

Briefing Paper: The next era of news media

Part 5 - Fake news and public trust ([full paper](#))

Combatting fake news

The media is the least trusted institution on par with government and behind NGOs and business, according to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometerⁱ. Australians place slightly more trust in the news (44%) than the global average (42%). However, more Australians are trying to avoid the news than two years ago (57% in 2017 to 62% in 2019)ⁱⁱ.

The prominence of fake news, particularly used as political propaganda, is one of the main drivers of public distrust. The definition of fake news is both contested and evolvingⁱⁱⁱ. However, two inherent characteristics are its inaccuracy or misleading nature, whether partial or complete, and the intent of the author to mislead. It can be hard to classify news as fake, because the selected information and facts might be correct for some or all people but be misleading in isolation.

In common vernacular, the term 'fake news' is being used by public figures to refer to news with a political bias that is unfavourable to them. According to Edelman, 73% of people worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon^{iv}.

A new frontier of fake news is fake video, also known as deep fakes. In 2017, researchers at the University of Washington were able to turn an audio of President Barack Obama into a realistic video of him giving a speech that did not exist^v. Tools such as Fake App are making this sophisticated video manipulation widely available. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg believes deep fakes are different to misinformation. "It is likely sensible to have a different policy and to treat this differently than how we just treat normal, false information on the internet," he said^{vi}.

In response to fake news, around 120 news sites have started to display trust indicators on their pages, with links to detailed policies on ethics, factchecking and corrections. It is hoped these will distinguish reputable news sites from unreliable ones^{vii}. Junk or fake news aggregators are also appearing.

The role of social media

The fake news debate has also become one of censorship, with questions being raised about who should have the responsibility and ability to determine which news is misleading or harmful. So far, the onus for tackling fake news has been put on social media platforms, with governments around the world calling on Facebook to do more to stop interference with elections. In response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which saw the company acquire personal data about Facebook users under the pretence of academic research to influence political elections around the world, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg took out an ad in several newspapers in the US and UK to apologise for the data breach^{viii}.

Beyond that, Mr Zuckerberg has deflected responsibility for foreign interference in elections to governments, saying Facebook does not have the tools to stop foreign governments. He has also defended free expression and warned against censoring content such as satire that could fall under the definition of "fake"^{ix}.

Mr Zuckerberg later refused to appear before a UK parliamentary committee investigating how social media data is being misused for targeted political advertising. The final report recommended*:

- a code of ethics be established that defines ‘harmful content’;
- an independent regulator be able to take legal action against technology companies that do not act against harmful and illegal content;
- electoral law be updated to take into account online and microtargeted campaigning;
- more transparency around political advertising; and
- technology companies address shell companies and attempts to hide identity in advert purchasing.

In Germany, law was introduced in October 2017 requiring social media sites to remove hate speech, fake news and illegal posts within 24 hours after being informed about the material or face fines of up to EUR50 million. Facebook has recruited several hundred staff to manage reports of illegal content^{xi}.

During the Australian election campaign, a multi-agency taskforce was created to monitor for foreign interference and foreign hackers who could circulate fake news. The Australian Electoral Commission launched a social media campaign in 29 languages to warn voters about fake news. Facebook banned foreign advertising leading up to the election and launched a factchecking partnership to vet the accuracy of information. Despite the measures, cases of fake news were reported^{xii}.

► Who said what?

US President Donald Trump, 19 March 2019^{xiii}:

The Fake News Media has NEVER been more Dishonest or Corrupt than it is right now. There has never been a time like this in American History. Very exciting but also, very sad! Fake News is the absolute Enemy of the People and our Country itself!

University of British Columbia Assistant Professor Taylor Owen, 25 September 2018^{xiv}:

Platform algorithms prioritize entertainment, shock, and radicalization over reliable information. This is embedded in the business model. This is why research shows, for example, that misinformation spreads further and faster than genuine news.

The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, House of Commons UK, 14 February 2019^{xv}: *Social media companies cannot hide behind the claim of being merely a ‘platform’ and maintain that they have no responsibility themselves in regulating the content of their sites.*

New Knowledge, 18 December 2018^{xvi}:

Over the past five years, disinformation has evolved from a nuisance into high-stakes information war. Our frameworks for dealing with it, however, remain the same -- we discuss counter-messaging and counter-narratives, falling into the trap of treating this as a problem of false stories.

Edelman president and CEO Richard Edelman, 20 January 2019^{xvii}:

...people have lost confidence in the social platforms that fostered peer-to-peer trust. These forces have led people to shift their trust to the relationships within their control, most notably their employers.

