

Can YOU tell the difference between fake news and the genuine article?

I first published my thoughts and observations on the subject of fake news last year in my book "[Crisis Management – Is social media its new best friend or its worst nightmare?](#)" when I devoted an entire chapter to the subject. It certainly seems ironical that it has since become a regular news item in own right and is invariably sensational while often simultaneously presenting an air of credibility. Not only is it something that we as individuals will often react to, organisations may well make ill-advised business decisions based on the content presented. In fact, was a Presidential election won off the back of a fake news campaign? Hold that thought.

Back in the days of black and white television I can remember a short satirical documentary about [spaghetti harvesting](#) in the border area between Switzerland and Italy.

This was of course a joke and, although very convincingly reported, it was not intended to cause harm but rather to hoodwink people into believing that spaghetti actually grows on trees. It was an *April fool's day* prank which is a tradition in a number of western countries and this example just one of many that can be found on YouTube. So today in the information age I guess the questions we should be asking



Does spaghetti really grow on trees in Switzerland and Italy?

ourselves is can we really tell the difference between fake news and the genuine article and does it actually matter if we can't?

"Fake news is not only a buzzword in political debates, but a daily threat for companies and other organisations across the continent and also in the UK. Protecting reputation is a key task for corporate leaders and their communication advisers in today's volatile world. And yet only 12 per cent of the organisations we surveyed had established advanced routines to identify threats" – Professor Ralph Tench, Leeds Beckett University (Tench, 2018)

A university lecturer that I was working with was enraged recently after reading a Facebook post relating to social deprivation in the UK. *"How could they possibly do that?"* she demanded, *"it is so unfair."* As tactfully as possible, I suggested that she did what she was always telling her research students to do – verify your sources of information. To her credit she proceeded to practice what she was always preaching and attempted to establish the post's origin and authenticity. Despite the story being as believable as it was melodramatic she subsequently concluded that the *bullshit monitor* had been well and truly off the scale at the top end and the misleading content had in fact been fabricated.

"Fake news was not a term many people used four years ago, but it is now seen as one of the greatest threats to democracy, free debate and the Western order" - (Carson, 2019).

Carson also argues that so great is the danger, the "[Doomsday Clock](#)", which symbolises the threat of global annihilation, remains at two minutes to midnight thanks to the rise of fake news and information warfare.

SO JUST WHO DID INVENT THE EXPRESSION 'FAKE NEWS' ?

Now if you ask people who first coined the expression 'fake news' it is entirely possible that many may express the belief that it is synonymous with Donald Trump and the 2016 US Presidential Election campaign. It certainly appeared that anything said that he found contentious would invariably be dismissed on the pretext that it was false.

Even so, regardless of your personal opinion of the 45th US President, it must be said that there is plenty of evidence that actually supports at least some of his claims. During the 2016 election campaign, fake news posts gained such high engagement that BuzzFeed published an analysis on how they had outperformed real genuine news on Facebook. During those critical months of the campaign, 20 top-performing false election stories from hoax sites and hyper partisan blogs generated nearly 9 million shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook alone. Within the same time period, the 20 best-performing election stories from 19 major credible news websites generated a total of just over 7 million shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook (Silverman, 2016).



Did Donald Trump invent the expression "fake news"?

However, while perhaps Trump can be credited with popularising the expression 'fake news', he cannot claim the credit for concocting the concept as history is full of examples of misinformation. For instance, the role of rumours in French Revolution is well documented and in 1897 Mark Twain is alleged to have remarked that *"The report of my death was an exaggeration"*. Moving forward to 2015, Royston Butterscotch reported via the [Wales-on-Craic](#) blog that the rugby pitch at the Millennium Stadium Cardiff was to be tilted 45° on the following Saturday and then tilted 45° the other way at half time. This would have resulted in the visiting Irish National team having to play uphill for the entire game. The blog apparently went viral with over 80,000 views. One can only wonder just how many people were puzzled about just how the pitch could be tilted one way then the other. Irish fan, Brendon O'Flaherty, is purported to have complained saying *"Tis an outrage to be sure to be sure, so it is"* - (Butterscotch, 2015).

