

Julian Knight

Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

24 April 2020

Dear Julian,

Disinformation and misinformation about COVID-19

The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee in the National Assembly for Wales shares your concern around misinformation about COVID-19, and thanks you for raising this issue. Public understanding of both the virus, and efforts to tackle it, is crucial to minimise infections, reduce the strain on our NHS and save lives.

The Committee does not need to look to social media to find examples of harmful false information about the coronavirus. Mainstream UK news providers have frequently published information that inaccurately reports issues that are devolved to Wales. At the best of times this is damaging to democracy in Wales, during the current crisis this undermines efforts to tackle the disease in Wales.

Examples include:

- **ITV:** [Volunteer target raised to 750,000 after more than half a million people sign up to help NHS](#) (26 March 2020).

This news item reports the English NHS volunteering scheme with no reference to health being devolved, and this being an England-only scheme. ITV was far from alone in misreporting this initiative, and subsequently social media was filled with people in Wales confused about how they could volunteer.

- **Independent:** [Coronavirus: Emergency planning rules will allow restaurants and pubs to operate as takeaways in bid to survive lockdown](#). This article makes no reference to the fact that, as planning is devolved, this change only applies to England (the rule change outlined was already in place in Wales).

- **Express:** [UK school closures: Are schools closed till September? When will schools open again?](#) The sub-heading of this article states “The Government has announced that all schools across Britain are to close from Friday, March 20 due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis”. This is not true, as education is a devolved matter, and as the article later states, at this point governments in Wales and Scotland had already decided to close schools.

The examples above are indicative rather than exhaustive. Although the impact of individual articles can be trivial, the drip-effect of this misinformation into Wales damages public understanding of steps taken to tackle the virus.

The news media is not helped by UK Government announcements that frequently erase devolution in the interest of simple messaging. For example, when the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock MP, [launched the English NHS volunteers scheme](#), he made no reference to this only operating in England.

At some point governments across the UK will decide to relax some of the restrictions that are currently in place. Given that changing the lockdown is a devolved matter, clear communication will be vital to ensure that people in different parts of the UK know which changes apply to them. Similar misreporting to that outlined above could therefore have serious consequences.

Tackling misinformation is one side of the coin of ensuring a well-informed citizenship: the other is ensuring the supply of trusted, reputable information. In 2018, this Committee published a [report into news journalism](#), which concluded that the decline of commercial news journalism “is a profound public policy issue, which policy makers at all levels, not least the Welsh Government, need to address as a priority issue”.

The decline of local newspapers is an international phenomenon, but given the historic absence of a strong, diverse media sector in Wales, is felt more profoundly here. We have been contacted by local news providers explaining how their fragile business model has been further damaged by reductions in advertising revenue during the current crisis.

We call on the Committee to raise the issues outlined above with news providers and the UK Government. We would like to see both groups improve their communication

of devolved issues with the ultimate aim of reducing the strain on the NHS and saving lives. We would also like the Committee to discuss with the UK Government what support it can provide for the local media sector, both during this crisis and on an ongoing basis. A well-resourced local news media in Wales would improve public understanding of the virus and measures taken to tackle it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Helen Mary Jones". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end.

Helen Mary Jones AM

Chair of the Committee