New York Times CEO Mark Thompson, 19 June 2019^{xviii}:

In the end, calling journalists traitors or calling them enemies of the people is, inevitably, going to increase the risk of violence and hostility towards journalists. It's irresponsible and he [President Donald Trump] shouldn't do it.

Facebook Australia and New Zealand policy director Mia Garlick, 17 April:

Once a story is rated as false, we show it lower in News Feed, reducing its future views by more than 80 per cent on average.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, 26 June 2019^{xix}:

We exist in a society where people value and cherish free expression, and the ability to say things including satire. [I don't think anyone would want] a private company to prevent you from saying something that it thinks is factually incorrect. That to me just feels like it's too far and goes away from the tradition of free expression and being able to say what your experience is through satire and other means.

Prepared by Sarah Parkes sarah.parkes@daymark.com.au

ⁱ Edelman 2019, '2019 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report', p. 5, 20 January, accessed 26 June 2019, https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-03/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=global_report&utm_campaign=downloads

ⁱⁱ Fisher, C, Park, S, Young Lee, J, Fuller, G and Sang, Y 2019, 'Digital News Report: Australia 2019', p. 8, News & Media Research Centre and University of Canberra, 17 June, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019/06/apo-nid240786-1366986.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ ABC Media Literacy 2018, 'How journalists define fake news', ABC News, 15 August, accessed 26 June 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/education/media-literacy/how-journalists-define-fake-news/10122248>

^{iv} Edelman 2019, '2019 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report', p. 20.

^v Langston, J 2017, 'Lip-syncing Obama: New tools turn audio clips into realistic video', *UW News*, 11 July, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.washington.edu/news/2017/07/11/lip-syncing-obama-new-tools-turn-audio-clips-into-realistic-video/>

^{vi} Schiffer, Z 2019, 'Facebook might start treating deep fakes differently than fake news, Zuckerberg says', *Business Insider US*, 27 June, accessed 3 July 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.sg/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-special-policy-deep-fake-videos-2019-6/>

^{vii} Newman, N 2019, 'Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2019', p. 15, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, accessed 27 June 2019, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-01/Newman_Predictions_2019_FINAL_2.pdf

^{viii} Crook, J 2018, 'Zuck apologizes for Cambridge Analytica scandal with full-page print ad', *Tech Crunch*, 26 March, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://techcrunch.com/story/facebook-responds-to-data-misuse/>

^{ix} Thomsson, N 2019, 'Zuckerberg defends free speech, even when the speech is false', *Wired*, 26 June, <https://www.wired.com/story/zuckerberg-defends-free-speech-even-when-speech-false/>

^x The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019, 'Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report', p. 89-97, The House of Commons, 14 February, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmds/1791/1791.pdf>

^{xi} BBC 2018, 'Germany starts enforcing hate speech law', *BBC News*, 1 January, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-42510868>

^{xii} Jenson, M 2019, "'Fake news' is already spreading online in the election campaign – it's up to us to stop it", *The Conversation*, 24 April, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://theconversation.com/fake-news-is-already-spreading-online-in-the-election-campaign-its-up-to-us-to-stop-it-115455>

^{xiii} @realDonaldTrump 2019, Twitter post, 11:24pm 19 March, accessed 2 July 2019, available at <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1107981131012628481?lang=en>

^{xiv} Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics 2018, 'Democracy under threat: Risks and solutions in the era of disinformation and data monopoly', p 31, House of Commons Canada, December, accessed 2 July 2019,

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ETHI/Reports/RP10242267/ethirp17/ethirp17-e.pdf>

^{xv} The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019, 'Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report', p. 10.

^{xvi} New Knowledge 2018, 'Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency', p. 99, 18 December, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://disinformationreport.blob.core.windows.net/disinformation-report/NewKnowledge-Disinformation-Report-Whitepaper.pdf>

^{xvii} Edelman R 2019, 'Return to largest-ever inequality of trust driven by spike among informed public,' Edelman, 20 January, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/2019-edelman-trust-barometer-reveals-my-employer-most-trusted-institution>

^{xviii} Thompson, M 2019, 'New York Times CEO Mark Thompson on growing newspaper company by billions during Trump's 'fake news' era', CNBC video, 19 June, accessed 2 July 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/19/new-york-times-ceo-on-how-newspaper-grew-300percent-amid-fake-news-bashing.html>

^{xix} Thompson, N 2019, 'Zuckerberg defends free speech, even when the speech is false'.