

The Mixed Promise of Public Broadcasters in Combating Fake News

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I. Introduction

Fake news dominates discussion of the current global media landscape. The connection between fake news and resurgent right-wing nationalism makes the discussion all the more urgent and the problem even more worrisome. Adding to the geopolitical puzzle, analysts identify Russia as the preeminent exporter and sponsor of propaganda and disinformation infecting recent European and American elections. Despite the impact of fake news on the integrity of Western democratic institutions and processes, the problem seems intractable, especially when solutions are weighed against political values like freedom of speech and of the press.

There is already a Western institution, however, that honors those values while also serving as a potential anti-propaganda tool. It is historically-rooted, well-funded, and trusted in many Western countries. This institution is public broadcasting. Despite the lower profiles and smaller treasuries of American public broadcasters, public media outlets remain widely influential and patronized in Europe. They are regarded by elites and the broader public alike as authoritative and reliable. These features of public media could mitigate a major problem in combating fake news – how to push back against propaganda when propaganda-debunking efforts are often cash- or ratings-strapped or themselves mistrusted or accused of purveying fake

news. Public media's potential as a fake news fighter rests on the fact that, while less well-regarded or well-funded than in its mid-20th Century heyday, it still floods the information zone in Western countries with real news while also undertaking large-scale, publicly-funded efforts to debunk false information.

This paper is a preliminary effort to examine whether public broadcasters have, in fact, proven effective at combating fake news, and whether they might continue to be. Their utility will be analyzed based on their ability to debunk disinformation and their effectiveness at widely disseminating real news. Based on that ability, this paper will evaluate whether public media could be continually useful in the future (as more European elections occur). This study focuses its analysis on Britain, France, and Germany, three nations with well-respected public broadcasters, recent elections featuring fake news, and efforts to promote true information. Overall, public broadcasters had only a moderate impact on fake news mitigation before and since the elections, but their mere presence increases the level of informed voters and citizens armed with real information, and that for that reason, their funding should be maintained or increased, and current efforts to combat fake news continued or augmented.

II. The History, Functions, and Benefits of Public Broadcasters Around the World

For about a century, public broadcasters have played a key role in the development of Western media and democracy. In many countries, they were the first organizations providing national media services¹ and were often the sole source of national television programming.² As the Knight Foundation recounted, British media historian John Seaton called public broadcasters

¹ http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/_files/cbcrc/documents/latest-studies/nordicity-public-broadcaster-comparison-2016.pdf. Pg. 4.

² Id.

“a mighty behemoth” that forged “powerful collective experiences, the common coin of everyday life.”³ As the 20th Century continued, however, technological and political changes put pressure on public media’s business and political standing. The popularity of cable TV meant more channels and options for consumers, more broadcast licenses for competitors, and more media fragmentation and declining market share for legacy public outlets.⁴ Simultaneously, deregulation-oriented governments increasingly came to power in the middle and later parts of the century, intent on privatizing public services like broadcasting. Privatization followed in some countries such as France (partially) and was considered in Britain and New Zealand, among other nations,⁵ but funding cuts, license fee caps, and budget holes have been the more common developments for public media.⁶ By 2011, seven of 18 public broadcasters the Knight Foundation studied were making a third or more of their revenues from advertising, a departure from the staunchly ad-free model with which they began.⁷

Their importance to democratic processes has continued, however, and Britain provides an illustrative historical example. The BBC was the first public broadcaster in the world and is still the most famous and respected.⁸ It was founded in 1922 as a private corporation but converted several years later to public ownership.⁹ In making this change, the British government reasoned that broadcasting “carries with it such great propaganda power that it cannot be trusted to any person or bodies other than a public corporation.”¹⁰ The BBC’s original mandate was to “inform, educate, and entertain” the British people,¹¹ and that charge informed

³ <https://www.knightfoundation.org/public-media-white-paper-2017-gardner>.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-33654279>.

its work then and now. The BBC maintains a large global audience across TV, radio, and online platforms; every week about 308 million people access its services.¹² The organization has avoided privatization and resisted a larger role for advertising in its funding mix,¹³ making it the world's paradigmatic example of a robust public media outlet.

