Response to “Fake News” inquiry by the Culture, Media and Sport Parliamentary Committee

Muslim Council of Britain

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1. **Introduction**

1.1. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), founded in 1997, is an inclusive umbrella body of affiliates comprising mosques, educational and charitable bodies, cultural and relief agencies and women and youth groups from across the UK. The affiliate base reflects the diversity of Muslims in the UK being from a range of ethnic, geographical and theological backgrounds and traditions. It is pledged to work for the common good of society as a whole.

1.2. The prevalence of news that is incorrect, either intentionally or unintentionally, is a serious concern, both because it undermines the trust that the public has in news stories and due to the impact it has on the narrative created on specific issues.

1.3. On behalf of the MCB, we therefore welcome the committee’s inquiry into fake news and the impact it has on broader society.

1.4. This response reflects insights drawn from significant experience within the MCB in engaging with regulators and national managing editors on the topic of reporting about Islam and Muslims, although many of the insights are applicable for the reporting of other minority communities. The response is split into the following main sections:
   - Section 2: Definition of “fake news”
   - Section 3: Examples of specific “fake news” items
   - Section 4: Impact of “fake news”
   - Section 5: Conclusions and recommendations

2. **Definition of “fake news”**

2.1. The term “fake news” has been used with significantly different meanings.

2.2. On the one hand, the term is used as a means of stifling debate and scrutiny on legitimate areas of discussion and as a means of attacking those who do not share one’s viewpoint on an issue. President Trump’s accusation that the CNN is “fake news”\(^1\) falls into this category. Such usage is hugely damaging as it undermines valid accusations of “fake news”.

2.3. On the other hand, the term is used to describe outlets intentionally set up to disseminate false information with a specific goal.

2.4. Given the impossibility of determining the motive of an author, our perspective is that “fake news” should be defined to include the dissemination of any objectively false news, with the greatest concern focussed on where there is the greatest impact on our society.

2.5. Care should be taken to distinguish between an outlet which publishes false stories on occasion, and those that do so by design.

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3. Examples of “fake news”

3.1. “Fake news” with the above definition can be split into a number of categories when it comes to the reporting of Islam and Muslims:

- False stories on far-right websites that seem to have a specific anti-Muslim agenda
- False stories on more mainstream media outlets

3.2. Far-right websites: Examples of “fake news” this year include the following:

- Breitbart claimed: “Revealed: 1,000-man mob attack police, set Germany’s oldest church alight on New Year’s Eve”\(^2\). In reality a stray fire cracker started a small blaze on netting covering scaffolding on the church and it was put out after about 12 minutes. The roof was not on fire and the church is not Germany’s oldest.\(^3\)
- Jihad Watch claimed: “Canada: Gunmen screaming “Allahu akbar” open fire in mosque, murdering multiple people”\(^4\) when in reality a student named Alexandre Bissonette known for right-wing posts was charged with 6 counts of murder.\(^5\)
- Geller Report claimed: “Muslim gunman screaming ‘ALLAHU AKBAR’ opens fire in Spanish supermarket”\(^6\) when in reality the individual was a Spanish national who spoke Basque.\(^7\)

3.3. Mainstream media outlets: Care needs to be taken on calling mainstream news outlets “fake news” when national newspapers provide an important means of holding power to account. However, it is worth noting that the two fake news stories published by Jihad Watch and the Geller Report above were also published with similar (or worse perspectives) by the Sun\(^8\), Mail and Express.

Whilst we make no accusation about the intention of the author of the following pieces, nor of the media outlet themselves, we set out a small selection of false stories published about Islam and Muslims in mainstream media:

- The Mail on Sunday claimed “Isolated British Muslims are so cut off from the rest of society that they see the UK as 75 per cent Islamic, shock report reveals”\(^9\), when in reality the report did not make such a claim and instead referred to the views of students of one school about the population of Asians in the UK. This story was also reported in the Sunday Times and The Sun.\(^10\)
- The Sun claimed “Ramadan train driver in crash: Rail accident experts claimed his fast caused the rush-hour derailment that led to three days of disruption”\(^11\) when in reality, the experts did not conclude that his fast caused the derailment.
- The Express claimed: “More than 900 migrants carried out Germany NYE sex attacks” although this has been widely debunked as fake leading to a change in the article\(^12\).
- Daily Star Sunday claimed “UK mosques fundraising for terror”\(^13\) when mosques were not fundraising for terror.

