



Grassroots for Europe Round Table - Meeting #33 Report

“Combating Disinformation – a key strategy for saving our Democracies and our Planet”.
Tuesday 7th February, 2023 5pm

Speakers:

Adam Barnett - Lead UK reporter at DESMOG,
Dr Mike Galsworthy - Co-founder of Scientists for EU,
Prof. Paul Willner (Swansea University)

Chair: Colin Gordon

Comment from the Chair: The challenge of disinformation is central to the politics of Brexit, as it is to countering other related global threats to our democracy and our planet, from climate change to Russian genocidal aggression to anti-scientific denials. Illustrating this, today in Brussels the EU Vice-President launched a report and announced a new EU centre to address “foreign information manipulation and interference threats”. In this gathering of pro-European activists, we will be hearing about recent experiences, initiatives and best practice in combatting disinformation from which we hope to learn, continuing to develop our shared campaigning capabilities. An information pack circulated to participants before this meeting provides background materials and resources. Our discussion today follows on from Chris Steele's important briefing to our recent session #30, dealing with Russian influence strategies and Brexit. We hope today's discussion will in turn be the start of a concerted workstream of our organisations.

Dr Mike Galsworthy - Pro-European campaigning around Brexit has come a very long way since May 2015, when David Cameron came to power with a mandate to have a referendum on Brexit. The sheer volume of disinformation from the various Leave organisations made it impossible to put all the fires out because the fire starters were quicker and had an easier job. When the Britain Stronger in Europe Facebook page first started, it couldn't adequately bat back all the charges that were popping up: the comments section was overwhelmed with people shouting out or throwing in memes of charges against the EU, as were Twitter and Facebook generally. This was probably the peak of disinformation about Europe.

Community building - The *Scientists for EU*, on the other hand, nurtured and grew a community to keep the trolls out, so that all the posts had largely constructive comments from which to develop an island of sanity. Community building was very hard in those early days, but really started happening only after 2016. And the #FBPE drive was about people following other people back within the premier community, which means that when someone discovers a piece of disinformation, and quotes, tweets it or puts answers underneath it, it is visible to the rest of the community, who can also pile in and support a correction.

More fact checkers have also emerged since then, as has a more active community writing complaints about disinformation to the BBC, other media, and MPs. Community building is vital to form an army that can identify and move together against shotgun-style disinformation. Secondly, we should note the greater public **outcry about the social media supporting disinformation**, with more screws being turned on Facebook, for example, to use less alarmist posts. These

corrective mechanisms, community building and public complaints, came in too late to influence the referendum (and the government has since tried to increasingly control the Electoral Commission). Following the 2019 election we decided that the most important thing to do with information is to build your own citadel to **share it with others** as a counterweight to disinformation.

It's vital not to wait for disinformation to appear, because it's the theme or first word of disinformation that stays in people's mind, and a rebuttal tends to entrench it. Instead, **take the initiative** using your own quality information. **Set out your own narratives** about Brexit and fishing, Brexit and farming, new Bills etc. **Get in there first** and share out your information. That obliges opponents to negate it if they have enough resources to do so.

Bylines At the beginning of 2020, looking at pro-EU groups we had built up over the years, we did not know if the *European Movement*, *Grassroots for Europe*, or any other entity would be able to pick up all the talented teams we had developed around the country. Reading about disinformation in the United States showed how the hollowing out of local news had allowed a lot of national rightwing publications to sweep people along. A similar problem in the UK means we need to **strengthen local communities** and provide a more **prestigious layer of outward communications**, which would be **local, regional citizen journalism** rather than just the usual social media channels. So, we started *Yorkshire Bylines*, *West Country Bylines*, *Northeast Bylines*. Now there are nine *Bylines*, with more to come. These publications allow you to rebut things spread by other media, but more importantly to **set up narratives**. Very importantly also, unlike Twitter, and Facebook, your article becomes a much more **easily findable entity on search engines**. We find now that the traffic coming from search engines is doing better for some *Bylines* articles than Facebook, and sometimes Facebook and Twitter combined. So, we should encourage a long-term build of *Bylines* outlets. A large entity for tackling lies can better tell the facts than via a single tweet thread or single Facebook post. Examples of such resources are *Yorkshire Bylines*' 'David Davis Downside Dossier' and 'Digby Jones Index,' or the lost opportunities list co-hosted by European movements, on the excellent app and via Central Bylines

Such resources and references become **mini-libraries** for those combatting disinformation Within the *Bylines* network we as yet have **no resources for rapid rebuttal**, but it will be interesting to build them. What we can do is deal with false statements on *Twitter*, for example. A recent example was Liz Truss's statement that no one had given her warning about the impact of her mini budget. Someone at Cambridge University who had done exactly that through the Civil Service tweeted about it. At our request he **turned a tweet into a findable, searchable article** that could be disseminated across Facebook. So, rebuttals converted into readily available articles make an impact.