French public media shows similar important to its country while also exemplifying differences from the British model. The French government kept direct control over broadcasting until 1964 and a monopoly until 1982.¹⁴ Today there are several completely state-funded TV stations under the general organization of France Télévisions.¹⁵ These stations feature news, society, culture, dramatic, and educational programming, as well as children's shows and programming for France's overseas departments.¹⁶ Almost three-quarters of French public broadcasters' funding comes from programming license fees, with sponsorships, public funding, advertising, and other sources making up the balance.¹⁷ Despite public funding constituting a minority of the broadcasters' revenues, the ideal of non-profit broadcasting is so ingrained in France that large proposed cuts in public funding in recent years met with significant opposition, even outrage.¹⁸ The French experience illustrates diversity in the historical development of public broadcasters while also demonstrating the same underlying commitment to free, public media.

Germany also has well-respected and historically-rooted state media outlets. Modern German public broadcasting dates to 1954, when the country's public television organizations

¹² Id.

¹³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-26546570>.

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jul/19/public-sector-broadcasting-worldwide-bbc>.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ Id.

were given the mandate, as in Britain, to “entertain, inform, and enlighten.”¹⁹ Although German state media often consider the BBC a model, many in Germany find the quality of programming not on par with BBC standards.²⁰ Still, German public media is popular, with the channels ZDF and Das Erste taking the highest share of viewers at 13% and 12.5% respectively, as compared with the two leading for-profit channels, RTL and SAT.1, with 10% and 8% respectively.²¹ Germans pay for their public media through per-household flat fees, though the public criticizes the fees as being among the world’s highest.²² Germany therefore demonstrates the diversity of funding models available to public outlets, while also, as in Britain and France, a continuing commitment to the concept of public media.

For good reason, too. Public broadcasters are boons to their societies. As the Knight Foundation reports, public outlets, compared with private ones, air more hard news, current affairs programming, international news, and policy-oriented news, and their programming is less sensationalist, more balanced, and features less “palace intrigue” and “horse race” coverage of politics.²³ Furthermore, public TV news viewers, as compared to private viewers, are better-informed, likelier to vote, less xenophobic, have higher levels of social trust, and hold more moderate political views.²⁴ Other studies have demonstrated that countries with strong public media sectors have smaller knowledge gaps between economic and social classes and thereby foster a more “egalitarian pattern of citizenship.”²⁵ Over and above the quality of the news

¹⁹ Id.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Id.

²² Id.

²³ <https://www.knightfoundation.org/public-media-white-paper-2017-gardner>.

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Id.

provided, public outlets, compared with private ones, simply feature more news, period.²⁶ They also foster more news consumption on the part of their own consumers.²⁷

Not surprisingly, then, public broadcasters are quite trusted by their publics around the world. In Britain, BBC journalists are more trusted than those of any other news organization in their country. Only 18% of Britons trust private mid-market newspapers to “tell the truth,” and 10% trust tabloid newspapers to do the same. Meanwhile, 44% say BBC journalists will tell the truth – not an overwhelming number, to be sure – but far outpacing private competitors.²⁸ Furthermore, the BBC’s current number may be a temporary result of several recent organizational scandals fresh in the public mind; the BBC was trusted to tell the truth by 81% of survey respondents in the early part of the last decade.²⁹ While Westerners’ trust in institutions like the BBC is strong if somewhat lowered, other parts of the world show higher trust levels. One survey of news consumers in 16 African countries found that three-quarters of respondents trusted the state news outlets more than private ones.³⁰ Relative “distrust of private broadcasters is widespread” across the surveyed countries, and overall, private media have lower trust levels in more than two-thirds of African post-authoritarian democracies examined.³¹ This result is especially notable given that the publics surveyed had recently emerged from undemocratic political environments in which trust in state media should have been lower. Yet their desire for and trust in reliable public media had not dimmed. The chart below from Moehler and Singh summarizes the figures.

²⁶ <https://pcl.stanford.edu/research/2008/curran-mediasystems.pdf>. Pg. 1.

