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BY EUGENE YIGA

# Truth or Scare

As the vaccine rollout continues, false information is one step ahead.

Mark Twain once said that “a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes”. Now, thanks to technology, conspiracy theories transcend geography and reality, finding a home wherever people are willing to believe.

“It can be tricky to trace a conspiracy to its roots, particularly in the digital realm where they get updated and revamped,” says writer and researcher, Robyn Porteous. “Alarmingly, many conspiracies throughout the pandemic have also gained traction as a result of being shared by high-profile people.”

Conspiracy theories attempt to trigger an emotional response (often outrage) so that people respond before interrogating the

information. They also mix fact with fiction so that it becomes hard to tell what is true and what is not.

“Those inclined towards concocting misinformation and disinformation are adept at preying on and tapping into people’s legitimate concerns, and seem to confirm their worst fears irrespective of whether there’s data to support it,” Porteous says. “Throughout the pandemic, there’s also been a tendency for

people to almost net-import their conspiracies from abroad – significantly the US – tweaking the ideas to make the nefarious intentions and dastardly villains relevant to our own context.”

Porteous highlights three groups prone to spreading false information. The first does it for financial gain, whether through clickbait or phishing scams. The second does it to affect a narrative by pushing an ideological or political agenda. The third is a mix of those who do it for fun (because they derive pleasure from being agents of chaos), and those who do it ignorantly (because they don't question what they receive).

“Most incorrect information is spread by ‘useful idiots’ – a derogatory term from the Cold War used to describe ‘non-communists’ susceptible to communist propaganda,” says Howard Fox, marketing and commercial director at GIBS. “People receive information; it fits with their world view, which is

objective and unbiased from their perspective. They feel a sense of moral duty to pass the information along, and the information propagates to an increasing number of people.”

### Everyone is at risk

In the past, news was primarily curated by print publications and television channels. And while not entirely unbiased, it was at least not self-selected. Nowadays, social media platforms curate the ‘news’ we see and deliver more of what we click on. That’s why Fox believes we are all, to an extent, “prisoners of our biases”.



Robyn Porteous

## “Most incorrect information is spread by ‘useful idiots’...”

“Misinformation and disinformation don’t need to persuade us that it’s true or correct,” Porteous says. “It just needs us to doubt. And unless you’re an expert in the area, it isn’t too difficult to create doubt.”

This means we are all vulnerable to false information, especially when it taps into our prejudices, views, and fears. Thinking you’re immune just because you’re smart makes you even more at risk.

“It isn’t too difficult to position pieces of information as factual and accurate, particularly when dubious sources exist, making it seem as if the information is cited from real research and studies,” Porteous says. “Anyone who doesn’t know better – and in the context of a pandemic, that’s basically anyone who isn’t an epidemiologist, a vaccine scientist, or a healthcare professional – is susceptible to believing what they see, often without question.”

## Large corporations, once considered unimpeachable, are now seen as contrary to public interest and are the target of internet trolls.

### Trust is lacking

The spread of inaccurate or misleading information has real-world consequences and can even lead to loss of life. For example, if too many people refuse to take a vaccine, the population is less likely to reach herd immunity, while those who shun face masks put others (and themselves) at risk of contracting and further spreading Covid-19. As became clear in the US Capitol siege, mistrust of government can even threaten democracy itself.

“It’s good to be sceptical of authority and to interrogate the validity and effectiveness of interventions, but the exaggeration of this fuelled by conspiracies can result in people behaving foolishly, at best, and criminally, at worst,” Porteous says. “It undermines your ability to make informed decisions and behave in a manner that is incumbent of a responsible citizen, thus undermining your role as a member of a community that ought to participate in our democracy in an informed and responsible manner.”

Part of the problem is the lack of trust. Large corporations, once considered unimpeachable, are now seen as contrary to public interest and are the target of internet trolls. And while the phrase “as seen on TV” used to be a sign of strength, now it’s more likely to result in cynicism, justifiably so given the many scandals.

“We live in a post-truth world,” Fox says. “The media landscape has changed, and lying has, to an extent, become an acceptable norm for politicians worldwide. Sources ‘credit’ Trump with making more than 30,000 false or misleading claims during his term. This from the man who famously called a CNN reporter “fake news”. It would have been unthinkable a decade ago; now we shrug. The bar for the veracity of news has been dramatically reset.”

