COVID PRESS COVERAGE:

PART ONE

A TWO-PART SERIES ON HOW NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS AND THEIR PET COMPLAINTS-HANDLER IPSO HAVE FAILED THE PUBLIC DURING THE PANDEMIC

RACISM and FAKE NEWS in the Wild West of newspaper comment sections

HACKED OFF
Campaign for a free + accountable press
Social media is a hotbed of Coronavirus conspiracy theories, racism, and fake news.

This applies to the platforms of the big social media companies, like Facebook and Twitter, but it also applies to newspaper website social media platforms, often referred to as “below the line”, “BTL”, or “comment sections”.

Comment sections appear on several popular newspaper websites which reach millions of readers. They enable those readers to engage with a story, pass comment on it, and discuss it with others.

Newspapers have been vocal in their criticism of Facebook, Twitter and other companies for their failure to keep fake news and abuse off their platforms. But this report exposes the harmful content appearing on “below the line” social media platforms of the largest newspaper websites.

Many of these newspapers have used their own columns to campaign for regulation of social media companies while doing nothing about the casual racism, abuse and fake news that appears regularly on their own platforms.

This is not only hypocritical, it is dangerous. Just like the social media sites, these comments help to normalise racist abuse and spread wholly false conspiracy theories.

This report sets out the findings of a review of newspaper comment sections on the websites of The Sun, The Mirror, The Daily Telegraph and MailOnline (The Daily Mail). A total of 53 examples of comment sections content dating from January to April were collected, which include “fake news”, conspiracy theories and racist language. Comments were drawn from coverage of news stories about the coronavirus.

This was not an exhaustive review but provides some indication of the problem.

The Government has plans for a new system of regulation to apply to social media companies but has stated its intention to exempt newspaper websites – claiming the sham regulator “IPSO” is already regulating comment sections. But to this day, IPSO has yet to publish a single adjudication regarding content in comment sections.

This review shows why – if the government is serious about tackling the problem – it must include newspapers and their comment sections in any regulatory framework.
A fake news infodemic.

Of the 53 examples of fake news and racism we found in newspapers' online sites, most can fit into one of five categories: that the virus was a hoax, is linked to 5G, was deliberately engineered, was created by "elites", can be killed in sunlight, or began in the USA.

These are precisely the kinds of conspiracy theories circulating on Facebook and Twitter.

This report sets out only the most egregious examples. All the cases we found are set out in an appendix available here. Usernames have been redacted.

"THIS VIRUS CAME ENGINEERED IN A CHINESE LAB"

This is one of many comments alleging that the virus was deliberately engineered in a lab. It was published on The Sun newspaper website, under a story which was critical of wet markets.

The comment was first published on 28th March 2020. On 9th July 2020 (more than three months later) it remains accessible.

In fact, 57 people have engaged with it. As with all of these comments, engagement only measures those who actively responded in some way. Many more are likely to have read it.

It is wholly without foundation, and Full Fact have published a fact-check on their website.

"THE VIRUS STARTED IN THE US"

This comment summarises a conspiracy theory claiming that the virus, having begun in the US, was brought into China when Wuhan hosted the Military World Games in October 2019. It was published on The Sun website under a story about a Chinese coronavirus expert.

Posted almost three months ago, it has still not been removed (as of 7th July 2020). 47 individuals have so far engaged with the post.

"THE VIRUS WAS CREATED AND SPREAD BY THE GLOBALIST DEEP STATE"

This comment was published on the Daily Telegraph website and remains accessible more than three months later. It sets out a series of conspiracy theories associated with the virus, including that it has been spread by the "globalist deep state".
“Online misinformation can fuel hate speech;
hate speech can fuel hate crimes.

“It is essential that this cycle is broken.”

Sasha Ockenden is Communications Coordinator for Tactical Tech, which exists to investigate the impact of new technologies on society and to educate the public on its benefits and dangers.