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ <https://www.newstatesman.com/broadcast/2012/11/bbc-still-most-trusted-media-organisation>.

²⁹ Id.

³⁰ <http://web.asc.upenn.edu/news/Moehler/WhoseNewsDoYouTrust.pdf>. Pg. 279.

³¹ Id.

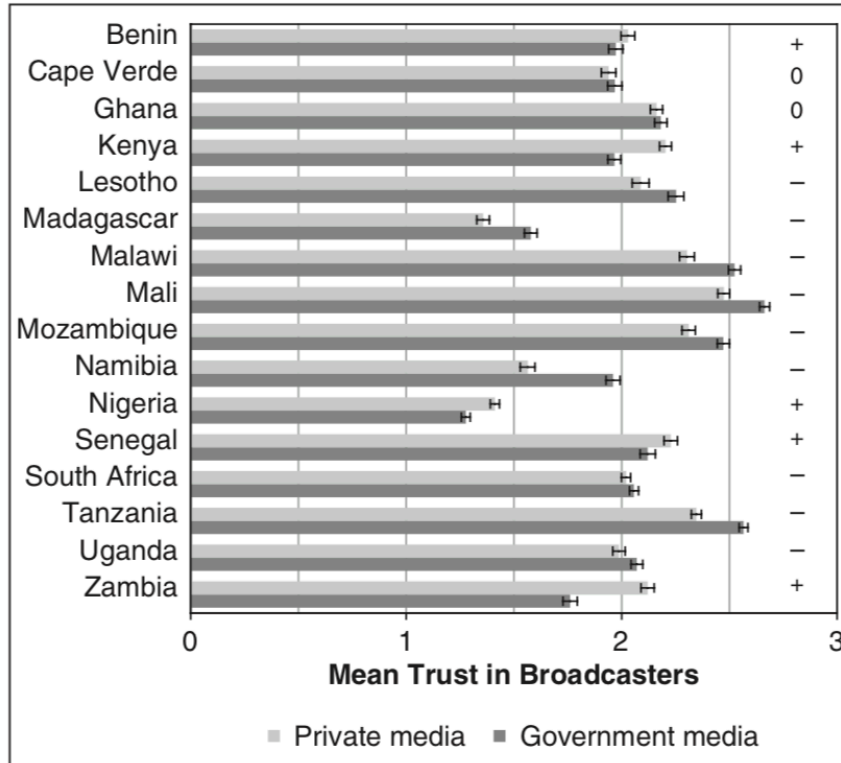


Figure 1. Comparison of mean trust in private and government broadcast media

A plus sign indicates that the mean trust in private sources is significantly higher than the mean trust in public sources ($p < .05$), a zero indicates that differences are not statistically significant, and a minus sign indicates that mean trust in private sources is significantly lower than trust in government sources.

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Public broadcasters are widely-used thanks to this trust. Many boast high ratings and high shares of their total nations’ viewing and media-using audiences. Denmark’s public broadcasters, for example, take about 65% of their national television share, Finland’s about 42%, Britain’s 53%, and Austria’s 35%.³³ Bringing up the rear are Turkey and Canada, with 3 and 5%, respectively, according to a recent survey.³⁴ Most countries’ public broadcasters boast higher ratings than these low-end outliers, however.³⁵ Public outlets, the evidence shows, are effective

³² Id.

³³ <https://www.cesifo-group.de/DocDL/dicereport314-db1.pdf>.

³⁴ Id.

³⁵ Id.

at making their publics more informed, and are rewarded for it with robust ratings and organizational endurance despite recent privatization efforts.

III. The Fake News Problem and Public Broadcasters as a Potential Solution

Fake news is a real problem. As the European Commission recently reported, Russia embarked on an “orchestrated’ propaganda campaign” that was “extremely successful” at spreading fake news around the European Union during recent elections.³⁶ According to Commission security chief Julian King, the EU identified “3,500 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation contradicting publicly available facts repeated in many languages on many occasions” during recent election campaigns.³⁷ The U.S. is no stranger to fake news, either, as the inquiries surrounding Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election show.