### Tech companies need to change

Given that social media (including private messaging apps) are arguably the biggest culprits when it comes to spreading false information, tech companies are in the spotlight when it comes to addressing the problem. Yet they’ve (largely) been absolved from providing oversight. As long as the content isn’t illegal or so grossly contrary to public mores that it damages the platform, they rarely get involved in veracity.



Howard Fox

“The majority of content is generated by unpaid, untrained, highly biased contributors who have no commitment to journalistic ethics,” Fox says. “[Platforms] get the content for free and keep all the advertising and other revenue, which is why they are extraordinarily profitable. The problem is that in this instance, one can’t be half pregnant. Either it’s a free-for-all, or it’s under the platform’s editorial control. The latter doesn’t appear to be a viable business model.”

Electronic and social media operate under the same laws as any other media. But, due to the volume of content and anonymity of contributors, it’s tough to police. Countries that have tried to restrict social media have had significant pushback based on the right to free speech.

“I don’t believe additional control is either viable or (apart from exceptional cases) desirable,” Fox says. “It would be better to educate recipients of fake news to recognise it, not propagate it, and act as a counter to the errors and biases.”

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### Individuals must take responsibility

Practically speaking, Fox suggests that we respectfully listen to dissenting voices and perhaps even read opposition media occasionally. Also, if you want professional quality content that is held to an ethical standard, opt for reputable news sites, especially those behind a paywall that don’t rely on clickbait for revenues.

“There’s a need for focused communication campaigns that educate others on how they may become pawns in the game,” Porteous says. “We all have a responsibility – to ourselves, our friends, our families, and our communities – to continually ensure we aren’t complicit in the spread and harm caused by misinformation and disinformation.”

As individuals, we must always verify the information we consume, ensuring it comes from credible sources as well as professionals who are experts in their field. There are also tools – from organisations like [Real411](#), [DFRLab](#), and [Africa Check](#) – that make it possible to confirm the validity of information before we pass it on.

“By passing things on without pausing, we potentially play a role in the proliferation and harm that misinformation and disinformation can cause,” Porteous says. “If something comes out as being inaccurate or false, it’s important that we share that with our networks in such a way that we amplify what’s true, in the hopes that it reaches someone before the misinformation and disinformation do.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Misinformation vs Disinformation vs Fake News

Misinformation is false or incorrect information spread without an intention to deceive, whereas disinformation is deliberately spread to mislead. ‘Fake news’ has a more fluid definition. According to Dean Jackson of the International Forum for Democratic Studies, it includes intentionally deceptive content, jokes taken at face value, large-scale hoaxes, slanted reporting of real facts, and coverage where the truth may be uncertain or contentious.

### When fake news hits your organisation

Well-crafted fake news is inclined to have an element of truth to it so that it is not easily debunked. But whether it is false or true, the response to negative public comment is often more damaging than the original post.

“Organisations and high-profile individuals are sometimes trolled to get a reaction,” Fox says. “As is the case with all professionally-managed response communication, preplanning and preparation are essential.”

Responding without thought or in anger is fatal. Instead, have responses ready for any sensitive area of the business, ensure responses are consistent from senior management (have agreed spokespersons in place), and never try to cover it up.

“Remember, President Clinton wasn’t impeached for what he did, but rather for trying to obfuscate,” Fox says. “The same holds in the court of public opinion – if there’s an element of truth buried in the fake news, fess up early, take it on the chin, and move on.”

## CASE STUDY

### MIRROR TRADING INTERNATIONAL

The legal liabilities, especially regarding defamation, continue in cyberspace (the use of oblique usernames and aliases notwithstanding). And yet, many people still trust the advice they get from random people on Facebook or Twitter more than they trust what comes from established companies or even the authorities.

“Take Mirror Trading International, South Africa’s (and the world’s) largest cryptocurrency scam of 2020 at R8.6 billion,” Fox says. “The Financial Sector Conduct Authority declared it a scam in August 2020. ‘Investors’ ignored the authorities and, based on the hype across social media, continued to pile billions into the fraud. It is a sad and expensive reflection on the lack of trust in what was previously considered a reliable and trustworthy establishment.” **GIBS**