It is also important for the pro-European movement to develop **a set of champions and spokespeople** who can tackle false news straightaway on TV and radio, as well as in the press.

Those are Mike's thoughts on the best way to build up counterweights to disinformation. It's very important to have **crib sheets** on hand when talking to the public at street events. Our people need to be provided with actual answers and rebuttals to the most common questions or challenges that will come up. MG agreed to a request from London for Europe for some notes for local EM/GfE groups on how to rebut disinformation.

Adam Barnett - Adam opened by clarifying that his approach to the subject is as a journalist, not an activist or campaigner.

Numerous organisations are approaching the subject of disinformation in a variety of ways. Some are pushing for regulation of government and tech companies; others are looking to dissuade advertisers from using outlets pushing disinformation. Desmog was formed in the USA in 2006 with the UK branch being set up in 2014. The focus is to look at the public relations efforts of the fossil fuel industry and its clouding of discussion around climate change and their role in it This involves much research and investigative reporting, to inform people about what is actually happening, to expose connections between various anti-climate change groups, who is doing what and the source of their money. The aim is to create a database and provide a resource through website stories.

This has revealed a huge cross-over between those trying to muddy the waters around climate change and those pushing for Brexit. Their aim was to ensure that leaving the EU was done on terms most in line with their free-market, sometimes called libertarian, ideology – unregulated capitalism, in which those who have money can do as they like, and the state should do as little as possible. These free marketeers wanted to ensure that EU regulations on climate change and the environment were no longer applicable in the UK. The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) – a thinktank favoured by Liz Truss – was very pro-Brexit and critical of the Climate Change Act and of the net-zero targets set to reduce carbon emission. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the IEA lobbied for the moratorium on fracking to be lifted - a position taken up by Truss when she was in government. This fits into the IEA's broader free-market economic arguments. An investigation by Greenpeace Unearthed revealed that the IEA was funded by British Petroleum from 1967 until at least 2018. Neither BP nor the IEA have responded to questions about whether this funding continued beyond 2018

To combat misinformation, it is vital to let the public know what is happening and enable them to make connections. Steve Baker (Con. MP for Wycombe since 2010, Minister for State for Northern Ireland, 2022) aims to do for climate-change what he had previously done for Brexit and for public health measures aimed at tackling the COVID virus. To clear the way for businesses to act in their own interests and ignore the public good. Baker was deputy chair of the “Net Zero Scrutiny Group”, which is a sort of clone of the ERG or the Covid Recovery Group, and which was extremely vocal last year in pushing for the extraction of fossil fuels at the height of the global gas crisis. Mr Baker is currently a government minister, having been kept on by Rishi Sunak, and we've reported that he has in January received £10,000 from Neil Record, who happens to be the chair of the Global Warming Policy foundation, where Baker was a trustee until last September.

The Net Zero Scrutiny Group reportedly has around 18 members in the Commons and is run by dissident Conservatives Steve Baker and Craig Mackinlay, a former deputy leader of UKIP. The crossovers here are well worth noting. DESMOG has devoted a lot of time to mapping out these networks so you can see who's working with whom and on what.

Things have got steadily worse, I think, there has been a noticeable development since the pandemic which is that climate change has become part of what is termed the broader culture war – the phrase that people use all the time, meaning basically a right-wing backlash against social liberalism. There's been a lot of research about who it is that is pumping out this stuff. Climate Action Against Disinformation <https://caad.info/what-is-climate-disinformation/> - a global coalition of over fifty leading climate and anti-disinformation organisations, of which DESMOG is a member, monitored social media misinformation around the November 2022 COP 27 climate summit in Egypt, which I attended. Their excellent report exposes who is pushing the misinformation which appears on-line. The two largest sources are the advertising by the fossil fuel industry, and cultural influencers - people like Canadian psychologist and media commentator, Jordan Peterson: some of them are obscure to those outside their online circles but do have a huge reach. They frame any effort to address the climate crisis as a plot by pointy-headed liberals, sandal-wearing greens, and economic elites to ruin lives and take away freedoms. This throws red meat to a more paranoid fringe of conspiracy theorists and crankier organisations and individuals. – for example in

current agitation against schemes to regulate traffic.

