We need to set up an international body to fight fake news

The world has undoubtedly got a fake news problem – there is a compelling case for setting up an international body to combat it, writes Graham Lawton

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By Graham Lawton

I AM not a gambler, but every now and then something comes across my desk that looks worth a punt. I’m also not a tipster – who gives away their inside info? – but I’m going to have to show my hand, or this won’t be much of a column. My tip for the day: Sheldon Himelfarb to win the Nobel peace prize.

Hardly a household name, admittedly. And not a bet that is likely to pay out any time soon. I’m playing the long game, a bit like the time I decided to put a tenner on one of my sons playing football for England at the World Cup (that one came good, in the sense that I didn’t place the bet and hence am £10 up).
Himelfarb is CEO and founder of PeaceTech Lab, a non-profit organisation in Washington DC that promotes the use of technology and data to combat violent conflict. Worthy, though maybe not Nobel-worthy. But the reason I’m tipping him is because of a potentially world-changing idea that recently emerged from his organisation.

I came across this idea at the Nobel Prize Summit: Our Planet, Our Future, a virtual gathering of Nobel Laureates and others to discuss how to heal our planet’s multiple injuries. Himelfarb’s session was on a side stage and its title was hardly one to get pulses racing: A Call for an Intergovernmental Panel on the Information Environment. Read that twice to let it sink in.

Something about it caught my eye, possibly the stellar panel that Himelfarb had assembled to chew over the idea. This included Vint Cerf, co-inventor of the internet and chief internet evangelist at Google; Tawakkol Karman, human rights activist, winner of the Nobel peace prize and member of the Facebook Oversight Board; and Katherine Maher, then CEO of Wikipedia.

On the agenda was Himelfarb’s proposal for an international body, modelled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or IPCC (itself a recipient of the peace prize), to counter the threat from the global proliferation of misinformation.

Although Himelfarb admits that fake news isn’t a novel problem, what is news, he says, is “the volume and velocity with which anyone can spread mis- and disinformation round the world”.

https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg25033370-100-we-need-to-set-up-an-international-body-to-fight-fake-news/
“False information spreads faster and further on Twitter than the truth in every category of information”

One recent study found that false information spreads faster and further on Twitter than the truth in every category of information. Another found that Facebook is still allowing climate denialism to circulate widely.

Himelfarb warned that our information environment is so polluted that we are in danger of becoming incapable of dealing with existential threats, such as climate change and pandemics. The answer, he proposed, is to establish a scientific body to analyse the global information environment and give governments recommendations about how to clean it up. This would be known as the Intergovernmental Panel on the Information Environment, or IPIE.

The proposal won broad though not unconditional support from the panel. As Maher pointed out, there is a fundamental mismatch between climate change and disinformation.

On the former, there is now broad international agreement that the problem exists and requires action. No such consensus exists on disinformation – indeed, as Karman pointed out, the worst offenders are nation states such as Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

And in any case, who gets to arbitrate what is true and what is false? Maher also pointed out that Wikipedia regards Fox News and The Daily Mail as unreliable sources, which is its prerogative. But would we be comfortable with an international body making similar recommendations?

There are also competing and possibly more deserving claims. An international group of chemists recently proposed setting up a similar body for pollution. Given that the UN has recognised waste and pollution as the third planetary crisis alongside climate change and biodiversity loss, maybe that is more of a priority.

I accept that these are valid objections, but we have to start somewhere. It took 20 years for the international community to come round to the idea of establishing the IPCC, and 30 for its warnings to cut through.

Pollution clearly deserves to be ranked alongside climate and biodiversity on the list of global threats. But we won’t clean any of them up without also cleaning up the information ecosystem. Himelfarb says we should think of a clean information environment as a basic human right.

Speaking of cleaning up, I am trying to find a bookmaker who will give me odds on Himelfarb to win the peace prize one day. That tenner is still in my wallet and I have given up on either of my sons pulling on the shirt.
What I’m reading

_In a discarded pile of books, I found one I’ve wanted to read for ages: Christopher Isherwood’s Goodbye to Berlin. When your luck is in, it is in._

What I’m watching

The Underground Railroad on Amazon Prime Video. Brilliant, harrowing.

What I’m working on

I’m looking forward to a break from covid-19 duties. A change is as good as a rest.

- This column appears monthly. Up next week: Annalee Newitz

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