Public broadcasters could mitigate and combat fake news two ways – flooding the information zone with trusted, accurate news while also refuting and debunking falsehoods. This paper will examine Britain, France, and Germany to assess whether reliance on public broadcasters for either of these functions is realistic. All three countries have robust and respected public media outlets and had important election campaigns within the last two years: Britain’s 2016 Brexit referendum, France’s 2017 presidential election, and Germany’s 2017 federal Bundestag elections (which also determine who holds the office of Chancellor). Additionally, all three featured Russian efforts to inject inflammatory fake news into the public discourse. These countries demonstrate that public broadcasters’ potential to mitigate fake news is mixed but promising.

³⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/russian-fake-news-disinformation-europe-putin-trump-eu-european-parliament-commission-a8164526.html>.

³⁷ Id.

IV. Britain

Britain experienced a high level of fake news before and after the Brexit vote. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh, for example, found over 400 Russian-run Twitter accounts that tried to influence the referendum.³⁸ A report from Democratic senators on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee recounted research from the University of California-Berkeley and Britain's Swansea University showing that, direct Russian control aside, 15,000 Twitter accounts with Russian ties disseminated Brexit-related content.³⁹

Nor did the inflammatory, xenophobic posts stop after Brexit, raising the possibility of continuing influence on British politics. For example, a Kremlin-linked account capitalized on fear surrounding a 2017 terrorist attack on London's Westminster Bridge with a post falsely claiming a Muslim woman ignored victims of the attack.⁴⁰ The post was picked up by British mainstream private media outlets including the Mail Online and the Sun.⁴¹ The resulting demonization of Muslims likely increased news consumers' propensity to support the ongoing Brexit process or general disengagement from the European Union. Notably, the media outlets that most prominently disseminated the false Bridge attack post were private, not public.

The BBC started an effort to combat fake news following Brexit. The outlet is augmenting its already-existing "Reality Check" online series to combat fake news articles.⁴² The effort will be in partnership with Facebook,⁴³ which itself has been criticized around the world for its role in spreading fake news, likely prompting remedial efforts like this partnership.

³⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/russian-influence-brexit-vote-detailed-us-senate-report>.

³⁹ Id.

⁴⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>.

⁴¹ Id.

⁴² <http://www.digitaljournal.com/internet/fake-news-vs-reality-check-bbc-works-to-combat-fake-articles/article/483611>.

⁴³ Id.

While the organization already ran Reality Check for months before the Facebook announcement, the series had started only after Brexit.⁴⁴ BBC news chief Jeff Harding suggested the organization realized more fully its power to spread true information and debunk the false, saying, “The BBC can’t edit the internet, but we won’t stand aside either... We will fact check the most popular outliers on Facebook, Instagram and other social media... And we want Reality Check to be more than a public service, we want it to be hugely popular. We will aim to use styles and formats – online, on TV and on radio – that ensure the facts are more fascinating and grabby than the falsehoods.”⁴⁵ The Reality Check team focuses on false content that purports to be from reliable news outlets.

The BBC’s hope is to make Reality Check part of a broader shift toward “slow news” consisting of more in-depth analysis and expertise,⁴⁶ in keeping with the research noted above showing public broadcasters are better at precisely this sort of less sensationalist and more policy-oriented news programming. Furthermore, the organization is also planning to create a well-funded “intelligence unit” drawing upon staff organization-wide to expand its data journalism footprint⁴⁷ with the goal of countering fake news. The BBC also asserts that debunking fake news is now “front and center at the morning news meeting discussions” in a new way, and that the shift in editorial emphasis to combating mistruths has already been “changing the BBC newsroom’s workflow” and efforts.⁴⁸ The Reality Check series, meanwhile, has been focusing not only on British stories, but on debunking U.S. fake news as well. For

⁴⁴ Id.

⁴⁵ Id.

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jan/12/bbc-sets-up-team-to-debunk-fake-news>.

⁴⁷ Id.