<https://www.desmog.com/2021/08/18/lowtraffic-neighbourhoods-politicians-lobby-groups>

A word to conclude about a new pilot project which is called DEBUNK. Its aim is to use all our investigative journalism and the material in our databases on these “think tanks,” fake experts, organisations and individuals to try to respond directly to the avalanche of misinformation that they generate daily. So for example, when Jordan Peterson claims that it is impossible to model climate change and that forecasts are incorrect, we present the authority of evidence and point out the source which claims he has taken lots of money from an oil company. Likewise, when Julia Hartley Brewer appears on BBC Question Time, we point out that she works for a media channel which is constantly airing climate change denial. When Brexit “hero” Lord Frost’s Global Warming Policy Foundation claims its sole aim is scrutinising government policy on energy, we rebut that claim with indisputable evidence that the GWPF has been pushing a pro-fossil fuel agenda for over a decade.

Evidence and critical thinking are the vaccine with which to neutralise disinformation. It is vital to ensure that people are better informed and therefore inoculated against, and able to refute, false claims. However it is also vital that we have our facts right and do not go beyond available evidence. Michael Mann’s *The New Climate War* dedicates a chapter to the danger of exaggeration and using the most extreme forecasts.

Paul Willner: Debunking disinformation vs. Persuasive communication

(Paul supported his talk with PowerPoint slides that are distributed with the report) Before starting on his talk on “How pro-European action for combatting disinformation can operate alongside campaign communications based on persuasive conversations”, Paul picked up an issue about anti-Vaxxers, drawing a distinction between the present and the more ‘organic’ MMR anti-Vax epidemic about 20 years ago caused by one rogue doctor, Andrew Wakefield. That kind of organic growth is obscured now by social media, but it gave bad actors like anti-COVID Vexers a natural audience and massive following on social media like *Twitter*, for example, which mutually reinforces and increases their power and influence.

Without claiming to be a misinformation expert, Paul highlighted three main issues, accompanied by slides. Slide 1 illustrates the first point - **persuasive communication is difficult to achieve** by deluging people in facts. That seems to be at odds with the idea of combating misinformation by debunking it. A lot of research suggests that in personal encounters, presenting facts and figures has little persuasive power. Achieving a good rapport with people, exchanging personal stories with them, is far more effective. This is often called ‘deep campaigning.’ ‘Deep campaigning’ relates almost entirely to one-to-one conversations, such as on a doorstep or a shop, where you’re meeting someone for the first time. This is the only situation where debunking should be avoided. However, a lot of evidence suggests that the more frequently an argument is heard, the more likely it is to be believed. We should therefore be debunking vigorously in social media and journalism, everywhere except in a first meeting with an individual you disagree with.

Slide 2 concerns a second point, **online disinformation training**. (a) There are some paid courses that typically cost £200- £300, prices which may put people off. (b) A very interesting looking course last year by the *Alliance for Europe* describes a system of three pillars, one of which is intelligence, enabling intelligence collection and analysis to fight disinformation and advanced the democratic digital space. *Alliance for Europe* was offering disinformation training last year, but not so far this year. That might be an interesting organisation to contact. (c) And then there is a little free disinformation training pack which is “an accessible and engaging 30-minute romp through the principles of recognising disinformation, including critical thinking and cognitive biases.” (*Mis certified...*, Slide 2) But **do we need to promote disinformation training?** Not really, because so many people in our pro-European community are doing that online already and

keeping us informed. The priorities are for coordination, debunking and dissemination, which earlier speakers have been talking about.

So, the **third** issue is **countering disinformation** ([Slide 3](#)) illustrated by the work of Stefan Rollnick, who is the head of a misinformation cell in a PR company *Lynn PR*. Rollnick's full time job is countering Disinformation. Slide 3 is from a report they did on countering Russian propaganda about Ukraine. Stefan and his unit identified **10 key messages that could be used to counter the Russian narratives about Ukraine**. Slide 3 shows concisely what people could be doing to counter Russian propaganda. The Twitter thread ([Slide 4](#)) gives examples of content that could be used to illustrate each of these counter narratives. [Slide 5](#) offers a propaganda response toolkit that has **five elements: signals, narrative, counternarrative, vulnerabilities, counternarratives and content**. This covers **core narratives** that Russia is sending out. For example - (a) Russia has global support. (b) Russia is a liberator (c) Zelenskyy lacks support because he is a former comic actor and celebrity and so is unfit to lead. It is important to identify the sources feeding into each narrative. If the Russians were writing now, corruption in Ukraine would feed into a narrative about demoralisation. The **third element** in each narrative is **identifying vulnerabilities** that make your counter argument more difficult to advance or easier to puncture. One example is the Russian message that Ukraine is committing atrocities. There is indeed a far- right presence in Ukraine, including in the units defending Mariupol, and that is a potential vulnerability. The answer to this is that Ukraine is fighting for democracy. The counter to 'Russia as liberator' could be 'David versus Goliath,' Ukraine is a small country doing phenomenally well in fighting a massive Russian bear. "Ukraine is committing atrocities" can be turned into "Ukraine is fighting for democracy." And for each of the counter arguments, they identify the sort of content that might be used to support the counter narrative. And the tweets in the Twitter thread (Slide 4) are not verbal treat tweets, but a clip for each argument offered - a collection of memes usable in constructing counter arguments.

