

FAKING IT

Timothy Compston *investigates why it is that fake news is so high on the agenda.*

The term 'fake news' is much in evidence these days especially in the accusations levelled by US President Trump at the mainstream media on an almost daily basis. According to CBS News, the President has tweeted about fake news more than 100 times since January. On the other side of the political coin, some have applied this damning label in the context of stories which have appeared on social media, which they allege helped to skew the result of the last US election in the Republicans' favour and even points to Russian interference.

Underlining the geopolitical dimension at play here, just last month Facebook revealed that it had discovered a Russian-funded campaign to promote "divisive social and political messages" on its network with \$100,000 being spent on around 3,000 ads over a two-year period up to the end of May 2017. Prior to this, the US Intelligence Community Assessment flagged up a Russian messaging strategy around the election using covert intelligence operations and overt methods, including state-funded media and paid social media users or trolls.

'INFORMATION OPERATION CAMPAIGNS' HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED BY GOVERNMENTS FOR YEARS

Given all the furore, it is good to step back and ask what we mean by fake news? Well, for its part, the Collins English Dictionary defines fake news as: "False, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting". Of course, despite all the hype, fake news, in the truest sense of the term is nothing new. There is a long tradition of disinformation, propaganda, rumours, and conspiracy theories. What has changed is the inexorable rise of the internet and social media and the dynamics of the medium and the message. Today the reality is that it is very easy to create what appears, on the surface, to be professional news sources, but whose journalistic credentials are scant if non-existent. There is also an economic imperative for providers of online news – or what appears to be news – to sensationalise stories to generate more clicks.

Commenting on the fake news phenomenon, Philip Ingram, a former military intelligence officer and chairman at Global Intelligence Insight, points out that the key change now is what some elements of the press are calling 'citizen journalism': "This is the ability of virtually anyone to be able to reach out

to a mass audience. It is much easier now, whereas fake news beforehand was controlled as part of a national programme or an organisation's programme because you knew there were very few routes to get stuff into the press and out into the public". Social media, Ingram reflects, allows this to happen very, very, quickly indeed. "Now fake news is almost uncontrolled and, because of the rapid timeframe a lot of the news agencies are working on, to try and get something picked-up and put out, what they are not doing is going through the normal checks and balances that professional news agencies, professional journalists, should be doing before they re-publish something. All that comes under time pressure and that is why you see a lot of fake news stories getting pushed around very quickly indeed," he notes.

SETTING THE AGENDA

Heading across the Atlantic to put some metrics on the influence of social media as a source of news, a new survey by the Pew Research Center back in 2016, conducted in association with the John S and James L Knight Foundation, found that a majority of US adults – 62 percent – get their news from social media, and 18 percent do so often. It is not just the public that is turning to social media as a source of information it is also, as Philip Ingram suggests, setting the agenda in traditional media newsrooms. This reality was underlined in a thought provoking study by Anthony Adornato – an assistant professor of journalism at Ithaca College's Roy H Park School of Communications. The study – *Forces at the Gate: Social Media's Influence on Editorial and Production Decisions in Local Television Newsrooms* – found that of the news directors at US network affiliate television stations surveyed, a third of respondents indicated that their stations have reported information from social media that was later found to be false or inaccurate. The study also revealed that, worryingly, in Adornato's view "policy has not caught up with practice". According to Adornato, one of the more striking findings was that, of those newsrooms that have social media policies, nearly 40 percent said the policy does not include procedures for verifying social media content before it is included in a newscast.

Changing tack, in today's uncertain security environment researchers are also keen to investigate the relationship between fake news and how the public respond to terrorism. For its part, Cardiff University announced back in June that it is to undertake a study to analyse where, and how, fake news spreads on social media following major terrorist-related incidents and what the police can do to manage its impacts upon public behaviour. "By rigorously studying how rumours and conspiracy



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theories emerge and 'travel' in the aftermath of terrorist attacks and other highly charged situations, our project will produce robust, independent, research and insights about how and why some 'soft facts' are so influential upon public attitudes and opinion," says Professor Martin Innes, director of Cardiff University's Crime and Security Research Institute.