USING MISINFORMATION TO RABBLE ROUSE

In more recent times, I can recall a series of incidents that occurred in the UK around twenty years ago that were the result of what can only be described as rabble rousing incited by agitators spreading unsubstantiated rumours. The incidents that come to mind each involved paedophilia although with social media very much in its infancy and still metaphorically wearing diapers it cannot be in any way be accused of influencing these events. On one occasion a doctor living in Wales and practicing paediatric medicine was forced to hurriedly abandon her home following an attack that was motivated by the simple confusion between the words paediatrician and paedophile (Allison, 2000). It seems someone hadn't been paying attention in their English language lessons at school.

Meanwhile, in the UK city of Portsmouth area of Paulsgrove, several families also had to flee from their homes when violence broke out after they were wrongly accused of harbouring alleged sex offenders (The Telegraph, 2001). There were other similar incidents reported around the same time which illustrates that it just takes one person to whip up a crowd into a frenzy as long as they have a convincing story to tell and some modicum of oratorical ability to deliver it.

Moving forward to present times, in 2018 social media celebrated its 21st birthday and it has unquestionably become an indelible part of modern day society. However, while some would have you believe that it has become an essential part of the information age, others consider it to be nothing short of insidious. In my book [*"Crisis Management – Is Social Media its new best friend or its worst nightmare?"*](#) I was able to illustrate how people often take what they read at face value (Clark, 2018). I also discussed how social media is not just a force for good but it also has an extremely ugly dark side. One of its negative aspects is to provide would-be agitators with a much more powerful platform for facilitating the proliferation of their fake news. Moreover, in the few months that have passed since my book hit the bookshelves there has been growing evidence that many deaths have occurred which can be directly attributed to irresponsible posting of fabricated and inflammatory fake news on social media.

TRIAL BY SOCIAL MEDIA

This is where it really gets nasty and cases of trial by social media are very much on the increase. I was originally motivated to write this blog after reading an article I came across on the BBC News website and naturally it also encouraged me to dig deeper to discover more. The editorial that initially caught my attention was a story reported in November about an incident that had occurred in Mexico three months earlier in August 2018.

"Rumours of child abductors spread through WhatsApp in a small town in Mexico. The rumours were fake, but a mob burned two men to death before anyone checked" – (Martinez, 2018)

The Mexico News Daily takes up the story about the rabble which was estimated to consist of around 150 angry citizens of San Vicente Boquerón, a town in the municipality of Acatlán de Osorio. The mob first beat and then burned alive 43-year-old Alberto Flores Morales and his 21-year-old nephew Ricardo Flores Rodríguez on August 29 because they suspected the two men of being child snatchers. Local authorities subsequently determined that the men were innocent. One of the vigilantes, identified as Francisco Martínez, was allegedly using Facebook to reach out to other town residents and urging them to join the ever growing throng. He was also live streaming this appalling act of mass hysteria on Facebook but conversely this has since enabled local police to identify many of the participants and issue appropriate arrest warrants (Mexico Daily News, 2018).

In the UK, the University of Central Lancashire's senior lecturer Dr Amy Binns refers to the lack of constraint that people show on their social media posts compared to their face to face communication behaviour as *"Online Disinhibition"*. She also talks about the process of *"Deindividuation"* which occurs when people stop behaving like rational individuals and adopt mob

behaviour and can embark on violent activities including lynch mobs, the Mexican episode described previously being a point in case (Binns, 2018).

Other investigations conducted by the BBC has identified as many as 31 deaths (including 4 women) caused by mob attacks incidents in India between 2014 and 2018 that were fuelled by false rumours being spread on WhatsApp concerning child abductors. Approximately 86% of these deaths occurred during the four month period between April and July 2018 (Nazmi, et al., 2018).

