

# The fickle finger of *fake*

**Rob Shimmin** examines the phenomenon of fake news and its role in crisis creation and management – how do we quieten the echo chamber?

President Donald J Trump has done much to elevate the term 'Fake News' into the public's consciousness around the world, pointing the 'fickle finger of fake' at a variety of mainstream media. From late 2016 to the time of writing he has tweeted the term close to 70 times. In Figure 1 overleaf, Google Trends shows the impact on "Fake News" as a search term in response.

But what exactly is fake news anyway? While it may have a new name, the concept has been around for a very long time. Think propaganda and the shades of black, white and grey used to describe communications in World War II – white being true, with well-identified robust sources; grey

being harder to verify, likely untrue and not carrying clear sources; and black being deliberately false information that has been packaged as truth from a seemingly trusted source.

## Bias, not fakery

But it is important to understand that biased news and poor journalism are not fake news.

Things get less black, white or grey when we consider elements like tone and bias. In my PR career, my first response to a client's outrage at a negative piece was to ask if the facts were correct or if they merely objected to the tone. Therein lies the difference between fake news and biased news.

When President Trump tweets his annoyance at the media not covering the good news and focusing on the bad, his criticism should perhaps be levied at bias rather than fakery.

Similarly, if a mistake is made and the publication prints it, that's sloppy journalism, not fake news. Speed

is everything in today's competitive media landscape and standards can suffer. Actor Denzel Washington vented his frustration with the press, when he said that one of the effects of: "Too much information is the need to be first, not even to be true anymore." The press, like those it reports on, has to be accountable. The recent resignation of three CNN journalists after an article was retracted shows the impact of getting it wrong. But those outside the mainstream media might not be so quick to fall on their swords.

Today's sources and motivations are manifold; a website that debunks false stories – First Draft News – suggests seven types of misinformation and disinformation:

- **Satire or parody:** No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool;
- **Misleading content:** Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual;
- **Imposter content:** When genuine sources are impersonated;
- **Fabricated content:** New content is 100 per cent false, designed to deceive and do harm;
- **False content:** When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content; and
- **Manipulated content:** Genuine information or imagery manipulated to deceive.

Motivations vary tremendously. One example is the spreading of baseless stories invoking fear and loathing of immigrants to influence a vote. Another is automated trading on the rise or fall of fake news induced stock movements. Twitter had to act fast when a website set up to look like Bloomberg reported a fictitious \$31bn takeover

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bid for the company, resulting in an exploitable but brief eight per cent jump in the share price. And we also have simple click-bait, where sensational but untrue stories have cashed in as soon as the idle surfer has clicked on them.

In one tweet, President Trump said: "My use of social media is not Presidential – it's MODERN." The President prefers to talk directly to his public via social media. In a crisis this can be an attractive option, especially when you feel you won't get a fair trial by media. However, calling fake news on unwanted coverage and the media behind it is a shaky strategy and accelerates an erosion of trust in the media.

Edelman's highly respected 2017 *Trust Barometer* describes a precipitous fall in trust for mainstream media, with results suggesting it is now distrusted in 82 per cent of the countries surveyed. This is a worrying trend. In a democracy, journalists are expected to ask the tough questions that will expose the truth unflinchingly, whether spoken by politicians, CEOs or individuals. If trust in that media collapses, those holding power may become less accountable.

So who is trusted? Edelman's research showed that respondents now prefer search engines (59 per cent) over human editors (41 per cent). People tend to amplify information they agree with and ignore that with which they disagree. By illustration, 53 per cent did not regularly listen to people or organisations with who they often disagree and people were nearly four times more likely to ignore information that supports a position they do not believe in.

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According to this research, the most trusted source for information is now shared between ‘a person like yourself’ and technical and academic experts. UK politician Michael Gove leveraged the zeitgeist very well in promoting the UK’s Brexit, when he said: “People in this country have had enough of experts.”

That means social media is both the hardest to control and most fluid disseminator of fake news out there.

So how best to defend yourself if you see an exploding story that’s hugely damaging and you know to be entirely untrue?

Firstly, you need the media equivalent of a bomb disposal expert. Where possible, debunk the story and fast. With video and images offering the fastest conduit for a viral story, take time to analyse them carefully. Look at geotags and time stamps so you can understand when they are purported to have been taken. What else is in the image? Were those things there when they say they were? Do the shadows point to the same time of day?

After the shooting down of MH17, journalist and blogger Eliot Higgins accused the Russian Ministry of Defence of

*Defence against the dark arts: Journalist and blogger Eliot Higgins accused the Russian Ministry of Defence of providing fake photos at a press conference after the shooting down of MH17*

Finding truth in a post-truth world | Eliot Higgins | TEDxAmsterdam | YouTube

providing fake photos at a press conference. The Russians showed satellite images suggesting a Buk missile launcher had moved from a Ukrainian military base at a key time that made its involvement in the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines aircraft highly likely. By showing Google Earth images taken just before and after the claimed date of the Russian satellite images, Higgins highlighted a large patch of vegetation that was there just before, then was missing on the Russian shot and reappeared on the subsequent image.

Higgins said: “They did not say it shot down MH17, but they strongly implied it was involved.” He followed up by claiming that the Russian’s first reaction days after the incident was to produce fake imagery.

To aid your efforts, there are numerous fact checking websites that can help in the fight against fake news. These sites exist to debunk fanciful or downright dishonestly incorrect and sensationalist stories.

Here’s a selection of sites identified by the European Association of Communications Directors: [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com); [www.FactCheck.org](http://www.FactCheck.org); [www.PolitiFact.com](http://www.PolitiFact.com); [www.TruthOrFiction.com](http://www.TruthOrFiction.com); and [www.HoaxSlayer.com](http://www.HoaxSlayer.com)

With the usual caveats of not needlessly amplifying the story, consider creating an anchor of truth through correct coverage in the mainstream media. Reach out to members of the media with your proof and use their coverage to reassure the stakeholders you really care about. Will it completely starve oxygen from the explosion? Sadly not: a salacious story will run its course through social media and any outlet that blends news with entertainment. But you need a third party trusted outlet to carry the truth of the matter as a simple first step.

## Suspect news

Mark Zuckerberg has voiced his commitment to tackling the problem of fake news after extensive criticism of the site for not doing enough. US users are beginning to see collaborations between Facebook and fact checking sites with a warning message appearing as you attempt to repost a piece of suspect news.

If allowed to reach Facebook’s two billion users, this may help quieten the media echo chamber where users are eager to accelerate stories they agree with, without checking the facts first.

A simpler and potentially even more effective move from Facebook is an algorithm tweak that identifies links favoured by users who post 50-plus times per day and dramatically limits the reach of those links.

The fundamental lesson is to think first, act fast. As with all crisis management, ensure you are working with the facts. Before responding to a breaking story, double and triple check it’s real. Your organisation’s statement defending itself against fake news can become the story. There’s no smoke without fire.

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## Sources

- Claire Wardle (February 16, 2017): Fake News. It’s complicated, [www.firstdraftnews.com](http://www.firstdraftnews.com)
- Edelman Trust Barometer (2017), [www.edelman.co.uk](http://www.edelman.co.uk)

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Twitter

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Google Trends