

# HACKED OFF REPORT: THE CORONAVIRUS **FAKE NEWS** PUBLISHED IN NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

DECEMBER 2020

## THE **FAKE NEWS** FERRET

**EXCLUSIVE: NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS PUBLISH MORE THAN 50 FAKE NEWS STORIES, INACCURACIES AND DISTORTIONS ABOUT COVID-19, SHAM REGULATOR “IPSO” DOES NOTHING**

### Bill Gates disinformation published by **Sun & Metro**

BILL GATES SMEARED WITH FAKE NEWS  
IN SUN & METRO



Entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Gates was falsely reported by The Sun and The Metro to have published a note on Coronavirus which implied the virus would have positive effects on society...  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

**Mail** report that virus may have started in lab found to be totally baseless

MAIL EVIDENCE-FREE REPORT CLAIMS VIRUS MAY HAVE STARTED IN LAB; IPSO DOES NOTHING

MailOnline

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Did coronavirus start in Chinese government lab? Scientists believe the disease may have begun in research facility 300 yards from Wuhan wet fish market

### IN THIS ISSUE

HOW NEWSPAPERS PUBLISH **FAKE NEWS** TO MILLIONS OF ONLINE READERS

THE **DO-NOTHING COMPLAINTS-HANDLER** CONTROLLED BY THE PRESS

... AND WHY THE GOVERNMENT **MUST** GET SERIOUS ABOUT FAKE NEWS



## Daily Star propagates 5G conspiracy theory, 5G masts attacked

IPSO SITS ON ITS HANDS AS STAR BROADCASTS CONSPIRACY THEORY TO MILLIONS

Dozens of 5G masts set on fire, in attacks believed to be in connection with the conspiracy theory, repeated in the Daily Star, that 5G is linked to COVID-19... CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

## PRESS COVERAGE IN A PANDEMIC

A free and accountable press is never more important than at times of national crisis.

Yet throughout the COVID-19 pandemic some newspapers have been guilty of publishing serious disinformation, or “fake news”, alongside multiple distortions.

Whether false information about the severity of the virus, fictitious stories about miracle cures, or simply the stuff of conspiracy theories, some newspapers have spewed out the same discredited and dangerous “fake news” which has appeared on social media platforms.

And IPSO, the industry-controlled press complaints-handler, has done nothing to address it. As IPSO has stood by, independent fact checkers such as FullFact and other fact-checkers have embarrassed the complaints-handler time and again by pointing out the newspaper disinformation IPSO has missed.

**Reliable, quality journalism is essential when public health is at stake.**

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed a lack of regard for accuracy and proper editorial review at many of the UK’s most-read newspapers, with titles frequently churning out stories about Coronavirus which were seriously and recklessly inaccurate, misleading, or untrue.

This is possible because, unlike every other

major industry in the UK, the press remains unregulated. IPSO – the complaints-handler controlled by newspaper executives, has not ordered a single investigation in the six years since it was established.

The consequences of this are damaging for the public, who are fed disinformation and have no protection from press abuse.

Britain needs a fearless and accountable press. As long as press executives persist with IPSO, we won’t get it.

### *The* ***Fake News Ferret*** **SAYS**

#### Readers deserve better

**Freedom of the press is one of the foundations of our society, but that should not include the freedom to inflict distortions, falsehoods and “fake news” on the public.**

Millions of people read newspapers and their websites every day. They are unavoidable, yet effectively unregulated.

It should shame IPSO, the sham complaints-handler, that more than 50 false or distorted newspaper stories were published about COVID this year. But don’t hold your breath for IPSO to act – it’s obvious they exist to protect the press, not the public.






