

# COVID:19: PRESSURE POINTS: FIGHTING FAKE NEWS (UK)

06 May 2020 | UK  
Legal Briefings

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Misinformation and the spread of ‘fake news’ is not a novel issue. As engagement with social media has grown exponentially, so has the ability to circulate unverified information quickly and extensively.

However, the harmful effects of the mass broadcast and sharing of false information have been felt acutely during the coronavirus pandemic. Users of social media have taken the opportunity to spread conspiracy theories, false medical advice and fabricated government guidance. This has [undermined](#) governments’ efforts to contain the virus, heightened alarm and anxiety.

## THE UK GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE

The UK Government has announced the formation of a ‘rapid response unit’ within the Cabinet Office which will work alongside social media companies to remove fake news and harmful online content. According to Oliver Dowden, the Culture and Digital Secretary, the new unit aims to combat false information about the illness and phishing scams which capitalise on the crisis. The unit reportedly tackles up to 70 incidents a week by rebutting false claims, working with platforms to remove harmful content and ensuring promotion of public health campaigns through reliable sources.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

The government has recognised the role of social media companies in tackling ‘fake news’, and will be working alongside them to remove harmful content. Social media companies have said they will work to improve the situation, with Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Reddit and Twitter releasing a joint statement on their efforts against fraud and misinformation regarding coronavirus.

Further, individual companies such as [Twitter](#) have said they will remove content promoting unverified claims or misinformation about coronavirus. Social media platforms are also ensuring that official guidance from the WHO and the NHS is highlighted at the top of search results for coronavirus-related information.

Some recent examples of social media companies stepping up to this new role include the move by [WhatsApp](#) to prevent users from forwarding a 'frequently forwarded' message to more than one chat at a time, as well as the commitment to develop further technical solutions and report weekly on misinformation trends made by Facebook, Twitter and Google during virtual meetings held by Oliver Dowden this week in response to the circulation online of conspiracy theories linking coronavirus to 5G networks.

## **IS IT ENOUGH?**

While the UK government has increased its efforts against the spread of 'fake news', there are continued calls for tougher punishments for both individuals that knowingly share misinformation, and for platforms that fail to take down known 'fake news' once it has been reported to them.

It is clear that there are currently few legal levers available to combat fake news and governments increasingly rely on the voluntary cooperation of social media platforms. However, making activities criminal offences, for instance, is unlikely to address the problem and harm caused by the sharing of fake news. In our view, focus would be better placed on improving public awareness of how to spot and deal with fake news and improving moderation processes on social media platforms. In any case, creating of change in this area is highly complex and will take many years.

[More on COVID-19](#)

## **KEY CONTACTS**

If you have any questions, or would like to know how this might affect your business, phone, or email these key contacts.



**HAYLEY BRADY**  
PARTNER, HEAD OF  
MEDIA AND DIGITAL,  
UK, LONDON

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