“AGENDA DEPOPULATION. GATES IS ON RECORD... HE IS OPEN REGARDING HIS PLANS”

Agenda depopulation. Gates is on record as stating vaccination will effectively result in depopulation. He is open regarding his plans. It is documented. It is not hidden. Look at his history. Look at his bloodline. Look at his education. Do some research. It's all widely available. The WHO are effectively reducing the world population. This is their goal. This is their plan. It has been since time began. Open your eyes.

This comment was posted on MailOnline in early April. It remains accessible.

Bill Gates features prominently in conspiracy theories about global elites in general, and in particular about “owning a vaccine for COVID-19”. These theories are fueled by the fact that an organisation which has received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation does currently own a patent for a vaccine treatment for a different kind of coronavirus affecting birds. It was granted in 2018. Either mistakenly, or maliciously, conspiracy theorists mischaracterise this.

“ARE WE BEING KEPT INSIDE FOR A DIFFERENT REASON... G5 MASKS GOING UP MAYBE”

We assume this commenter is referring to “5G masts”. It is one of several comments found in which people were speculating about health risks – now entirely discredited – associated with 5G.

BBC NEWS

Coronavirus: 20 suspected phone mast attacks over Easter

By Lisa Arias
Technology news editor

Dozens of attacks on 5G masts – and on construction workers involved in building them – have been reported since the Coronavirus outbreak, directly linked to this conspiracy theory.
**Explicit racism.**

In addition to fake news, newspaper comment sections are riddled with explicit racism.

**"WE ALL KNOW THE TRUTH THOUGH THE MURDERING FREAKS"**

![Comment](image1.png)

**"THERE JUST DIRTY BASTARDS"**

![Comment](image2.png)

These comments appeared under an article in the Sun. They remain accessible over three months later.

**"DISGUSTING PEOPLE"**

![Comment](image3.png)

This comment (appearing under the same article), referring to Chinese people and the culture of wet markets, describes them as "disgusting people" and "disgusting behaviour". It has been published for over three months, with 57 "likes".

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**As these comments have been published and broadcast to millions of people by newspaper websites, hate crimes against Chinese people have soared.**

On 13th May, Government Ministers reported that hate crime committed against people from South & East Asia had risen by 21%. A week previously, a Sky News report revealed that the rate of hate crimes committed against Chinese people between January and March 2020 was nearly three times that of the previous two years.

![Image: Sky News](image4.png)

**NUMBER OF HATE CRIMES AGAINST CHINESE PEOPLE IN UK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Jan-Mar 2018</th>
<th>Jan-Mar 2019</th>
<th>Jan-Mar 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than drawing newspapers' attention to anti-Chinese racism on their comment sections, IPSO has done nothing to counter or remedy racist language directed at Chinese people on these platforms.

In the context of rising hate crimes, any competent regulator would be scrutinising comments posted under stories about China and the origin of COVID-19.

IPSO has done nothing.
“This report shows how the comment sections of many news sites are overrun with the most abhorrent racist language. “Without proper regulation, people have been able to express and normalise hateful speech without repercussions.

“We have worked with young people directly affected by language used in these comment sections, which has seriously damaged their mental well-being and self-esteem.”

Sajda Mughal OBE is an anti-racism campaigner and Director of the JAN Trust.

“CHINA... MAKES FAKE PRODUCTS... [IS] EXTREMELY FAMOUS FOR CHEATING”

What ever the scenario but China remains the country that spread the virus in the world by providing fake patent number and not telling the truth. China failed to control the virus and China responsible for all global deaths. China is the only country who makes fake products, copying brands and nobody in the world eats such wild animals. Additionally, China extremely famous for cheating you may check YouTube videos and see how they make fruits from plastic and sell it.

In a Mirror article, Coronavirus crisis timeline - 100 days that changed the world, a commenter accuses the Chinese of being “famous for cheating” and of making fruit from plastic. The comment has received 10 “likes” and remains accessible, having been published over three months ago.

THE CH**KS ARE SAVAGES, COMMUNIST LIARS... A PLAGUE OF LOCUST[S]”

The wet market isn’t the source of the virus, hence it is open again. We need to bring manufacturing home, stop buying Chinese crap. The chinks are savages, communist liars, I have alienated them to a plague of locust for years.