**It’s time that IPSO was replaced by an independent regulator, which doesn’t take the public for fools.**

**Readers deserve better than this.**





### PREVALENCE OF PRESS DISINFORMATION

Newspaper	No. OF EXAMPLES OF FAKE NEWS FOUND				
	CONSPIRACY THEORIES	CURES AND TREATMENTS	SERIOUSNESS, SPREAD OR EFFECT OF VIRUS	ADVICE OR CONDUCT OF AUTHORITIES	OTHER
	4	3	2	1	1
The Telegraph			4	4	1
			3	1	3
	3	2	4		4
MailOnline	2	1	2		5
	1		1		
METRO	1				1
THE  TIMES					1

**A TOTAL OF 55 FAKE NEWS STORIES ABOUT COVID-19 PUBLISHED IN NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS. IPSO ADJUDICATIONS: ZERO.**

The examples of “fake news” and distortion in this report have been gathered from throughout 2020. They are verifiably false or misleading, and in most cases confirmed by a third-party fact-checker (usually the independent fact-checking organisation ‘Full Fact’). The full list of fake news stories which support this report are set out in the Appendix available here.

Some of the most egregious examples are shown across pages 4 to 10 of this Report.

The most popular topics of fake news in the press on coronavirus include credence given

to conspiracy theories alleging that the virus was created in a laboratory in Wuhan, misreporting on the effect of the virus, and repetition of unverified “cures”.

None of these examples are minor or careless inaccuracies. They are serious and either deliberate or extremely reckless.

In 3 months alone, Facebook removed 7 million fake news posts about the coronavirus from its platform but **IPSO, the complaints-handler controlled by the press, has not upheld a complaint on any of them.**

## DAMAGING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Facebook and Twitter both stand accused of allowing damaging conspiracy theories to circulate on their platforms – but some newspapers have also published totally discredited conspiracy theories themselves.

Despite having layers of editorial departments and legal resources to fact-check at most national newspapers, false, dangerous and sometimes libelous theories are reproduced and published to millions of readers while IPSO does nothing to stem the flow of disinformation.

## EVIDENCE OF CHINESE MASS CREMATIONS... WERE JUST WEATHER PATTERNS

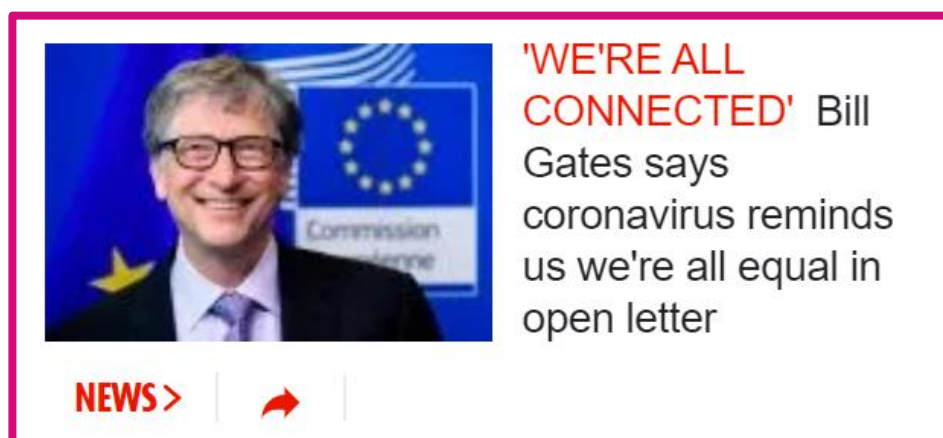
The Sun and Express But FullFact found these both reported in claims to be entirely false, and February on satellite that the images reported on do images reportedly not even show evidence of showing evidence of mass sulphur dioxide. cremations in Wuhan, claiming high levels of sulphur dioxide were identified above China.

These stories feed conspiracy theories alleging that China has hidden many thousands of deaths and discreetly burned the bodies.

The fact-checker said, “The maps are not satellite images, and do not show actual levels of sulphur dioxide. They are simply forecasts based on historical data and weather patterns.”



## BILL GATES NOTE WAS A TOTAL INVENTION



In March, fake news attributing a quote to Bill Gates which referred to COVID-19 as a “great corrector in our lives”, was published by The Sun and The Metro newspapers.

Common conspiracy theories about Bill Gates allege that he started the virus or has a pre-formulated vaccine reserved for “elites”.

In the text of the quote, capital letters are frequently used out of place and several grammatical and spelling errors appear. Neither these unusual features, nor of course the fact that the content of the quote attempts to cast the virus’ effect on the world as partially positive, appeared to have alerted The Sun or the Metro to the fact that it was not written by Bill Gates.