Sadly these episodes of barbarity and violence caused by false information on social media are not unique to India or Mexico. Ronojoy Sen from the National University of Singapore has identified occasions of online rumours sparking deadly violence and riots in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Indonesia (Sen, 2018). But the examples of deaths caused by social media are not just restricted to fabricated posts about crimes against children.

SECTARIAN KILLINGS INCITED BY FAKE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Sectarianism has been probably around for ever. Today, just like other despicable acts resulting in people being persecuted, injured and even killed resulting from the spread of fallacious information, it too has now jumped onto the social media bandwagon. False rumours have set Buddhists against Muslims in Sri Lanka, the most recent in a global spate of violence fanned by social media (Taub & Fisher, 2018).

In India, sparked by bogus rumours on WhatsApp, people have become the innocent victims of mob lynching's while others have been beaten to death. In one incident in Maharashtra state, five people from a nomadic community were lynched because one of them spoke to a child after they had stepped of a bus (Gruenbaum, 2018). Perhaps the most cruelly ironic fatal attack was on Sukanta Chakrabarty, a man hired by the Tripura state government to travel around villages in a public education campaign to curb the spread of these lethal rumours, when he was also lynched (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

Further atrocities ignited by fake news posts on Facebook have been reported in Nigeria. Police and the army in Plateau State were convinced that the graphic imagery and misinformation circulating on the social media platform last June resulted in revenge killings of Fulani Muslims by Berom Christians. Among the images was one of a dead baby with a machete head wound although this had previously been posted on Facebook months before. Moreover, a video of man with his head cut open was also posted but the origin of this image was traced back to Congo-Brazzaville, nearly 1,000 miles away, having been taking in 2012. Neither of these images, among others, was anything to do with the animosity between that existed between the Fulani and Berom but it they were exploited to provoke a reaction (Adegoke, 2018).

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO AVOID FALLING FOUL TO FAKE NEWS?

While social media companies wrestle with fake news and other unacceptable issues, some governments are threatening a variety of measures to restrain its unpalatable dark side - even to the point of blocking access to 'rogue' platforms. The UK Government has in fact just published

(April 2019) a white paper entitled "[Online Harm](#)" which sets out its plans for a world-leading package of online safety measures that also supports innovation and a thriving digital economy.

"In the wrong hands the internet can be used to spread illegal or harmful content, undermine civil discourse, and abuse or bully other people. Online harms are widespread and can have serious consequences. Two thirds of adults in the UK are concerned about content online, and close to half say they have seen hateful content in the past year" (HM Government, 2019).

This UK package comprises legislative and non-legislative measures and will make companies more responsible for their users' safety online, especially children and other vulnerable groups. The white paper also considers the constraining of the use and propaganda proliferation by terrorists including the live streaming of their atrocities.

When Possible Use Reliable Information Sources

While we wait for platforms to strive to improve their respective products and various governmental driven initiatives introduce constraints on social media, if someone really wants to establish whether a news item is authentic they should invariably refer to its likely origin. I should add the caveat that there are a few mainstream media channels whose integrity is widely acknowledged as they are known for validating their sources of any information that they report on. For example, in the UK this should include organisations such as the BBC, Reuters, the Economist and the Guardian all of which have well-earned reputations for checking their sources of information. In the event that they have not had the opportunity to verify a story – they will say so. As an aside these four UK based channels were also listed in the USA's Top 10 trusted news sources in 2017 with the Economist in poll position, Reuters was third and the BBC fourth (Ruddick, 2017).

Facebook: Tips to Spot False News

Facebook claims to be committed to reducing the spread of false news on its platform. They remove fake accounts and disrupt economic incentives for people that share misinformation. Facebook also use signals, like [feedback from its community](#), to identify stories that may be false. In countries where Facebook works with independent [third-party fact-checkers](#), stories rated as false by those fact-checkers are shown lower in News Feed. If Pages or domains repeatedly create or share misinformation, Facebook significantly reduces their distribution and remove their advertising rights. Facebook is also working to empower people to decide for themselves what to read, trust and share by giving them more context on stories with tools like [Related Articles](#).

