the broadcaster’s Reithian purpose: to impress a national consensus on the public mind that serves the British state.

A December 2019 poll showed that [only 44 percent](#) of Britons believed that BBC journalists were honest and impartial.

That loss of faith has been accelerating as audiences are exposed to other sources of information, chiefly on social media - what BBC Verify dismissively terms “alternative” and “conspiracy-minded” media.

Last year, according to a report in the British media's house journal Press Gazette, an annual survey showed trust in the BBC had [dropped 20 percentage points](#) in four years.



Britain's then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson leaves the BBC studios in London on 1 December 2019, 11 days before he won a landslide victory at the general election (AFP)

In March, viewers reported finding the BBC's news coverage [less reliable](#) than that of ITV, its main commercial, advertising-driven rival.

And that was before the latest scandal concerning the BBC's recently departed chairman, Richard Sharp, a key donor to the ruling Conservative party. He was [forced out in](#) April over revelations that his appointment in early 2021 followed hot on the heels of his efforts to help the then-prime minister, Boris Johnson, secure a loan.

The problem with the new "counter-disinformation" industry the BBC is helping to bolster is that it intentionally frames disinformation in elite-serving ways. Establishment media can deflect from the skeletons in its own closet by indiscriminately labelling independent media as "fake news".

Not only that, but it can smear independent journalists trying to present a different perspective on critically important world events as malicious or traitorous actors. It can easily fuel the online swarms that denounce Nato critics as "Putin assets" or "stooges of China".

This development is so dangerous because BBC journalists have no special skillset that makes them better arbiters of truth than the rest of us. What they have is power - the power that comes from having the largest news platform and the British state behind them.

Scrutinising agendas

No news service is neutral or agenda-free, whether it is corporate, commercial media owned by a billionaire like Rupert Murdoch or a broadcaster like the BBC that is heavily dependent on funding and backing from the state.

And maybe more to the point, the BBC and Murdoch-owned media share far more in common than either would care to admit.

That should be all the more obvious given that nowadays the interests of the largest multinational corporations - from the arms industry to fossil fuel giants - are deeply entwined with the interests of British policymakers.

BBC journalists have no special skillset that makes them better arbiters of truth than the rest of us. What they have is power

The dividing line between corporate interests and “national” interests has never been finer. Public policy disagreements platformed by the media are largely confined to either marginal issues or policy areas where the British establishment is internally divided, as highlighted by the years-long row over Brexit.

For audiences to have a chance of arriving at a more reliable truth, they must be exposed to the messy, rough-and-tumble world of free speech - something the disinformation tsars abhor. Only that way are agendas and vested interests, as well as facts, exposed to the harsh light of scrutiny.

The assumption that a corporate media, one funded by corporate advertisers and embedded in a world of corporate interests, is capable of divining truth - a truth that would expose its war profiteering, its resource theft, and its ecologically unsustainable goals - is patently absurd.

But what is equally preposterous is the belief that the BBC, Verified or not, will serve as [an attack dog](#) on those interests when its master is a state already in bed with those very same corporations.

‘Authorised’ truth

Getting closer to the truth on issues in which states are deeply invested requires a genuinely free marketplace of information, one where different sources can contest the relevance of facts, their interpretation and context.

Did Russian President Vladimir Putin invade neighbouring Ukraine because [he is a madman](#) bent on imperial conquest, as maintained by the BBC and the British government, or because the West [ignored repeated warnings](#) from Moscow that it viewed Nato’s covert expansion into Ukraine as an act of aggression?

Audiences have to weigh the evidence, relying on relevant yardsticks. How partisan is a news outlet? Where does its funding come from? Is it being transparent? How plausible is the case it makes? And is its position consistent with other known facts?



How social networks became a 'subsidiary' of the FBI and CIA

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The battlefield on which this struggle plays out is already [far from level](#). The BBC is a leviathan, while its most serious critics - mainly independent journalists and academics - are minnows.

The [Twitter Files](#) have already demonstrated that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as search engines like Google, are [under the thumb](#) of western intelligence agencies.

Social media's initial commitment to free speech was jettisoned long ago under pressure from governments. Now platforms have refined their algorithms to promote "authoritative sources" like the BBC and New York Times while marginalising and silencing dissent, which is being increasingly treated as "disinformation", "misinformation" and the new "[malinformation](#)".

This is the context for understanding the role of BBC Verify. Its "disinformation experts" and fact-checkers will become another weapon - piggybacking on social media's skewed algorithms - to smear and silence those demurring from a single, authorised "truth".