What would a Brexit propaganda response toolkit look like? One example is the **core narrative** that the Covid vaccine roll-out would not have been possible within the EU. Johnson, Sunak, and Tory MPs are the public propagators of that idea. The **counter-narrative** is that the vaccine rollout happened before Brexit was implemented and had nothing to do with being outside the EU. Our counter narrative is **vulnerable** because the UK vaccine development was a success. A possible **rebuttal** is that the UK was working solely for itself, whereas European countries were working collectively to support one another and to provide vaccines to the Third World. The **vulnerability** here is that a lot of people probably think it's a good idea that the UK prioritised national needs over EU fairness.

Another example of a Brexit **core narrative** is that the decision was settled by the referendum. This narrative is now sustained by the Labour Party, as evidenced in David Lammy's speech last week (w.b. 30/1/23). The **counter-narrative** is that the decision to leave the Single Market and Customs Union was in fact taken by Theresa May long after the referendum in her Lancaster House speech of January 2017. The **vulnerability** here is the lack of serious political input: it would be easier to argue the case if some Labour politicians were breaking ranks. We can quote a very clear historical record that there's nothing about Single Market on the ballot paper and claim that Labour should not collude in Tory lies. Paul's *Guardian* letter last week on this issue received very positive feedback. The central issue now is to address misinformation around Brexit more systematically.

(Please note: we didn't manage to cover Paul's final slide as we ran out of time)

continues

Questions & Answers

Q1 Looking at your comments on the overlapping of Brexiter and climate-change denial forces, are pro-Europeans missing a trick in terms of understanding the US sources of support for Brexit?

Adam Barnett. I don't know. Peter Geoghegan wrote a good book, *Democracy for Sale*, about all this. And there's quite a lot on it in my databases as well. Obviously, there have been all sorts of attempts to influence public opinion about the EU and in Brexit. I think having said that, they you still have to say that the people that made the vote go the way it did were the ones who voted for leaving the EU. So even though there were attempts made, for example, probably made by Russia, although the UK government hasn't investigated what they might have been very attentively, and certainly there's a lot of American money that goes into the think tanks here that push for it: it's a fact that efforts were made to influence people, but I don't think even if they were incredibly successful, that they could have had made enough of a difference to change the result, though that doesn't mean they wouldn't try do it anyway. Or that it's not a problem. It could have more influence in the future. I think it's something to watch out for. We'll obviously have to reform our laws around big money being spent in politics, which is a massive threat to democracy. I personally would rather focus on public opinion and people being more critical readers of what they're being exposed to, so that no matter how much money is being given to this or that thinktank, or how much misinformation is put in this or that newspaper, the people reading it can hopefully see through it because they know better, they can apply actual scepticism rather than the scepticism of climate deniers or Brexit ideologues who are not sceptics, they're fanatics. There's no evidence that's going to change their beliefs.

Q2: My question regarding this misinformation is about the motivation for it. The motivation is fairly obvious as to why the oil industry will want to obfuscate the evidence and the messaging around climate change. And in the case of Brexit, it is obvious why people would want to spend on spreading misinformation about the EU and to advance the pro-Brexit cause because they want Brexit to succeed, but the more recent example is antiVax. And I struggle to understand what the motivation is behind the people who are pushing the anti-vaccine misinformation, and the most recent example of that is Andrew Bridgen MP. It's very well organised, it's very persistent. There's a lot of it, and I just wonder who stands to benefit from it. Why are they doing it? Have you any idea who is behind that sort of thing?

Adam: With a lot of these things, you have to ask yourself, are these people doing this for financial interests and money reasons? Or are they doing this because they really believe what they're saying. Because it's often both in some individual's cases. Sometimes there's a 'bit of one, bit of the other' combination, sometimes you have a delightful situation, when you have very cynical moneyed interests, teaming up with or mobilising or benefiting from cranky people who can serve their interests quite well.