### STAR PUBLISHES 5G CONSPIRACY THEORY



The Daily Star reported in March that 5G wireless networks could be responsible for the rapid spread of the new coronavirus – a conspiracy theory debunked by scientists and whose spread has been previously attributed exclusively to social media.

FullFact (among other fact-checkers) have debunked this claim, stating:

*“This is not true. There is no evidence that 5G WiFi networks are linked to the new coronavirus”.*

The rise of this conspiracy theory is believed to be the cause of a surge in suspected arson attacks on phone masts, which have caused

expensive damage and endangered the lives of engineers working on them.

Over the Easter weekend in April, weeks after this story was published, the mast serving the emergency NHS Nightingale hospital in Birmingham was among 20 cases of phone masts being targeted in suspected arson attacks.

After republishing and amplifying the theory, the Daily Star was then quick to condemn those who vandalised phone masts as ‘idiots’.

The BBC’s disinformation unit has now found that across the UK, more than 70 phone masts have been vandalised.

### DISCREDITED CONSPIRACY THEORY VIRUS BEGAN IN LABORATORY REPEATED BY MAIL AND SUN

In February, the Daily Mail and The Sun both published reports speculating that the virus could have begun in a Chinese laboratory, citing “experts” and a “study”.

In reality, the only basis for these claims was an article published by two Chinese scientists.

FullFact have published a fact-check, noting that apart from a map of the location of laboratories, the scientists “offer no evidence” in support of their claim in the article.

Nonetheless, both articles remain accessible online.





### BAD SCIENCE

Public trust in regulated science is critical to efforts to contain the virus.

Yet there are some newspapers which have sought to undermine experts and science for decades – and their response to this crisis has been no different.

#### STUDY LINKING VITAMIN D DEFICIENCY TO DEATHS WAS **FLAWED** – AND RETRACTED. **THE MAIL'S REPORT IS STILL UP.**

The Daily Mail and The Daily Express both reported in June that nearly 99% of Covid-19 hospital patients who are vitamin D deficient die, according to a research study.

But an [analysis by FullFact](#) revealed that the

paper from the Indonesian study, which the article refers to, was flawed.

It has now been removed by the authors from the online research library it appeared on.

Yet the Mail's article remains accessible online.

MailOnline

Terrifying chart shows how Covid-19 patients who end up in hospital may be almost certain to die if they have a vitamin D deficiency

- Indonesian experts analysed hospital records of 780 people who tested positive
- 98.9% of Covid patients defined as vitamin D deficient – below 20ng/ml – died
- Yet this fell to just 4.1% for patients who had enough of the nutrient, data showed
- The study has since been withdrawn following criticism about its methodology
- Did not take into account patients were older and likely to have health woes

#### TELEGRAPH'S MODELLING CRITICISM **WAS FAKE NEWS**



A Telegraph article in March, which was critical of lockdown restrictions and cast doubt on projection models for infections produced by Imperial College London,

inaccurately reported on those projections to fit the narrative of the piece.

Critical of the expert projections which informed the decision to lockdown in March, the article indicated that authors of a report at Imperial College had previously projected 250,000 deaths and were now projecting only 5,700.

The reality is that these were different projections, by different authors, at different times, and based on different assumptions.

#### MAIL'S ATTACK ON PROJECTIONS WAS **TOTAL DRIVEL**

In November, the Mail published an article headlined "What they DON'T tell you about COVID", which was packed with criticisms of expert infection and death rate projections – claiming actual rates were much lower.

But the projections [were based on the assumption](#) there would be no November lockdown – which, of course, there was. The article was so full of distortions that even the Government criticized it, only to back down when the Mail's backers threw their toys out of the pram.

### FAKE NEWS FEARMONGERING

In several cases, newspaper fake news appeared designed to generate a sense of panic.

#### EXPRESS FALSELY ALLEGE VIRUS WAS “GENETICALLY ENGINEERED” FOR HUMAN INFECTION

##### Coronavirus shock claim: Virus ‘genetically engineered for efficient spread in humans’

CORONAVIRUS may have been genetically engineered for the “efficient spreading in the human population,” a bombshell new study has claimed.