In another article by the Sun, headlined “US officials warned bat study at Wuhan lab could trigger coronavirus outbreak TWO years ago”, a commenter directs abuse at Chinese people, using a racist slur.

This comment remains accessible almost three months after it was published. It has received 43 “likes”.

Presumably, in the absence of any remedial action, such slurs are acceptable to The Sun and to IPSO.

The complaints-handler missing in action.

IPSO claims to regulate comment sections. An IPSO blog proclaims, “IPSO does regulate user-generated comments…”

But IPSO is no more than complaints-handler, controlled by the big newspaper groups. It lacks both power and inclination to take on the press. As a result, the comments in this report have remained accessible on newspaper websites for months.

Moreover, the standards code that IPSO claims to enforce does not even outlaw many of these comments. Its clause on discrimination permits hateful, racist abuse so long as it is targeted at an ethnic or religious group as a whole, rather than an individual.

A blog on IPSO’s website claims that this, “...helps to protect freedom of expression by promoting valid debate in society. It’s important in a free society that no group is considered above criticism...”

Does IPSO really believe that labelling Chinese people “savages” or akin to “a plague of locust” is “criticism” or “valid debate”?
Newspaper comment sections are like the Wild West.

All of these newspaper websites claim to moderate their comment sections to some extent. The examples in this report show that none are doing so effectively.

But whatever the newspapers’ own position, IPSO claims to be regulating them. On 6th August 2019, IPSO announced in a blog:

“...we can and do handle complaints about reader comments or user generated content which have appeared in our regulated publications...”

Any serious regulator would not wait for complaints about blatant racism, abuse or disinformation. It would act. But IPSO has not once taken any public action on newspaper comment sections - despite the dozens of examples found by Hacked Off over the brief period covered in this report.

IPSO’s rules are controlled by newspaper executives and its standards code is written by newspaper editors. It lacks the powers and independence to regulate its members’ editorial content or their online comment sections.

IPSO has always boasted that it has the power to launch an investigation when standards have been breached. In fact, they have never done so. Just like their discredited predecessor, the Press Complaints Commission, they simply respond to individual complaints.

So even when the most appalling and abusive smears appear in newspaper comment sections, they sit on their hands until someone complains.

Then there is the timeframe. Complaints typically take three months to be considered, after which millions of people will have seen the offending comment.

As long as IPSO is left in charge, fake news, racism and conspiracy theories will flourish on newspaper comment sections.

Newspaper comment sections are social media platforms.

The Government has plans to require social media platforms to be regulated. In fact, the current proposals are to require regulation of “User Generated Content” across the web – which will include social media platforms and forums of all kinds.

Except one kind.

A Government Minister recently stated that newspaper comment sections - despite falling into the Government’s definition of User Generated Content platforms - would be exempt. The Government have yet to set out how it will work and which publishers will qualify.

As this report highlights, many of the examples of disinformation found in newspaper comment sections online are similar to those found on Twitter and Facebook. There is no basis to prohibit online harms from social media platforms, while doing nothing to address the same harms on newspaper websites.

IPSO cannot keep the public safe.

The only justification given by the Government for the press’ special exemption is that IPSO is already regulating comment sections. A Government Minister claimed that IPSO is regulating them in a “clear and effective” way, so further regulatory requirements are unnecessary.

But IPSO has not lifted a finger over comment sections. Hacked Off’s small team of campaigners reviewed four titles’ comment sections over a brief period and found multiple examples of disinformation, racism and “online harms”. IPSO, lavishly resourced by the big newspapers, has been “regulating” these comment sections for almost a year but has apparently found nothing untoward.

The Government cannot leave the safety and security of the public in IPSO’s hands.

Hacked Off call for:

1. IPSO to be reformed or replaced by an independent regulator which meets independently agreed criteria, approved by Parliament, for press self-regulators

2. Online Harms legislation to cover newspaper website comment sections which are not a member of an approved independent regulator

Take action:
Write to your MP