

Transcript

Jess Blair, Director of Electoral Reform Society Cymru: The term 'fake news' might have started with a former US President shouting 'fake news' at every opportunity, but it's something that makes this kind of conversation much more accessible.

Philip Sargeant, Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, The Open University: The basic meaning of 'fake news' is information that's false or fabricated and that is being passed off as news, and thus as real. It is something that can potentially affect us all and the way we live our lives.

[Title card]

Fake news, misinformation and disinformation in Wales

[On screen caption - English dictionary definition of disinformation]

disinformation

[dis-in-fer-mey-shuhn]

deliberately misleading or biased information manipulated narrative or facts

Philip Sargeant: Disinformation is false information which has been created on purpose, and so it's often a type of propaganda.

[On screen caption - English dictionary definition of misinformation]

misinformation

[mis-in-fer-mey-shuhn]

false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead

Philip Sargeant: Misinformation is where the false information is more accidental, but it's still false and so it can still be very disruptive.

To understand the implications that 'fake news' has in different places, one has to have an understanding of the media environment in that place, and particularly the vulnerabilities that that environment might have.

Jess Blair: Wales is more susceptible to mis and disinformation. Partly because if people in Wales can't get good quality news about Wales from Welsh media sources, where are they getting their information from? And largely that's either UK sources who don't really understand Wales or reflect Wales back to people here, or it's from social media.

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The media landscape in Wales

Philip Sargeant: One of the important issues for misinformation and disinformation in the Welsh context is the whole concept of devolution. Devolution has been the process of shifting some powers away from the UK Parliament, based in Westminster, to parliaments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Shaun Bendle, Founder @ThatsDevolved: 'That's Devolved' is a Twitter account that was set up, aiming at really correcting the media when it gets devolution wrong, and informing people so they understand the difference that it makes and hopefully making a change in that way.

So, reporting on the Senedd is limited to four or five journalists, and while they will get some of the information out there, you'll never get the same level of scrutiny.

Will Hayward, WalesOnline Welsh Affairs Editor: To compare the UK-wide media with the Welsh specific media is a bit like comparing apples and pears. So, Wales is, especially devolution, it's very new - and Fleet Street for instance has had centuries in which to develop, not just readerships but also, essentially spheres of influence and areas that they would cover. So, in Wales we've had two decades in order to do that.

There has been a decline in newspaper sales within Wales, as there has everywhere, but this has been offset with the growth of online media.

At the start of the pandemic, Mark Drakeford wasn't just some guy you occasionally saw but didn't really know who he was, he was a guy who could decide whether you could visit your mother in a care home.

[Video clip - Welsh Government Covid-19 Briefing 10th May 2020]

Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister of Wales: We will continue to make decisions which are right for Wales using information and expert advice about how coronavirus is circulating here, to keep us all safe.

Will Hayward: In the last 16 months, we have seen a huge growth in an appetite for Welsh specific media because it's finally relevant to people's everyday life.

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Explaining fake news, misinformation and disinformation

Philip Sargeant: The Covid pandemic is a very good example, because you really want reliable information, so that people know what they can, what they should be doing. And it can have very serious consequences because this is to do with issues, of ultimately, life and death.

Will Hayward: In May 2020, it looked like the UK Government were going to go their own way for England. Boris Johnson said you can now drive as far as you want.

[Video clip – Statement by the Prime Minister, 10th May 2020]

Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister: We're taking the first careful steps to modify our measures. And from this Wednesday, we want to encourage people to take more and even unlimited amounts of outdoor exercise. You can sit in the sun in your local park, you can drive to other destinations.

Will Hayward: He addressed the British public saying you can travel as far as you want. Immediately there had to be a response from the Welsh Government and Wales police chiefs saying you cannot travel to Wales still, this isn't allowed.

[Video clip – Statement by the Prime Minister, 10th May 2020]

Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister of Wales: Noswaith dda. This evening, the Prime Minister has set out the minor changes which are proposed to the lockdown rules in England over the next three weeks. Our advice has not changed in Wales. Wherever you can, you should stay at home.

Shaun Bendle: These can have very real consequences. You've heard cases of people who've driven X amount of hundred miles from a city in England to go and climb Snowdonia or visit a Welsh beach and been arrested in the process.

Will Hayward: That was a really clear example to me of a time actually, from the very highest seat of government in the UK, that there was, essentially misinformation. It was incorrect. I think there's quite a lot of examples that you can point to of misinformation specifically affecting Wales. So, for instance we had measles outbreaks in Swansea, we've had them in several areas of south Wales, and the only reason that happens is because of misinformation around vaccines.

Jess Blair: Politicians absolutely can't say that they've got clean hands when it comes to mis and disinformation. You know, we've seen over the course of the last couple of years, politicians, political parties, especially around election time, playing into this element of 'fake news'.

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How does fakes news contribute to the democratic deficit?

Philip Seargeant: The democratic deficit, very basically, means that the political system isn't seen to live up to its democratic ideals. There's a deficit between what people think the system should be doing, how democratic the system should be, and how democratic it actually is.

Jess Blair: Broadly, it decimates trust. So, on a kind of microcosm, you might see something that is fake on social media, and that might then affect your trust in politics, or politicians or the news. And that has a real impact on democracy, you know, if people don't trust the information they're getting, they really question everything.

Will Hayward: The problem with phrases like 'fake news', is that they can mean anything to anyone and if you start labelling this is 'fake news', this is 'fake news', it erodes the whole trust in news generally. And we know how important a credible and trusted media is. Especially as more misinformation goes out into the world.

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What can be done to combat fake news?

Philip Seargeant: Simply identifying that 'fake news' is a problem is obviously important, but that's only really the first step. One then wants to work out what one can do about it. What one can do to address it. And there are basically three levels at which that can happen. Firstly, there's the individual. The individuals, the individual is able to take certain steps.

Shaun Bendle: There's an argument obviously, with both sides, making sure that people disseminating the information are saying the right thing and definitely aren't lying deliberately, and aren't making mistakes in what they're saying. Obviously, I'm going to pitch 'That's Devolved', but I think, for example in Wales, the Senedd Research service has really accessible breakdowns of different policy areas.

Will Hayward: You've always got to be sceptical, but scepticism doesn't run to not believing anything if everything is 'fake news', then it's impossible to discredit the things that are actually rubbish, and lies, and incorrect.

Philip Seargeant: Secondly, there's the role that the media companies can, and probably should, be doing.

Jess Blair: There's a real responsibility here on news organisations, on political institutions, in making sure that the information they put out is accurate, transparent and accountable.

Will Hayward: I think building trust with people is one of the key counters to misinformation. As a journalist, one of the key things I try and do is demonstrate how we've got to stories. So, for instance, I use social media quite a lot to explain how we got this information and why we feel it's relevant.

Jess Blair: One of the biggest low-hanging fruit is imprints. So at election time, when you get a leaflet through the door there's a little thing in the corner that says who's paid for it and who's produced it. On social media, there is nothing of that equivalent. So, ads that you're seeing could be from anyone. So, one of the biggest and easiest things that we could do is require ads online, on digital campaigns, to have that kind of imprint saying who's actually paid for them.

Philip Seargeant: And finally, there's a role for government. The Government themselves can take certain actions in terms of regulating, for example, the media companies.

Jess Blair: There is a little bit that Welsh Government can do, and they should do it, so that includes looking at whether they can help support some kind of independent news service in Wales. There's a responsibility here in terms of education settings, so talking about improving political education in schools, colleges, life-long learning.

Will Hayward: Misinformation tends to target where there's power and decision-making, and the more decision-making and power is held in Wales, the more likely it will be to be exposed to that.