By CALLUM HOARE

PUBLISHED: 09:41, Tue, Mar 10, 2020 | UPDATED: 20:46, Tue, Mar 10, 2020

In this story, The Daily Express wrongly claimed that a bombshell new study found that “*coronavirus may have been genetically engineered for “efficient spreading in the human population”*”.

In fact, the study does not claim the new coronavirus has been genetically engineered. It simply compares the genome sequence of SARS-CoV-2 with other coronaviruses and

suggests a reason why it might be spreading relatively efficiently.

This fake news is particularly dangerous, because it is consistent with conspiracy theories which have alleged that the virus was deliberately created.

#### MIRROR CLAIM THAT PEOPLE WITH DOWN’S SYNDROME WOULD BE “LEFT TO DIE” FOUND TO BE FALSE



The article was headlined “Coronavirus: People with Down's syndrome could be left to die to ‘save’ medical supplies”, yet the regulations did not apply to specifically to people with Down’s syndrome, and were not

being applied in the UK.

Despite the Mirror referring to Down’s Syndrome, cerebral palsy and autism, the actual guidelines do not refer to any of these syndromes or disorders.

The actual guidelines refer to “severe or profound mental retardation”, which sets an entirely different threshold. They apply only in the US state of Alabama.

This article is still available to access online.



EMMA JONES

## Good journalists tell the truth

**A regulated, Leveson-compliant newspaper industry would serve and support journalists to do their jobs to the best of their abilities**

**Emma Jones, journalist  
(former columnist, The Sun)**

**A** good journalist tells the truth, and lives or dies on the trust they build. That's the most important thing.

The newspaper industry must support journalists to deliver trusted news.

When newspapers fail to do so – as both tabloids and broadsheets have for decades – then it is at the expense of the reporters who work for their publications. And, of course the public, who are fed lies dressed-up as fact.

This is never more vital than at times of national crisis when people's lives are at risk. Readers rely on newspapers to deliver accurate information for public health.

All journalists' reputations are threatened by spoofed-up stories, political propaganda and commercial disinformation.

However, fake news is peddled on an industrial scale because investment in real news gathering is more expensive. The big publishers also want to protect their power, mainly over politicians – but also against anyone who stands up to them.

The newspaper industry has a duty to its hard-working staff – who are more often than not lowly paid, over-stretched and sometimes bullied – to provide the best standards and conditions for truthful reporting to take place.

A regulated, Leveson-compliant newspaper industry would serve and support journalists to do their jobs to the best of their abilities as well as serving its readers.



### ENDANGERING THE PUBLIC

Despite the obvious dangers of misreporting on a public health crisis, several articles relating to Covid-19 have made false claims about potential cures and remedies. Even after a headline has been amended, the damage is often already done.

Worst of all, many of these unsubstantiated claims are still available online.

### TRIALS HAD NOT EVEN BEGUN ON VACCINATION SUN CLAIMED “COULD PROTECT” AGAINST COVID

This Sun article is headlined to suggest that the BCG injection is believed to protect individuals from COVID-19. Given most people would have had the BCG injection at school, it risks giving readers the impression that they now may be protected from the virus and do not need to take precautions. Or even worse, some may go looking for ‘another dose’, wherever that might be.

The reality is that **there is no evidence that the BCG injection protects individuals from COVID-19. In fact, trials have not even begun.** This article remains available online.



### MAILONLINE MISREPORTED POLL FINDINGS ON DANGEROUS ANTI-MALARIA DRUG



This MailOnline article made similar drug cure claims, originally claiming in [an article](#) in early April that *malaria drug hydroxychloroquine “is the most effective coronavirus treatment currently available” according to a “majority” of 6,200 doctors.*

But [Full Fact found that](#) the poll the data comes from is not representative of all doctors. 37%, not a majority, of those involved in Covid-19 treatment worldwide said hydroxychloroquine was among the most effective treatments.

A poll of this kind cannot show “effectiveness” - it only shows the anecdotal perceptions of doctors.

### EXPRESS STORY SPECULATES ON NONSENSE “WARM WATER” CURE

An Express article asking: “coronavirus cure: does drinking warm water help cure coronavirus?” failed to confirm that there is no scientific evidence whatsoever to back up the claim.