⁴⁸ <https://digiday.com/uk/bbcs-slow-news-focus-changing-newsroom-dynamics/>.

example, the outfit trained a critical eye on President Trump's false claim that millions of people voted illegally in the 2016 U.S. election.⁴⁹

As these examples show, the BBC's ability to combat fake news was and remains mixed. The Reality Check series and other editorial and resource shifts occurred post-Brexit, not before, and in reaction to the Russian influence campaign. Given the BBC's reach, these efforts are probably useful now, but whether they would have mitigated Russian disinformation pre-referendum is unclear. As noted above, trust in the BBC has dropped in recent years, so the utility of Reality Check and other efforts should not be overstated. Going forward, increasing the BBC's debunking efforts is worthwhile given their reach within Britain. Their partnership with Facebook, which has a similarly large reach, is probably a smart tactic. The British government should continue supporting the BBC's efforts not only because it has so many viewers, but also because it adheres to strict journalism standards vis-à-vis fake news. This is a characteristic standing in stark contrast to private competitors like the Sun, which spread the false Bridge attack story. Overall, the BBC creates a more informed Britain and adding fake news debunking to its stable of programming is a good idea. The BBC should be considered one tool among several in combating fake news in Britain.

V. France

France also battled fake news recently. The 2017 presidential election marked a particularly intense period of internet misinformation aggravated by the candidacy of right-wing politician Marine Le Pen, who received support from Kremlin figures.⁵⁰ Consequently, French

⁴⁹ Id.

⁵⁰ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-24/le-pen-urges-russia-france-to-join-effort-in-fighting-terrorism>.

voters were “deluged with fake news stories” ahead of the election, and many of the sources of those stories were Russia-influenced, researchers found.⁵¹ A University of Oxford study reported that up to one-quarter of all politics-related links shared on Twitter in the lead-up to the election were based on misinformation.⁵² They were either “deliberately false” or expressed ““ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan or conspiratorial”” viewpoints, with many logical flaws and ““opinions presented as facts.””⁵³ These findings confirmed the French government’s fears that Russia would attempt to duplicate its 2016 U.S. influence campaign.⁵⁴

Le Monde, a French newspaper, cataloged the most egregious and striking posts that circulated. They recounted a website that published fake election results four days ahead of the vote and declared Le Pen the winner.⁵⁵ The post was complete with fake percentages of the vote and even concluded with the phrase, “this is not fiction.”⁵⁶ The problem was so bad that Facebook suspended about 30,000 French accounts suspected of being automated, many of which pushed out political misinformation.⁵⁷ On Twitter, many automated accounts that formerly aided Donald Trump’s candidacy switched to disseminating conspiracy theories and right-wing memes in France, according to researchers including Clinton Watts, a former FBI agent now a senior fellow at George Washington University.⁵⁸

There is some evidence, fortunately, that the effects of such wide-scale efforts did not penetrate the French media landscape to the same degree as in the U.S. The *New York Times* reported that a significant fraction of fake news attempts “failed to reach much of the French

⁵¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-voters-deluge-fake-news-stories-facebook-twitter-russian-influence-days-before-election-a7696506.html>.

⁵² Id.

⁵³ Id.

⁵⁴ Id.

⁵⁵ Id.

⁵⁶ Id.

⁵⁷ Id.

⁵⁸ Id.

electorate” ahead of the election.⁵⁹ The *Times* analysis focused on millions of Twitter messages from election time and found that many originated in the U.S. and only a few went viral in France. Ben Nimmo, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council studying fake news, told the *Times* that, concerning alt-right groups, for example, “There’s a big cultural gap that these groups have to jump over to expand their message...The language and iconography of the alt-right is pretty specific. Most of it just isn’t going to translate well.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, an organization dedicated to combating fake news found that about 40% of the stories shared immediately before the U.S. election came from unreliable sources pushing out fake news, whereas the same category stood at only 10% before the French election⁶¹ (although, as noted above, the percentage was higher on Twitter).

