

When Facts Fail

Lessons from the 2024 Southport Riots

Charlie Crouch
Gymnasium St-Klemens

70%

of information shared on social media is misleading or false*

Research questions

Question

1

How and why did false information spread during the Southport Riots?

Question

2

What steps can be taken to combat the spread of false information?

How and why did false information spread?

Content creators



A false narrative

Publishing platforms

quickly given reach & visibility on social media platforms



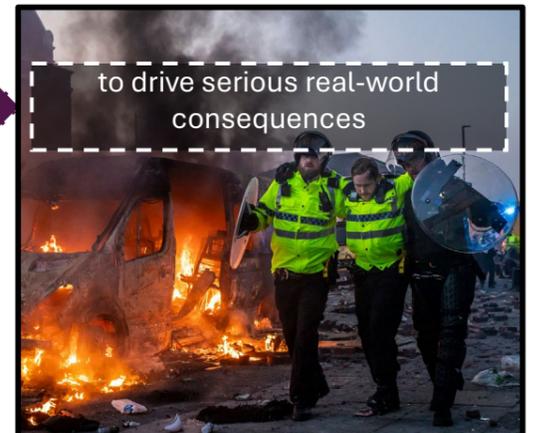
algorithms promote the most sensational

UK consumers

taps into existing societal prejudices

- Immigration concerns
- Rising Islamophobia
- Psychological factors

Re-posters amplify narratives



to drive serious real-world consequences

What steps can be taken?

By content creators

The issues

- We can't stop people posting false information online
- Legal frameworks are insufficient to regulate individuals

Potential countermeasures

- Urge influencers and community leaders, with large followings, to model responsible behaviour
- Require users to remove false content and acknowledge mistakes
- Apply penalties and fines for non-compliance

Conclusions

- None of these measures will deter content creators who deliberately intend to mislead, nor will it stop bots designed to disrupt social cohesion

By publishing platforms

The issues

- Social media platform business models set algorithms to promote the most divisive and sensational content
- Social media platforms are global, but regulators are national

Potential countermeasures

- Regulators need greater powers and international reach
- Algorithm transparency would improve content reliability, including use of community fact-checking

Conclusions

- Global social media platforms are too difficult to control
- Human moderators are subjective and have inherent biases
- Editorial control is impossible given the speed and volume of misinformation

By consumers

The issues

- People tend to believe what they read online, especially when it is often repeated and plays into their pre-existing prejudices

Potential countermeasures

- Debunking needs access to reliable sources such as traditional media, verified fact-checking websites and social media accounts of respected high-profile individuals
- Prebunking could 'inoculate' people against misinformation so they recognise it as false or misleading
- Improved media literacy would help people critically analyse information so messages designed to manipulate could be detected and sources questioned for credibility

Conclusions

- Debunking and prebunking are useful but limited solutions
- Debunking often comes too late, whilst prebunking is limited because it focuses on specific types of misinformation and loses its effectiveness over time

Key findings

- Whilst all actors have a role to play, improving media literacy is the single most effective tool to help people identify misinformation and disinformation
- Media literacy could be taught more explicitly in schools by incorporating it into the national curriculum

Case study

- Finland offers a powerful case study, since it has the highest levels of media literacy in Europe and often tops the Media Literacy Index, which assesses resilience against misinformation

*source: Charlie Crouch