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\(^2\) "Revealed: 1,000-Man Mob Attack Police, Set Germany’s Oldest Church Alight on New Year’s Eve", Breitbart, January 2017
\(^3\) "German police quash Breitbart story of mob setting fire to Dortmund church", Guardian, January 2017
\(^4\) "Canada: Gunmen screaming “Allahu akbar” open fire in mosque, murdering multiple people", Jihad Watch, January 2017
\(^5\) "Quebec Terror Suspect Alexandre Bissonette Charged with Six Counts of Murder", Vice News, January 2017
\(^6\) "Muslim gunman screaming ‘ALLAHU AKBAR’ opens fire in Spanish supermarket", Geller Report, January 2017
\(^7\) "Mercadona And Police Refute British Reports Of Jihadi Suicide Attack In Spanish Supermarket", The Spain Report, January 2017
\(^8\) "The Sun correction", January 2017
\(^9\) "Mail retracts claim “brit Muslims think 75% of UK is Islamic” - so why do Times and Sun stand by it?", Political Scrapbook, December 2016
\(^10\) "No, Train Driver didn’t crash because of Ramadan Fast. UK Sun Unpublishes", MediaEthics, November 2016
\(^11\) "Express correction", March 2017
\(^12\) "Daily Star Sunday censured over misleading headline on UK mosques", Guardian, April 2016
Each of these stories have since been corrected by the newspapers concerned after complaints by Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain Miqdaad Versi, whose monitoring has led to over 20 stories being corrected over the past few months in national mainstream newspapers related Islam and Muslims in the media13.

It is worth noting that whilst the source article may have been corrected, anti-Muslim “news” websites which copied these stories, retain the original article – and many of those who saw the initial false article, will not see the correction. As just one of many such examples, consider the following sites which retain the false Sunday Times, Mail on Sunday, Sun and Express article on British Muslims seeing the UK as 75% Islamic cited above:

- **The Muslim Issue** which claims to draw “its reports from officially recognized news sources from around the world”14
- **Europe News** which states it gives “no apology for being free”15
- **Solstice Witch 13**16 which has a host of false stories most recently: “Mid East migrants ‘terrifying,’ can’t ‘stop themselves from raping masses of women”

The reality of the false news items about Muslims and Islam in the media is beyond question. The Guardian noted: “Press publishing 'consistent stream' of inaccurate stories about Muslims”17 and the Independent said: “British newspapers accused of publishing 'consistent stream' of inaccurate stories about Muslims”18.

According to the editor of the Press Gazette, “Newspaper stories misrepresenting Islam would not be tolerated if they were about Judaism” and that the “regulator Ipso needs to step in”19 as it is not doing so effectively. Whilst the above examples were corrected often with the support of Ipso, the press regulator determined the following false stories not to have been breaches of its Code:

- **The Express** claimed “New £5 notes could be BANNED by religious groups as Bank CAN’T promise they’re Halal”20 when the fact that whether they were Halal was not relevant to the Bank’s decision making.
- **Daily Mail** claimed: “Nativity scene is 'banned' in case it offends one of the FOUR Muslims living in a Belgian town”21. In fact there was no ban, and no evidence to support the claim that the lack of a nativity scene was due to a fear of offending Muslims.
- **The Sun’s** Trevor Kavanagh claimed that “Dame Louise identified Muslim suburbs where…wife-beating and marital rape are standard” in his column.22 Dame Louise Casey did not make such a claim in her report. It is worth noting that Mr Kavanagh has not yet resigned from the press regulator Ipso’s Board despite attacking a complainant and being found in breach of the Code himself.23

Many other such examples exist and a more detailed critique of Ipso’s Editors’ Code can be found in the MCB’s submission to the Editors’ Code Committee24.

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13 The UK media too often misrepresents Muslims – with dangerous results, Guardian, January 2017
14 British Muslims see the UK as 75 per cent Islamic, report reveals, The Muslim Issue, December 2016
15 Isolated British Muslims are so cut off from the rest of society that they see the UK as 75 per cent Islamic, shock report reveals, Europe News, December 2016
16 British Muslims see the UK as 75 per cent Islamic, report reveals, Solstice Witch 13, December 2016
17 Press publishing 'consistent stream' of inaccurate stories about Muslims, Guardian, January 2017
18 British newspapers accused of publishing 'consistent stream' of inaccurate stories about Muslims, Independent, January 2017
19 Newspaper stories misrepresenting Islam would not be tolerated if they were about Judaism, regulator ipso needs to step in, Press Gazette, January 2017
20 New £5 notes could be BANNED by religious groups as Bank CAN’T promise they’re Halal, Daily Express, December 2016
21 Nativity scene is 'banned' in case it offends one of the FOUR Muslims living in a Belgian town, Mail Online, December 2016
22 Boris Johnson was right to slam Saudi abuses, but we need their oil so will have to hold our noses and deal with them, The Sun, December 2016
23 Sun journalist faces calls to step down from press watchdog, Guardian, February 2017
24 Muslim Council of Britain response to Editors’ Code of Practice Committee consultation on revisions to the Editors’ Code of Practice, MCB, March 2017
The above section has focussed on false and inaccurate news, and excludes scaremongering, bias and hate speech within mainstream media, some of which has led to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance concluding that "hate speech in some traditional media continues to be a serious problem, notably as concerns tabloid newspapers."  

4. Impact of “fake news”

4.1. Whilst fake news about Muslims from far-right websites is hugely damaging and reinforces false stereotypes about Muslims, the danger of false stories from mainstream news sites should not be ignored.