Thinking of the antiVax, you know, if you're if you're a big business and you and your whole model involves pumping things into the air that heat the planet, and it's the science that points that out, it's in your interest to discredit the science. Similarly, if you don't want to close your shops, just because there happens to be a virus that's killing people, then it's in your interests that people think you don't need to isolate people from an airborne virus. So it wouldn't really do anything to this person to person transmission, it wouldn't be affected by people staying in the house for until life-saving vaccines are developed. I think the antiVax movement is sort of like the shock troops of the anti-lockdown forces. It's all teaming up together, unfortunately, The opponents of climate action, supporters of Brexit, and people who don't really believe that COVID is a problem and think vaccines which save lives actually kill people are increasingly finding common cause.

Q2: You're really suggesting this is kind of fairly organic and self-supporting rather than being driven in the same way as oil industry misinformation or by some massive force that has an economic interest in it. This is just purely people who are creating their own marketplace for misinformation, there is money to be made from misinformation. Bridgen has found that he can make money from the route he's gone down, but there's no kind of Tufton Street think tank saying, put millions or billions of pounds into this because there's some benefit for us from it?

Adam: I think general distrust if the state is of benefit to the policies we're talking about, and a sort of general confusion, people not really knowing what to believe, a state of panic and fear. It's all sort of Fox News stuff, really. So, it's beneficial to them in that way. One could argue that you would think the big business position on vaccines would be pro, one would like people to use vaccines, because they can sell them and make money from them. So, it's not quite as straightforward as that, I think it's more that it fits into this broader attempt to confuse and scare people, and not minding too much whether you're opposing science and reason and critical thinking and government intervention into the market, both, I suppose, the biological market in this case, as well as the economic one, or the social one. It's beneficial to have people waving signs and saying, don't believe what they're telling you, regardless of the topic, basically.

Q3: The Tufton Street complex of organisations seem for a long time to have led a secretive underground existence. And then it seems to have come a cropper in some ways because of its association with Liz Truss. I don't know whether the Liz Truss debacle helped people to focus on Tufton Street and its role. Fairly recently, the Good Law Project got Tufton Street to admit that it was doing certain things as well. Do you think it'll carry on in the same way as before? Will it just go back underground? Or be more exposed because of these things?

Adam: I think you're right about the Liz Truss premiership. Sorry, I just had a moment of nostalgia there. I should say, by the way that this [Liz Truss] mug [that you're seeing] is a souvenir from the Tory conference last year. It's a bit paradoxical, given that the think-tank she's most associated with, the IEA, are not actually based in Tufton Street, but down the road from there. But several of the organisations in this network are Taxpayers Alliance and Global Warming Policy Foundation, which gets often missed out of this list, Migration Watch, a few others. And I can just tell you that our 55 Tufton Street database profile was one of the most read things last year on our website. So there seems to be a lot of interest in who these people are and what they're up to. I think they've certainly taken a knock by their association with a mini budget that knocked perhaps £30 billion off the UK economy. But these people have a lot of self-belief, and I've no doubt they already are carrying on as before. The IEA, for example, got their defences in early despite having been cheerleaders for that budget. Besides distancing themselves, as soon as things went a cropper, their director, Mark Littlewood, bizarrely comparing the economy to a pizza that in this case might have had the wrong chef, but that doesn't mean you decide to jettison what was otherwise a wonderful recipe. So, they'll keep going, they'll keep getting their funding, and they'll keep pushing for these policies. And certainly the Conservative Party, they're not seeming to do much else in a way of a coherent ideology or set of policy goals, now it has had close to 13 years, it seems to be purely a vehicle for staying in power. So when there's that sort of intellectual vacuum, what you end up with is that there will be a road for these sorts of organisations to try and make a comeback and say aha we told you, listen to us again.

Participating Organisations :

John Gaskell - Grassroots for Europe
Irina Von Weise
Jane Golding - British in Europe
Else Kvist – The New Europeans

Magdalena Williams – EM
Richard Morris - EM
Rosemary Watts - Glasgow loves EU
Fiona Wishlade – Glasgow Loves EU
Richard Wilson – Grassroots for Europe
Sue Wilson - Bremain in Spain
Amelia Hughes - EM
Mark English - EM
John Moore – Pro Europa
Lee Cooper – AEIP
RT Planning Team
Helen Grogan, Jonathan Harris, Lilian McCobb, Tony McCobb
Jo Pye, Caroline Kuipers

Next Round Table Meeting Topic: RT#34 Tuesday March 7th at 5pm

Time: Mar 7, 2023 17:00 London Join

Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86991931731>

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