

Fake news and censorship

It has rightly long been against the law to urge people to violence against others or to send out messages to people to join burglaries, looting or rioting. It is an offence to discriminate against people for their race or religion and to use hate speech against individuals or groups. Recent On line Harms legislation has underwritten that none of this must be done online, though it was already a crime whether you used the phone, a placard, a leaflet or an on line posting.

There are now those who want to widen the law to ban so called fake news. They argue that someone can circulate a wrong fact about an event which then whips up racial or religious hatred if it wrongly accuses people of a crime they did not commit. This is still covered by existing law if the resulting comment or stimulus to action is based on hatred and on their race or religion, using an invented and wrong fact to reinforce that ill. Trying to ban all fake news goes far beyond necessary protections of people and property, and desirable crack downs over invitations to violence. It implies there is just one truth, that the authorities can judge that truth, and that any other statements are false. Life is not that straightforward. If people and institutions cannot make false claims which they believe to be true at the time much debate and discussion will be banned. A government moving in this direction might end up breaking its own fake news law all too often.

Consider some of the statements the present government has made. They said they will build 300,000 new homes a year for 5 years. Many think that unlikely. If they do not build 300,000 a year for the next two years does that make their comment fake news?

Then there is their aim to make the U.K. the fastest growing G 7 economy. It is true it was the first half of this year but most official forecasts expect others to outperform over the next few years. Would that also become fake news?

When it comes to issues like climate change and net zero policies there are big disagreements. Is government saying only one view is allowed of all the complexities? When the Bank of England told us two years before inflation hit 11% it would be 2%, was that fake news?

Of course we need to keep the ban hate speech and stop people promoting criminal activity. Why aren't all the communications of all the small boat vendors taken down and prosecuted? We must not ban different ways of reviewing the big issues like climate change, migration and the economy as disagreement about cause, effect and policy are fundamental to democratic debate.