

Stop spreading the news

By  Kim Furman

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There is nothing new about fake news other than the name used to describe it. Disinformation, misinformation, satire, parody, propaganda and manipulations of the truth are age old. John Adams, American president, confirms just this when he said, "There has been more new error propagated by the press in the last ten years than in an hundred years before 1798." This statement could easily be referring to a social media feed.



Image source: [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com)

John Herschel, a celebrated British astronomer in 1835 reported in the *New York Sun* that he observed giant man bats in conversation from his telescope examining the moon. Fake news can range from the absurd to the plausible and everywhere in between yet the effects are all damaging.

The media industry has been evolving through social media and now the decline of print with the rise of Covid and the no-touch economy. Where media will land will be determined but the threat of being misled and unintentionally misleading others remains the same.



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There are many types of fake news but there are two interesting realms – misinformation and disinformation. They are both incorrect, yet misinformation is an honest error usually by a well reputable source whereas disinformation is purposefully and tactically incorrect. The intent differs but the outcome can be just as damaging.

Sharing fake news

Technology has amplified, velocitised and expanded the disinformation/misinformation problem. Where a picture once held truth, it is now easy to manipulate. Artificial intelligence even allows the voice and image of a person on video to be tampered with. Social media has created open source publishing which allows for the beauty of true free press but with every pro comes a con.

The second we share a tweet or post of any form we become publishers on our own social media feeds. However, how many of us take the time to validate the truth of what we just published? Social media is about speed, quick scrolling and sharing not detailed investigation. The speed that fake news can spread is unprecedented compared to the days of Adams, it can go round the world in minutes.



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Today's giant bats are Covid-19. We may laugh at the idea of educated people believing that the moon was inhabited by giant bats in animated discussion, but the moon was as unknown as Covid is today. Here lies the problem, when something is unprecedented, unknown with little information to prove otherwise then almost anything can become believable. Throw in the fear factor of today and we become easy targets for believing and sharing mis- and disinformation. The South African government has issued that "anyone that creates or spreads fake news about the coronavirus/Covid-19 is liable for prosecution. Verify the information before you share information."



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Yet how easy is fake news to verify? And what is perhaps equally dangerous is how the term fake news is often thrown at anything that does not support a person's agenda. This very conversation, of fake news and the media revolution, has prompted the associate editor of the *Daily Maverick*, Ferial Haffajee, journalist and author Mandy Wiener, business technology journalist for *Forbes SA*, and *Brainstorm* to name a few, Tiana Cline and Synthesis machine learning engineer, Archana Arakkal to take part in an online event – [Stop spreading the news](#) on 13 August. Hosted by author Howard Feldman, they will deep dive into the state of media and fake news. Arakkal will also address how within the technology that may exacerbate the disease of fake news, may lie the remedy with artificial intelligence and the advancement of algorithms.

Whatever the future of fake news and the new world solutions to tackle it, the old-world solution of fact-checking remains the same. We must bear in mind that the objective of free press was to progress the human mind, advance knowledge and create a better-informed public. Today we are all agents of free press, hopefully, we enable ourselves so free press lives up to its original intent.

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