Instead, it speculates about the claim before eventually giving the view of one epidemiologist, that water does not cure COVID-19, and sets them against the views of a politician saying it does (without evidence).

To even reach the views of the medical expert, the reader must scroll through 652 words, two page-width videos, three page-width images (two of which feature people drinking water), three advertisements and eleven prominent links.



### SUN HEADLINE GAVE CREDIBILITY TO “HOME CURE”

**HOT TODDY 'REMEDY' Coronavirus UK – First Brit known to catch virus ‘beat deadly flu with glass of hot whisky and honey’**

EXCLUSIVE

Nick Pisa

3 Feb 2020, 9:15 | Updated: 6 Feb 2020, 9:02



67 Comments

THE first Brit known to have caught coronavirus has told The Sun he beat the killer bug with a “glass of hot whisky and honey”.

This Sun headline, “*HOT TODDY 'REMEDY' Coronavirus UK – First Brit known to catch virus ‘beat deadly flu with glass of hot whisky and honey’*” may appear whimsical, but attributing one young person’s survival of COVID-19 to an unverified home cure risks downplaying the severity of the virus.

There is no evidence to suggest that honey or whisky can “beat” COVID-19. The story is about one person, who was not in an at-risk age group (a group

in which the mortality rate is 0.01/100) and who survived Coronavirus, who refused to take prescribed medication and instead attributed his recovery to drinking whiskey with honey.

Reporting his claims would be one thing, but a headline which states them as fact is dangerous.

The WHO have stated that ‘Drinking alcohol does not protect you against COVID-19 and can be dangerous.’ Despite this, the article is still available online.

## IPSO: A GREEN LIGHT FOR FAKE NEWS

All of the newspapers in this report have one thing in common: they are all members of the industry complaints-handler, “IPSO”.

IPSO describes itself as a regulator but has few regulatory powers - and has never used those it has. Its rules are controlled by a committee of newspaper executives and its standards are written by a committee of newspaper editors.

**And it shows: IPSO has not upheld a complaint against any of these examples of distortions and “fake news”.**

Even if IPSO were to take action over these articles it would inevitably be inadequate. It typically takes IPSO three months to process a complaint and come to a decision - enough time for fake news to be read and taken in by millions of people. From our work with complainants, we know that a lot of people give up before their complaint is even considered.

When IPSO does find against a newspaper, the remedy is consistently of lesser prominence than the disinformation. This means that, of the millions of people who will have seen the fake news, only a fraction will ever see the record corrected.

**Newspapers have been rife with press disinformation throughout the COVID pandemic. In the absence of an independent regulator, our only option is to write to editors directly.**

**Read the letter below and add your name today.**

IPSO was set up by the big newspaper companies to give the perception of accountability, so that the corporate press could claim that they are different from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. But the reality is that, in this respect, they are no different at all.

**The vaccine rollout is threatened by press disinformation.**

In 1998, Andrew Wakefield’s flawed study into the MMR jab and autism was published.

Over the following years newspapers latched onto the study’s incorrect findings; giving them excessive coverage and credibility. This allowed the falsehood that the vaccine led to autism to take hold in public understanding.

We cannot allow the same to happen with COVID.

Coronavirus is a killer – with the elderly and vulnerable most at risk. A successful rollout of tested vaccinations is critical to their safety.



Dear Editors

Press coverage of the flawed 1998 study into the MMR vaccine and autism caused public panic, confusion, and put children's health at risk.

Nothing has changed.

Instead of making your journalism accountable, you remain outside any independent form of regulation. This leaves the public exposed to the inaccuracies and conspiracy theories you choose to publish and propagate.

Conspiracy theories about COVID vaccinations published to your millions of readers risk undermining the effectiveness of the vaccine rollout – putting thousands of lives at risk.

For the safety of the public, and those most at risk of serious illness, we urge you to keep your reporting on COVID vaccines accurate, evidenced, and conspiracy-free.

Yours,  
The Great British public

**SIGN NOW**

*Letter with names of signatories will be sent to newspaper editors for national titles The Times, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, The Sun, The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Independent, and their Sunday titles.*