

Overcoming fake news with credible news brands

Fake news is a big issue for news brands, whose credibility matters more than ever before. It is time to sort the wheat from the chaff before the trustworthiness of the media industry as a whole is brought into question.

Marty Baron, executive editor of the Washington Post said addressing the World Editors Forum in an article on Wan-Infra, “No question: trust is our greatest challenge. There is no greater one.”



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Fake news took centre stage in 2016

Last year will be marked in history as the year when fake news took centre stage, according to an article in *The Conversation*, not only did it influence the US election and the Brexit vote, but also in South Africa, newspaper editors, journalists and Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan were targeted. The article goes on to say that, “Fake news is premised on deception and is little more than propaganda” and that, “hoax news, propaganda and misinformation have been around for as long as people have communicated”. The problem is the propagation of fake news, when it is republished by news media.

“The proliferation of fake news raises the age-old question of trust in the news media. Can journalists and news organisations still be relied on as credible intermediaries in sorting what’s true from what’s false?” states the article. Trying to stop fake news is impossible and it is up to news brands to uphold media ethics stringently and to verify all sources to remain credible.

What do the creators of fake news sites stand to gain?

“Purveyors of fake news produce content that looks much like the information you would see on a news site that claims to publish accurate information. They even fabricate Twitter handles to match those of media professionals, in so doing adding a veneer of respectability to their messaging. In many instances, the motive is money, with every click on an advertisement or link to native content generating revenue for a fake news outlet. In other instances, the motive is more sinister, with a politically motivated campaign,” states an article on BizNews.

Readers flock to news brands they can trust

In the wake of the rise of fake news, The New York Times has seen an all-time high in terms of subscribers and audience, according to an article on Warc, “political uncertainty and fake news are driving consumers back to news brands they feel they can trust, new figures suggest.” These figures show that in the fourth quarter there were 276,000 new digital subscribers to the New York Times, giving it a total of 1.85 million digital subscribers and 3 million print and online subscribers in total. “Those figures have helped it reduce its reliance on advertisers, as print ad revenues plummeted during 2016 and weren't offset by the rise in digital ad revenues.”

Impact on brands

Consumers are supporting trustworthy, established news brands, yet to remain credible, publishers require the budget to maintain robust editorial teams. Advertisers are often lured away by the vast reach of a multitude of digital platforms and the ‘wonders’ of programmatic buying. Fake news sites flourish in this environment, however, advertisers need to be cognisant of the long-term effects of associating their brands with fake news sites. Brand loyalty is closely associated with trust and when brands do not support credible news media, this has a negative impact not only on the brand, but also on the entire industry and society.

Fake news is a moral failure

Randall Rothenberg, IAB CEO (globally), as quoted in a Warc article, told the IAB Annual Leadership Meeting, “The leadership of the IAB has spoken out strongly on the issue of fake news, describing it as a ‘moral failure’ that the industry has a responsibility to address. There's a linear connection between fake news and those trolls of digital marketing and media: click fraud, fraudulent non-human traffic, consumer data breaches, privacy violations and the sources of ad-blocking.”

Each of those, he said, represented a failure of the supply chain, and fake news carried the same sort of costs as other supply chain failures, “it reminds our customers that there's something untrustworthy, even unsavoury, in all this complexity in which we traffic. Fake news is more than that; it represents a moral failure, as well. When all information becomes suspect – when it's not just an ad impression that may be fraudulent, but the data, news and science that undergird society itself – then we must take civic responsibility for our effect on the world.”

Legacy media houses are still trusted

In the fast few years, there has been much talk about the rise and benefits of social and digital media. According to Tess Sulaman in her article on BizCommunity, “It has been suggested that social media is the final nail in the coffin of traditional media. But perhaps the 'post-truth' era will bring traditional media back in the game through the backdoor A decline in trust of social media content will probably mean that we go back to relying on our traditional media houses as sources of reliable news, albeit occasionally delivered to us through social media platforms.”

Credibility is central to Afrikaans titles

Unlike native English speakers, Afrikaans speakers with a preference to read news in their mother tongue do not have a vast variety of news channels at their disposal. They rely on the integrity of Afrikaans editorial teams and journalists to bring them credible news.

Perhaps Afrikaans readers are the lucky ones, as they often have a committed and dedicated news verification team filtering their news for them. News brands such as Beeld, Rapport, Volksblad, Die Burger and their digital properties in the form of Netwerk24 and now NetNuus have a long, solid history of having built up trust amongst their audiences.

The established credibility and trustworthiness of these Ads24 titles filters down to advertisers in these publications. Afrikaans consumers, who make up the second biggest market in South Africa, are not only loyal readers of their chosen news brands, but they are loyal to brands that make the effort to win them over through quality Afrikaans adverts.

Truth will prevail

The truth will prevail. There will always be a central place in society for credible news brands and consumers will continue to support these media outlets – even if they have to pay to get quality content. Brand owners can play a big role, however, to ensure that credible media continues to not only survive, but also thrive.

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