Still, the French are nervous about a potential recurrence of fake news. French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a new law recently aimed at limiting the influence of fake news.⁶² But French organizations are not the only ones trying to mitigate and combat fake news in the country. A public broadcaster has indeed gotten in on the debunking act, although it is the BBC, not French outlets alone. The British organization collaborated with CrossCheck, a joint journalism project of European news organizations that debunks or verifies news stories.⁶³ CrossCheck itself includes among its sponsors Facebook and Google.⁶⁴ They also cooperated with French outlets including Agence France-Presse, BFM TV, L'Express, and Le Monde to counter fake news.⁶⁵ CrossCheck was set up so that, according to its website, “The public will be

⁵⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/technology/french-elections-alt-right-fake-news-le-pen-macron.html>.

⁶⁰ Id.

⁶¹ <https://venturebeat.com/2017/05/19/how-france-scored-a-big-win-against-fake-news-during-its-recent-elections/>.

⁶² <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/01/04/575580790/frances-macron-says-he-wants-law-to-combat-fake-news>.

⁶³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39265777>.

⁶⁴ <https://www.csmonitor.com/Technology/2017/0206/In-France-social-media-and-news-organizations-partner-to-battle-fake-news>.

⁶⁵ Id.

encouraged to participate by submitting questions and links to disputed sites and social content for CrossCheck to investigate. These questions will all be listed and answered on a dedicated CrossCheck website.”⁶⁶ The BBC-CrossCheck partnership routinely debunked many inflammatory and false pre-election stories.⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ As the *Times* analysis above suggests, these pre-election efforts aided France in avoiding the fate of the U.S. by avoiding letting fake news overwhelm the electorate.

Public broadcasters, therefore, appear to be working relatively well in France in helping combat fake news, granted that the most notable among them is the BBC. French outlets appear to be working effectively with companies like Facebook and Google. It is likely that public broadcasters including the BBC had some positive effect on mitigating fake news before the 2017 election, though misinformation’s baseline salience to the electorate appears to have been lower. As in Britain, their continued efforts along similar lines – and at a baseline level, their very existence – are welcome developments that should continue. The effectiveness of these efforts in the future remains unclear given the more diverse media environment state media outlets confront. French public broadcasters should therefore continue to be funded and their efforts to curtail fake news supported.

VI. Germany

Germany’s 2017 federal elections, which also determine who holds the Chancellorship, were a significant site of fake news as well. As the Brookings Institution reported, Russia conducted pre-election espionage activities in Germany at a “high organizational and financial

⁶⁶ <https://techcrunch.com/2017/02/06/google-and-facebook-partner-for-anti-fake-news-drive-during-french-election/>.

⁶⁷ Id.

⁶⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39495635>.

volume” and its intelligence services were “attempting to influence Germany’s decisionmakers and public opinion.”⁶⁹ The efforts date to 2013, when three German-language propaganda outlets appeared on the German media scene, all linked closely to the Kremlin. They were RT Deutsch, Sputnik Deutsch, and NewsFront Deutsch.⁷⁰ RT and Sputnik are funded and run by the Kremlin, while NewsFront, claiming to be independent, is almost certainly equally Kremlin-linked, according to Ben Nimmo of the Atlantic Council.⁷¹ Despite having modest audiences in Germany, the outlets are successful at pushing out popular fake news content.⁷² They have a “disproportionate impact” on the German online media landscape due to media amplifiers, including automated and semi-automated accounts, human amplifiers like right-wing Alternative for Deutschland party figures, and left- and right-wing conspiracy outlets.⁷³

The Brookings Institution reports that one of the more extreme examples of Kremlin-linked inflammatory propaganda in the German election was the false story of “Our Lisa.”⁷⁴ The Our Lisa narrative allegedly recounted the kidnapping and rape of an underage Russian-German girl in January 2016 by either “Muslim” or “Arab” men.⁷⁵ This false story led to hundreds of people demonstrating across Germany in response, including in front of the Chancellery in Berlin.⁷⁶

As a result of the prevalence and popularity within Germany of fake news, various efforts began to combat it. One debunking organization was Correctiv, an investigative news organization that started a website specifically to counter fake news ahead of the federal

⁶⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-impact-of-russian-interference-on-germanys-2017-elections/>.

