

Marek Bekerman

Programme Leader in MA International Journalism University of Salford

Can Fake News busters replace editors?

Seasoned media professionals have tried to cool down political fever around Fake News by pointing out that it is not a new phenomenon. But there is growing consensus that it is taking place in a new “information ecosystem” driven by digital technology and novel distribution models. The news industry is no longer the preserve of journalists and editors but has become the playground for all thanks to the democratic nature of the Internet and the informational floodgate opened by social media. While the traditional “analogue” democracy takes time and effort to destabilise, its digital reflection in the virtual reality is being subjected to an unprecedented attack.

Much has been written about hybridisation of news and the blurring of lines between hard and soft stories. Those who generate Fake News exploit fully the growing amorphous nature of the information space by blending in hoaxes with scoops and breaking news with spoofs. Invariably, many discussions on how to tackle Fake News end up with calls for measures to protect quality journalism or for some forms of regulation. Enthusiasts of the fast-growing fact-checking industry want to see it as the way forward.

None of these approaches want to confront the root cause of why Fake News is such a malignant success. Complaints about falling journalistic standards dominate discussions amid calls for better professional training or media literacy courses in school curricula. But British audiences have been raised for generations on a diet of media outputs of extraordinary quality provided by robust public service broadcasting and are among the most sophisticated and demanding media consumers globally. Yet, they end up being victims of Fake News as well.

There is nothing wrong with British journalism, either. Thousands of UK media professionals and many British organisations train, advise and consult on journalism and the media worldwide. Recent scandals and failures such as the phone-hacking by the tabloids, however outrageous, are exceptions rather than a rule in comparison with journalistic standards and practices in numerous other countries.

The Western media is suffering from progressing destruction not of journalism as such, but of the editorial process. It is not only the most expensive aspect of generating quality media content, but also least convenient for internet giants and most troublesome for politicians. The public wants quality content but is no longer prepared to pay for this key safeguard of quality and trustworthiness. This pincer movement on the editorial office as we know it has resulted in thousands of redundancies across the UK as newsrooms digitise, integrate and consolidate. Experienced editors with unique, albeit non-digital skills are being replaced by tech-savvy individuals capable of fact-checking but not editing content in the true sense of the word.

By the time “content curation” as a replacement for *bona fide* editing process lost its novelty value the demolition job had been largely done. Mainstream media outlets squeezed by new business models struggle to maintain the semblance of proper editorial processes, but are no longer able to compete with the free-for-all distribution channels which can only be restrained by such giants as Facebook or Google. But it is a fallacy to expect them to reinstitute editorial procedures as we know them – they will always serve their business interests and rely on algorithmic and software solutions with an admixture of an editorial intervention based on their own discretion and lacking democratic accountability.

And what about fact-checking as the Wunderwaffe against Fake News? Once the Fake News item is out, the damage has been done, and we are only left with damage limitation measures. Fact-checking is precisely that: a reactive, or retroactive measure which paradoxically sometimes only boosts the impact of a Fake News story. Fake News busting is also self-limiting: it focuses minds on countering existing information and stories rather than creating new ones. It is equivalent to practicing journalism by negative definition and drags the media into harmful and destructive information wars and confrontational media culture based on the worst possible formula – binarism.

Presenting the world in binary values through Twitter-length mental shortcuts is a grave danger to Western democracy – a system based on understanding the truth as a negotiated process informed by the changing context. This is precisely what the editorial process is about. British professor of media ethics, Tim Crook, says the role of editor in British journalism should remain the pinnacle of professional journalistic achievement. The editorial process must not be left in the hands of multinational corporations and technology giants, if we do not want to depart from the guiding mottos such like “Comment is free but the facts are sacred” and slide into the Quixotic world where “the facts are the enemy of the truth”.

Biography: Marek Bekerman is Programme Leader for MA International Journalism at the University of Salford. He worked as broadcast journalist for BBC News for 21 years and spent 10 years on media development assignments in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. He is currently coordinating an FCO funded project on fact-checking and media literacy in Central Asia.