These criticisms were put to the BBC, but it responded simply by directing Middle East Eye to a [press statement](#) on the launch of its Verify service.

Breach of impartiality

What BBC Verify won't address are the glaring and often systematic distortions in reporting by the BBC and other establishment media.

Even the BBC's flagship news programmes, such as *Newsnight* and *Panorama*, are far from immune to misleading audiences on issues critical to the British establishment. The BBC has a bad habit of failing to correct the record when its errors are exposed, often by the very people it suggests are peddling disinformation.

That was most evident in the BBC's coverage of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. I documented for MEE some of the [egregious reporting failures](#) in a *Panorama* special that sought to tar the Labour party as antisemitic under Corbyn.



With *Panorama*'s hatchet job on Labour antisemitism, BBC has become pro-Tory media

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Other, even graver errors in that programme have gradually come to light.

Four years on, the BBC was finally forced to [issue a correction](#) in one case, noting that the programme had selectively edited quotes from a witness that created a false impression damaging to Corbyn's leadership.

The BBC, however, has continued to ignore taped evidence supplied by two Jewish Labour party members accused of antisemitism, who stated that their [comments were misrepresented](#) by the programme to make its case against Corbyn. This error could have been avoided by the programme makers with the most cursory of checks.

I have also set out some of the ways that *Newsnight* [selectively undermined Corbyn](#) in clear breach of its impartiality rules.

The BBC's anti-Corbyn bias more generally was so evident that even a former chair of its trust, Sir Michael Lyons, felt [compelled to complain](#) about it.

Loaded terminology

But "disinformation" is not simply about relaying false facts, or imposing bogus interpretations on those facts, to mislead audiences.

When you dominate the airwaves, it can be done in a host of other, more subtle ways: by slanting terminology to colour the public's reactions to a story; by stripping out important context that would deepen viewers' understanding; by omitting facts that might provide an alternative perspective; and by placing the emphasis on minor issues that distract from what should be much larger concerns.

In short, “disinformation” is not just about actively spreading lies. It is about leaving absences of information that the public is rarely in a position to fill for themselves.

In [another piece for MEE](#), I [explained](#) how loaded terminology by the BBC distorted viewers’ understanding of a recent violent attack by Israeli police on Palestinians at Al-Aqsa mosque.

In an article misleadingly headlined “Clashes erupt at contested holy site”, the BBC presented an unprovoked police assault on unarmed Muslim worshippers in exactly the terms favoured by the Israeli state.

The BBC uncritically echoed a police statement labelling the worshippers as “agitators” and their seizure in an area under belligerent military occupation as “arrests” - as though this was simply an example of disinterested law enforcement.

Similarly, the BBC all too often unthinkingly repeats a Washington talking point: that the US is entitled to enforce a “global rules-based order” that serves its interests - as an alternative to international law, which should serve humanity’s interests.

The BBC all too often repeats a Washington talking point: that the US is entitled to enforce a 'global rules-based order' that serves its interests - as an alternative to international law

With worrying regularity, BBC journalists can be relied on to echo self-serving western claims that China is a “[challenge](#)” or “[threat](#)” to this so-called “global order”.

Then there are the omissions. The most conspicuous has been the BBC’s collusion - along with the rest of the British corporate media - in all but [disappearing Julian Assange](#) from coverage. The WikiLeaks founder has spent years locked out of sight for exposing war crimes by the British and US. He endures conditions described as psychological torture by Nils Melzer, an international law professor and the UN’s former expert on torture.

You would hardly know that from the BBC’s minimal coverage. Melzer has blasted “the BBC’s failure to expose the gross arbitrariness of Assange’s judicial persecution in the UK”, adding that the British media acts as little more than “[a public relations department](#) of their government”.

BBC journalists are happy [lecturing other states](#) over their attacks on press freedom, while studiously ignoring both a fellow journalist being persecuted a stone’s throw from their London headquarters and the terrifying legal precedents being set in his extradition hearings.

Missing context

Omissions and evasions continue in the BBC’s coverage of Iraq two decades on from its invasion by the UK and the US. As Media Lens, a media watchdog group, [noted recently](#), the state broadcaster still refuses to describe the invasion of Iraq as a “war of aggression” - a label [it uses regularly](#) to describe Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The BBC also continues to severely undercount the death toll in Iraq as a consequence of the invasion, ignoring the most authoritative estimates of well [over a million fatalities](#).