Reflecting on the historical antecedents of fake news, given all the current controversy about Russia, Philip Ingram reiterates that, in Western parlance, 'information operation campaigns' have been implemented by governments of all shades for many years: "The classic example was during the Second World War in the run up to Operation Overlord to give the Germans the impression that we were coming in by the Pas-de-Calais rather than Normandy. That was all fake news because that had stuff going out in the mainstream press and it had stuff going out on secret signals and everything else and through double agents," says Ingram. He recalls that the Falklands War also saw misinformation come into play around media reports about the position of the Royal Navy's nuclear submarine HMS Superb. "Superb was on its way, but they [the Government] knew that it wasn't going to be

there for a day or two and the story was designed to create confusion in the Argentine's minds to give the impression that it was going to be there much earlier. This created indecision in the Argentine Navy and forced them to remain close to port because they were scared about this potential submarine," he concludes.

CONTROLLING MISINFORMATION

Moving ahead, the dilemma for the authorities, reckons Ingram with his ex-intelligence officer hat on, is that they have even great difficulty controlling what is getting into the press or other channels like social media: "Not that they should ever be allowed to control the press, or what is getting out elsewhere, but it used to be that misinformation was controlled at a fairly high level and was part of a wider campaign plan. At the moment, misinformation can come out from anyone that wants to make it up and put it out there if it sounds slightly credible and that is the difference".

So, are there any answers to the plethora of fake news or misinformation that is out there? In terms of the social media providers that are increasingly in

the spotlight when fake news is debated, Facebook has brought forward a series of high-profile initiatives to address the issue. Adam Mosseri, vice president of the news feed for the platform stressed in a blog post back in April that: "We know people want to see accurate information on Facebook – and so do we. False news and hoaxes are harmful to our community and make the world less informed. All of us have a responsibility to curb the spread of false news".

STEMMING THE FLOW

Touching on concrete steps being taken by Facebook, Mosseri flagged up three key areas, specifically: "Disrupting economic incentives because most false news is financially motivated; building new products to curb the spread of false news and helping people make more informed choices when they encounter false news". In terms of more detail on these initiatives, Mosseri pointed to the fact that Facebook is working with First Draft – a non-profit dedicated to improving skills and standards in the reporting and sharing of information online – to roll out an educational tool to spot false news. Beyond Facebook, Google News Lab, Twitter and many mainstream media outlets are also key supporters of First Draft.

Dealing with fake news is certainly no easy task as according to Dr Sander van der Linden, a social psychologist from the University of Cambridge and director of the Cambridge Social Decision Making Lab: "Misinformation can be sticky, spreading and replicating like a virus". Taking the analogy with a virus a step further, Dr van der Linden was the lead author of a study that sought to compare reactions to a well-known climate change fact with those to a popular misinformation campaign. Although

not security-related the study is certainly thought provoking. When presented consecutively, the false material completely cancelled out the accurate statement in people's minds so opinions ended up back where they started. Researchers then added a small dose of misinformation to delivery of the climate change fact, by briefly introducing people to distortion tactics used by certain groups. This 'inoculation', according to the report's authors, helped shift and hold opinions closer to the truth, despite the follow-up exposure to fake news. "We wanted to see if we could find a 'vaccine' by pre-emptively exposing people to a small amount of the type of misinformation they might experience. A warning that helps preserve the facts," explains Dr van der Linden.

In conclusion, perhaps the take away lesson in the context of fake news should be that the sheer

PRESIDENT TRUMP HAS TWEETED ABOUT FAKE NEWS MORE THAN 100 TIMES SINCE JANUARY

volume of false information that is being disseminated, if left unchallenged, is likely to have longer term consequences where the management of security issues – like terrorism – and geopolitics are concerned. Invariably fake news leads to unsubstantiated rumours, the skewing of opinions and a reinforcement of the existing prejudices of the audience. Moving ahead, it will be interesting to see how such challenges are addressed by governments, the mainstream media and social media platforms as well as the public ●

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It is very easy to create what appears to be a legitimate news source