⁷⁰ Id.

⁷¹ Id.

⁷² Id.

⁷³ Id.

⁷⁴ Id.

⁷⁵ Id.

⁷⁶ Id.

elections.⁷⁷ They cooperated with Facebook in this effort.⁷⁸ This is an entirely private collaboration that has produced “mixed” results.⁷⁹ Collaboration with Facebook, itself a platform for spreading fake news, has been somewhat rough going. “While Correctiv’s fact-checkers contend that the tool helps, they said they are still in the dark about how [Facebook] compiles the list of posts to be reviewed,” Politico reports.⁸⁰ It is unclear whether these private efforts will prove effective.

Public broadcasters in Germany, meanwhile, are forging ahead with their own mitigation efforts. Faktenfinder, a research department of the German public outlet ARD, is one example.⁸¹ Faktenfinder is associated with Tagesschau, Germany’s most-watched TV news program.⁸² The outfit searches the internet for fake news that looks credible and could confuse the public discourse.⁸³ In addition to being a part of ARD, Faktenfinder works together with Verifikation, a unit of BR, the Bavarian Broadcasting Company.⁸⁴ Verifikation also pursues an anti-fake news mission, but rather than collecting its debunking results in one website, it continually feeds them into its ongoing reporting.⁸⁵ The head of the organization reports that the “work of the unit is not primarily about mere verification, but about providing information on false reports” and that it aims not only to debunk false stories but also to teach “media competence.”⁸⁶ Public broadcasters, then, are a key part of anti-fake news efforts in Germany.

⁷⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/fake-news-germany-elections-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-correctiv/>.

⁷⁸ Id.

⁷⁹ Id.

⁸⁰ Id.

⁸¹ <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/med/21006877.html>.

⁸² Id.

⁸³ Id.

⁸⁴ Id.

⁸⁵ Id.

⁸⁶ Id.

German public media appears to be making intelligent moves to combat disinformation by making debunking part of its daily news programming and arming the population with better media literacy skills. This dynamic is in keeping with the research above showing that public broadcasters generate more informed and media-literate publics. Ben Scott, an American political consultant working in Germany on fake news efforts, noted in an interview with Politico that “when he ‘first arrived in Berlin...he said he was struck how the country had maintained much of its public-interest media outlets in contrast to the demise of many such organizations in the U.S. Many local publishers remain on strong financial ground, and well-read locals are already aware of the fake news threat.’” He added, “‘In the U.S., we have not invested in public media, and have watched with apathy when newspapers closed...in its wake, the rise of infotainment has fractured the media world and allowed misinformation to thrive.’”⁸⁷

The efforts of public broadcasters in Germany have, over time, created more informed and discerning consumers of news. As a result, propaganda has not had the same reach in German elections as in Britain or the U.S. Countries should emulate Germany by inoculating their publics against fake news by investing in public broadcasters before fake news arrives and turning to those broadcasters for debunking when it does.

VII. Conclusion

Based on the experiences of Britain, France, and Germany, it is clear public broadcasters possess a significant, if not overwhelming, potential to combat fake news. Efforts in these countries to debunk propaganda and spread truth have differed by country and have met with mixed success. In Britain, for example, the authorities proved unprepared and unable to combat

⁸⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/fake-news-busters-germany-ben-scott/>.

fake news surrounding the Brexit vote. BBC efforts to mitigate fake news ramped up only after its effects on the vote were clear. By contrast, France and Germany were better prepared for the onslaught of Russia-sponsored misinformation. Germany shows public broadcasters by themselves and in partnership with private outlets can counter propaganda. The true advantage of strong public broadcasters has been to inoculate publics against fake news beforehand, arming them with higher rates of media literacy and a more informed outlook on their countries and on the world. Public, private, and combined efforts all show promise. Countries should therefore continue to robustly fund and support their public broadcasters. Although public media outlets are far from the only, or the most effective, anti-misinformation instruments, their roles in creating better informed and more humane people and political environments makes them a key part of that effort. Further research on this topic is much needed and should focus on countries beyond the three this paper was able to address.