4.2. Consider these two false headlines shared by the far right:
   - The Mail’s article headlined “Gunman screaming ‘Allahu Akbar’ opens fire in Spanish supermarket” was shared by Tommy Robinson.  
   - The Sunday Times’ article “Enclaves of Islam in Britain see UK as 75% Muslim” (Sunday Times) was shared by the English Defence League and Britain First.

4.3. Claiming that the mainstream national media has played no role in the growth in Islamophobia and increased hatred towards Muslims is no longer a tenable position given the wealth of academic evidence on the issue, and the lack of any evidence to the contrary:
   - Research by the University of Cambridge concluded that mainstream media reporting about Muslims is contributing to an atmosphere of rising hostility toward Muslims in Britain.  
   - Research by the University of Leicester suggested that “Politicians and media fuel hate crime in Britain.”  
   - Findings of an Islamophobia Roundtable in Stockholm showing that the regular association of Islam and Muslims with crime and terror in the media and on the internet is vital to the spread of Islamophobic rhetoric.

4.4. It is little wonder that according to reports, the British population believe that the current British Muslim population is 15%, over three times the reality and that more than half of Britons now regard Muslims as a threat to the UK.

4.5. Furthermore, given the prevalence of such stories, the credibility and trust the public has for journalists is appallingly low with only 24% trusting journalists according to the 2016 Ipsos MORI Veracity Index.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. The evidence clearly points to the fact that sections of the national mainstream media also publishes and shares false stories about Islam and Muslims, and the current regulatory structure has not prevented it, and in many cases tolerates it. Mainstream news outlets have a significantly larger reach and their impact is greater than far-right websites.

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25 ECRI Report on the United Kingdom, ECRI, October 2016
26 Tommy Robinson on Twitter
27 English Defence League on Twitter
28 Britain First on Twitter
29 University of Cambridge and Economic and Social Research Council Roundtable held at the House of Lords
30 ‘Politicians and media fuel hate crime in Britain,’ say University of Leicester experts, University of Leicester, June 2016
32 Europeans greatly overestimate Muslim population, poll shows, Guardian, December 2016
33 7/7 Bombings Anniversary Poll Shows More Than Half Of Britons See Muslims As A Threat, Huffington Post, July 2015
34 Journalists and politicians languish in latest public trust index, PR Week, December 2016
5.2. Any inquiry on “fake news” that fails to take into account false stories from mainstream news outlets, would be missing an important part of the overall challenge of “fake news”.

5.3. We hope that as part of the inquiry, the Committee will consider providing the following recommendations that impacts mainstream media in particular:

- **More effective regulatory structure:**
  - **Editor’s Code:** the press regulator Ipso considers inaccuracy to not be a problem in some cases such as when the point is not “central to the argument”, even if it encourages hostility and is false. A more detailed analysis of the deficiencies of the current Editors’ Code can be seen in the MCB’s submission to the Editors’ Code.  
  - There needs to be **appropriate deterrents**. Media outlets should not be able to get away with “clarifications” that do not admit wrongdoing without “due prominence”. For example, a significantly misleading front page headline needs to be corrected by an equally sized front page apology in good time, across all relevant media including social media, with financial penalties imposed where relevant.
  - The press regulator Ipso needs to be **willing to take action**. No investigation has been undertaken to determine whether there has been a systematic breach of the Code and thus no media outlet has been subject to a financial penalty.
  - Ipso is **not truly independent**. For example, Paul Dacre, the Editor of the Daily Mail, was the Chairman of Ipso’s Editors’ Code Committee until his resignation and Trevor Kavanagh, the columnist and assistant editor at the Sun, is a member of the Ipso Board. This poses significant conflicts of interest and reduces confidence in the regulatory structure especially given Mr Kavanagh has breached the Code due to one of his articles and publicly attacked one complainant, potentially deterring future complainants and leading to MPs and peers writing to the Ipso chair questioning its independence.

A Leveson-compliant regulatory structure that provides a framework of minimal standards and an incentive to join (Section 40), that is therefore likely to more effectively deter journalism that falls below these minimal standards, would be one that the Muslim Council of Britain supports.

- **Greater role of social media outlets and online news aggregators such as Google, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter**, from which more are sourcing their news. Whilst social media outlets and online news aggregators are not the original source of these false news stories, they play a major role in their dissemination, in particular because one-man bands of fake news can appear as legitimate as mainstream news sources online.
  - **Kitemarks** for the trustworthiness of news outlets, determined by an independent panel, may be one means of ensuring that non-verified one-man bands are more easily identified.

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35 Muslim Council of Britain response to Editors’ Code of Practice Committee consultation on revisions to the Editors’ Code of Practice, MCB, March 2017
36 Board, Complaints Committee and staff, Ipso
37 MPs and peers question independence of press watchdog, Guardian, October 2016
Prominence of corrections: the ability exists for news aggregators and social media platforms to ensure corrections to false news articles are shared with the same people who saw the original false article.

Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered The World, James Ball (not published)