We need a global panel on fake news

Monday December 20 2021, 9.00pm GMT, The Times

With the rapid spread of the new Omicron variant comes the spread of another deadly social disease: misinformation. Conspiracy theories and inaccurate news abound, again threatening to exacerbate the death toll and undermine management of the pandemic.

Yet Covid is only one of the planetary threats that misinformation compounds. Misinformation itself is an existential threat because it impedes action on virtually every global problem. It has stymied efforts to address climate change and caused mob violence in India and Myanmar. It has produced election violence in the US and attacks on minorities around the world. It has led young people to think that many vaccines threaten their fertility.

Which has led us to this conclusion: we need an Intergovernmental Panel for the Information Environment (IPIE), and we need it now. This was the recommendation of a group of experts at the Nobel Prize Foundation Summit this year, who suggested it be modelled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

We have researched the relationship between communication technologies and social wellbeing for 25 years and know that truth is the first victim in conflicts. What is different today, and unprecedented in human history, is the volume and the velocity with which anyone can spread misinformation globally. We have considered the full range of proposed solutions to the crisis, from antitrust action against social media companies, to redesigning the architecture of the internet itself, but none are as comprehensive and actionable as one based on the IPCC.

The IPCC was set up to determine the state of knowledge on climate change and provide regular scientific assessments on its implications. Like climate change, misinformation is a global problem which demands a co-ordinated global response. The IPIE would gather scientific evidence on misinformation, establish standards for a healthy information environment, evaluate potential policy responses and create the multilateral framework needed for a global approach.

The UK government already leads on technology issues in the G20 and other international forums. With the UK’s backing, an IPIE could begin to address this crisis. Helping governments and the platforms to co-ordinate on misinformation is the only way forward. We must take this vital step to save our information environment.

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