

HOPEFUL TOWNS: 'WHAT WORKS?' (5)

TACKLING 'FAKE NEWS', RUMOURS AND MISINFORMATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

"A lie can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots," the author Mark Twain famously said.

While we often think of conspiracy theories as international phenomena that 'go viral', misinformation that takes root in local areas often acts as a catalyst for tensions. This can take the form of hearsay about 'no go zones' or minority groups being offered preferential treatment, or unfounded rumours about the council. These narratives can spread via neighbourhood chatrooms or Facebook groups, corroding trust and undermining resilience. But there are offline elements which root this phenomenon too.

This learning note summarises key lessons from the fifth webinar in our Hopeful Towns 'What Works' series. The aim of the Hopeful Towns project is to better understand how places can be more resilient to hateful narratives in the first place.

CONTEXT

HOPE not hate's Dr Joe Mulhall, who has worked extensively to understand conspiracies and how the far right interact with them, set the scene. Joe defined conspiracies as *"An explanation of events that cites as the main cause a group of powerful persons acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good"* and described the rise of 'super conspiracies' – those which trace everything back to a single, master conspirator.

Ideas like this require a malign actor to blame, Joe explained, hence they often end up scapegoating minorities. And, in recent years, they have become more pronounced.

Concern about local issues is often a route by which people first come into contact with these narratives. Joe gave the example of community Facebook pages being targeted by those on the far right. Examples include the so-called 'Great re-opening' – a COVID-sceptic event, supported by the far right and purporting to be 'grass roots' – as well as the dissemination of lies about migrant hotels. But he also explained that these rumours often start with a kernel of truth that becomes warped. For

example, a primary school putting on an 'alternative' Christmas play may find itself at the centre of local rumours about Christmas being cancelled because of pandering to religious sensitivities.

David Burton-Sampson, former Mayor of Basildon, described the issues that online hearsay throws up in Basildon, where he has lived for 20 years. David provided a powerful sense of the local context, in an area with pockets of real poverty alongside enclaves of genuine affluence. This included stories of hate crimes being perpetrated – including against David himself – and of a context where rapid change at the local level was magnified by an online and offline rumour mill.

Particular examples provided by David include the persistent and untrue rumour that the council was unwilling to fly the St George's flag. He also talked of the common conspiracy theory that nativity plays had been banned. And he described a regen consultation side-tracked by myths about 'the Londoners' being prioritised for new homes. These descriptions echo things we have heard up and down the country.

CHALLENGING 'FAKE NEWS', RUMOURS AND MISINFORMATION

By way of solutions, our speakers stressed that you could not simply throw facts at misinformation and conspiracy. Getting the messaging right is important to counter misinformation, but the vehicle also needs to be right.

SPEAKERS

- **JOE MULHALL**, Senior Researcher at HOPE not hate
- **DAVID BURTON-SAMPSON**, Former Mayor of Basildon
- **TARIQ BASHIR**, Who is Your Neighbour?
- **NIALL MANN**, Regional Communications Manager, iMix

To be effective, messages need to be **grounded in people’s realities**. This means engaging communities to understand where these things are coming from. It may be that rumours about ‘no go zones’ stem from a few streets where there are issues with litter, street drinking or antisocial behaviour. Communications need to come from **trusted local voices**, which often requires significant effort to **build connections within communities**.

GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

Joe suggested three things: **1)** Local decision-makers need to communicate basic information as early and accessibly as possible. “The far right thrives in an information vacuum.” **2)** Individuals need to be present in the online spaces where conversations are taking place, and report abuses and hate speech to social media companies. **3)** Strong, regular engagement remains the best way of providing positive, alternate narratives to those put forward by the far right.

David highlighted a number of key approaches to mitigate these things, including local working groups as well as partnerships with the police and other agencies.

BETTER CONVERSATIONS

There was a lot of discussion about the importance of listening. Tariq Bashir, of the organisation ‘Who is Your Neighbour?’ described how his team of facilitators do this. Their work is based in some of the toughest parts of the country in which to have these conversations.

Some key principles emerged, when it came to moving beyond rumours and falsehoods. This included the importance of getting past what Tariq called the “Them over there” impulse – whereby people were talking about groups they had little contact with, in general and uninformed terms.

Tariq also emphasised that you need to stay in the conversation for long enough to understand the realities of what people are experiencing – and to allow them to be vulnerable about deeper concerns.

NEWS AND MESSAGING

As well as rebutting rumours and stopping ‘information vacuums’ from opening up, another way of tackling misinformation is by enabling more positive narratives. Niall Mann, of iMix, gave us a really clear overview of the best ways to approach local news outlets and present positive stories about change and inclusion.

Niall’s presentation involved lots of handy guidance. There were good tips about what local journalists tend to be looking for and the pressures they are under, and also about how to avoid jargon and find stories that resonate. He mentioned some key words and phrases, that can help as points of commonality, such as ‘family’, ‘safe communities’, ‘public health’, ‘dignity’ and ‘fairness’.

In particular, there were three ‘key components of a good story’ which Niall set out. These were a) a human angle, b) local roots and c) an emphasis on shared interests and values. He also stressed the need for messengers who are “authentic, genuine [and] local,” as well as for those who are surprising, or are not immediately associated with issues like cohesion.

NEXT SESSION

The next webinar in the WHAT WORKS series will be the final one. It will be held on **Thursday July 15th 2021, between 11am and 12.30pm**, and will go into the topic of difficult conversations in more detail. Put it in the calendar if you’d be interested, and we will send out the Zoom invite nearer the time. In the meantime please encourage others who might be interested in the topics discussed to join our Towns Leadership Network: <https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/network>

What are the three principles for interacting with communities?

David:

- Listen to people’s grievances
- Engage and empathise with others
- *Positively* challenge the things you disagree with

Tariq:

- Better out than in: give people space to say what they think
- Most people are alright: sincere, good-hearted, well-intentioned
- Curiosity: learn from conversations with others

Niall:

- Understand others’ experiences and get to know your patch
- Find the point of commonality
- Identify the right messenger