And the broadcaster still glosses over the background to the invasion: of western sanctions against Iraq through the 1990s that are estimated to have caused another 1.5 million deaths - a policy UN officials Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck have described as “[genocidal](#)”.

Then there is missing context. Another BBC disinformation expert, Ros Atkins, hosted a segment last year implying that any discussion of a neo-nazi problem in Ukraine was little more than a [Russian talking point](#). He was referring to the fact that Putin spoke of “de-nazifying” Ukraine as one of the justifications for Russia’s invasion.

Veterans of the far-right Azov Brigade, who took part in the war with Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, at a rally in Kiev on 14 March 2020 (AFP)

But Atkins could only make his case, presenting Ukraine’s neo-nazis as a marginal phenomenon, by ignoring years of [earlier coverage](#) by western media outlets, [including the BBC](#), that [painted](#) a very [different picture](#).

What the BBC has been doing is recasting a well-established fact as disinformation only because it is now inconvenient to western policymakers as they press ahead with a proxy war in Ukraine to weaken Russia.

Putin’s “de-nazification” claim may be hyperbolic. But [Ukrainian neo-nazis](#) - driven by bigotry towards all things Russian - undoubtedly played a significant role in fuelling the eight-year civil war in the Donbas region that preceded Moscow’s invasion.

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There, Ukraine’s ethnic Russian communities faced off against far-right battalions like the Azov Brigade. No journalist can credibly weigh Russia’s justifications for launching its invasion without at least acknowledging the role played by Ukraine’s neo-nazis in the earlier civil war.

And finally, there is the question of priorities. Last week BBC News gave top billing, and acres of coverage, to the death of a popular singer, [Tina Turner](#). Inspirational as Turner’s story was, it was hard to ignore the fact that other, far more vital matters were displaced by the prominence given to her death.

The reality is that a rapidly approaching climate tipping point - when runaway global heating will make life on Earth all but impossible for humans - should be permanently top of the media’s running order, given the failure of British politicians and their counterparts elsewhere to address the crisis.

Turner’s death coincided [with new research](#) indicating that a breakdown in the Gulf Stream would “have drastic impacts, including increasing sea levels, altering weather patterns and depriving marine ecosystems of vital nutrients”.

A search of the BBC’s website, however, suggests this story did not even merit a mention.

The holiday industry, fossil fuel companies, car manufacturers, airlines - in fact, the entire global corporate super-structure that dominates the West's economies and political systems - will have welcomed that omission. They have no interest in seeing research promoted that might damage their bottom lines or justify the jailing of their senior executives.

Co-opted journalists

With the launch of Verify, the BBC is declaring war on an upstart independent media that has proved increasingly successful at using social media platforms to discredit the broadcaster's role in peddling state propaganda.

The need for a "war on disinformation" - like the earlier need for a "war on terror" - is, in fact, itself a prime piece of propaganda.

In the previous era of a nebulous "terrorism", the deceptions sold by counterterrorism experts - such as the lie that Iraq's Saddam Hussein was sheltering his arch-enemies of al-Qaeda - helped provide the casus belli against states in the oil-rich Middle East that were disobedient to the West.



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Now, with more tangible bogeymen in the shape of Russia and China, the British government has been covertly - and lavishly - [funding "counter-disinformation"](#) groups that echo its talking points against these two geostrategic rivals.

The BBC and other media have invariably failed to note, as they platform these organisations, that they are not independent. They are effectively paid mouthpieces of the British state.

BBC Verify, however, appears to mark a turning point, when journalists themselves become the ones hawking the deceptions: the chief one being that only journalists

drawing their salaries from billionaires and the British state are immune from becoming Kremlin "assets".

In truth, journalists in the state and corporate media are being willingly co-opted to serve a national security state that is determined to increase censorship as a way to avoid scrutiny of its activities.

Assange, who did more than anyone else to expose the West's crimes and the deceptions needed to conceal those crimes, has languished in jail for years, unseen and largely forgotten by fellow journalists. They seem strangely indifferent to his plight, even as the US and Britain seek to redefine his investigative journalism as "espionage".

An establishment media that has hung Assange out to dry cannot be trusted to defend an independent media that seeks to scrutinise power, especially when that power is exercised not only by western states but by their obliging press corps.

We are likely to see more journalists claiming to be "disinformation experts" like those at BBC Verify. Their aspiration will not be, as it was for generations of journalists, to fearlessly hold the powerful to account. It will be the exact opposite: to join the clamour for greater censorship.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Eye.

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