Learn more in "[Facing Facts](#)," a short film about Facebook's fight against misinformation, or [Inside Feed](#), a site dedicated to shedding light on Facebook's people and products.

In your own quest to identify fake or false news stories, here are some tips on what to look out for:

1. **Be sceptical of headlines.** False news stories often have catchy headlines in all caps with exclamation points. If shocking claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they probably are.

2. **Look closely at the link.** A phony or look-alike link may be a warning sign of false news. Many false news sites mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the link. You can go to the site to compare the link to established sources.
3. **Investigate the source.** Ensure that the story is written by a source that you trust with a reputation for accuracy. If the story comes from an unfamiliar organization, check their "About" section to learn more.
4. **Watch for unusual formatting.** Many false news sites have misspellings or awkward layouts. Read carefully if you see these signs.
5. **Consider the photos.** False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos. Sometimes the photo may be authentic, but taken out of context. You can search for the photo or image to verify where it came from.
6. **Inspect the dates.** False news stories may contain timelines that make no sense, or event dates that have been altered.
7. **Check the evidence.** Check the author's sources to confirm that they are accurate. Lack of evidence or reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story.
8. **Look at other reports.** If no other news source is reporting the same story, it may indicate that the story is false. If the story is reported by multiple sources you trust, it's more likely to be true.
9. **Is the story a joke?** Sometimes false news stories can be hard to distinguish from humour or satire. Check whether the source is known for parody, and whether the story's details and tone suggest it may be just for fun.
10. **Some stories are intentionally false.** Think critically about the stories you read, and only share news that you know to be credible.

Source: (Facebook, 2019)

With respect to validating if and where an image has been used before, [Google Images](#) provides a very effective means of cross-checking. For example, if you upload a copy of the image of the lady harvesting spaghetti on the first page of this article, it will tell you among other things that it is '*a spaghetti tree hoax*'.

How do I mark a Facebook post as false news?

There must be the best part of 200 social media platforms out there and while fake news could appear on a large percentage, this paragraph focuses solely on Facebook because it has by far the largest number of active users.

Now, for the sake of argument, let us assume that you have good reason to believe that the Facebook post (see Figure 1) regarding the political funding of the UK Member of Parliament, Chuka Umunna, is actually fake news. To flag this as fake news:



Figure 1

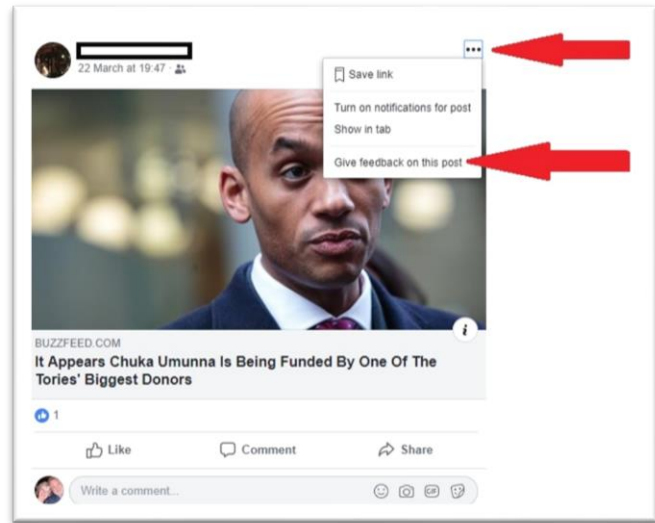


Figure 2

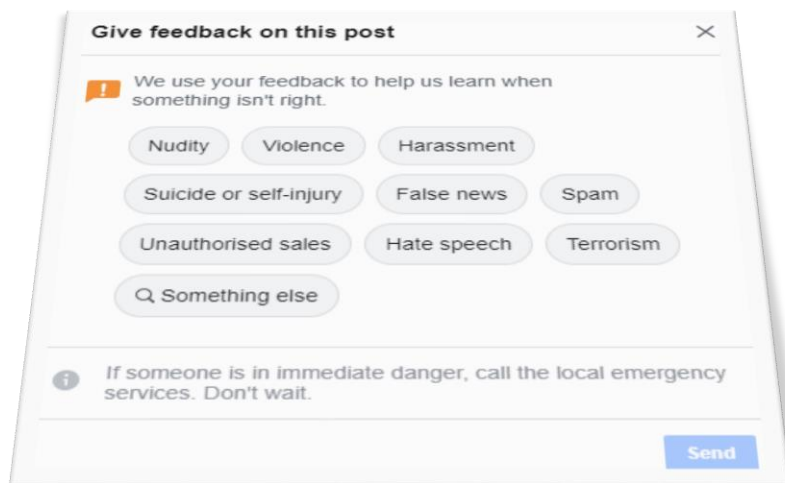
First, click ... in the top right hand corner next to the post you'd like to mark as false as indicated by the top red arrow in Figure 2. Then in the drop down box that appears, select "Give feedback on this post" as indicated by the second arrow.

Another dropdown box will appear as illustrated by the figure below.

Select the "False News" options

Finally, press the "SEND" button at the bottom of the dropdown box.

Source: (Facebook, 2019(b))



What to know more: Look at University Run Short Courses

There are a variety of universities that now offer short courses about fake news or publish useful Blogs on the topic. While this is not intended to be a definitive list, those that I have come across include:

- [The University of Michigan](#)
- [Bournemouth University](#)
- [The Open University](#)
- [University of Hong Kong](#)
- [Sheffield University](#)

About The Author

Robert (Bob) Clark is a Business Continuity Consultant, published author, trainer and visiting university lecturer. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Business Continuity Management, a Fellow of the British Computer Society and a Member of the Security Institute. Much of his practical experience was gained during the 28 years he spent working with IBM, Fujitsu and more recently with PwC Malta.

He has a Master of Science Degree in Business Continuity, Security and Emergency Management awarded by Bucks New University in 2012. Also that year he was listed as a Business Continuity Institute approved instructor and he has run BCI licensed training courses including the five day course preparing students to sit the BCI's Certificate examination. Bob has frequently designed, created and delivered bespoke courses for commercial audiences covering:

- All aspects of the Business Continuity lifecycle including Awareness Training for entire organisations
- ICT Disaster Recovery
- Threat Analysis / Risk Assessment
- Planning to prepare for the Pandemic Threat
- Emergency Preparedness (e.g. building evacuation, shelter-in-place, terrorism, earthquakes etc.)

In 2014 he became a visiting lecturer primarily at Manchester Metropolitan University where he has delivered business continuity and emergency preparedness to both undergraduate and post graduate students. In the same year he developed a Crisis Management module for a Master's degree programme in tourism for Edinburgh Napier University.

An experienced manager, Robert has directed large, high profile programmes and projects including business continuity initiatives for several blue chip and prestigious organisations. This includes assignments with BP, Barclays Bank, British Airways, Capital One, Centrica, De la Rue, Government of Malta, Italian Ministry of Finance, Transport for London and Zurich Insurance.

Between 1999 and 2004, he was the Head of the Project Management Practice for DMR / Fujitsu Consulting. For a two year period, he held the position of Resourcing Director for Fujitsu Consulting Northern Europe managing around 1,500 consultants across 5 countries. This position was relinquished following a merger.



Robert Clark speaking at the Budapest University Business School, November 2018

Robert's experience is multi-national and multi-cultural having worked in twelve different countries. His communication and mentoring skills are excellent and he has a track record of engaging at all levels of organisations including two Prime Ministers.

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