

## Transcript

### Is 'fake news' still a problem for society?

*Short film on 'Fighting Fake News'*

**Philip Seargeant:** Fake news was first coined in around 2015 or so and became particularly popular in 2016, specifically around the US presidential election and also around Brexit.

**Charlie Beckett:** Researchers discovered that there were millions of messages flying around on the Internet, now some of them were satirical.

There was also a lot of deliberate lying to get attention, perhaps for their point of view, but perhaps more importantly, trying to discredit other people's opinions.

**Philip Seargeant:** The term fake news has become problematic, mainly because people use it to mean different things.

So, if you're trying to use it in an analytic context, it's too vague.

There are basically three different ways in which the term fake news is used.

The first is false information that's presented as news.

The second is politicians using the term to deflect criticism from them.

And then the third use is to refer to the idea that the news media itself is in some way corrupt or biased to attack the news media and thus undermine its legitimacy.

**Charlie Beckett:** I try and avoid using the term fake news because it's become a term of abuse.

Some people, at least. Use it to mean any view or information that they disagree with or don't like, and so I prefer to use other words like misinformation or disinformation.

Or sometimes you can create so-called fake news by mistake, so you can misinform people. You might not know enough about something you give people just selected facts, and then there's disinformation where you are deliberately distorting the reality for your own ends.

**Angela Saini:** Right throughout history, the attraction of science to people who have political ideologies to sell, is that it feels objective.

When you can brandish science, you are not speaking from the heart, You're not giving your opinion, you're just giving fact and everyone has to just accept it, but in so many areas of science, including for example climate change or vaccinations, medical stuff.

There are dissenting voices, there are contradictory voices and that is how things get politicised. Politicians will find people who will fit in with whatever policy they want to introduce.

**Charlie Beckett:** Donald Trump is always a good study of misinformation.

Partly he's created it, for example, his casual suggestion that drinking bleach might help counter coronavirus.

On the other hand, he's also been in a sense, a victim of it.

Famously, he went to visit Japan, and there was a wonderful bit of video of him throwing a whole box of fish food into the cart pond like some sort of thug who didn't understand. But in fact he was imitating exactly what the Japanese Prime Minister had done literally seconds before.

**Angela Saini:** As Democratic as the Internet may appear, it is also constantly being manipulated and used by political actors, or well-funded organisations in order to push agendas of which we are not aware.

What may seem like your Mum or your friend sharing something innocuous about some health thing that they've seen, could well when you trace it back, have some roots in, some political ideology on the other end of the world.

**Charlie Beckett:** 20 years ago, if you wanted to find out something about the world you had to do it through mainstream media, now you have an absolute multiplicity of sources.

That means that journalists are having to compete in a world of information superfluity.

Now much of that information, or at least some of it includes what we call fake news and they have to be very careful that they don't get caught up in the Twitter storms or the sudden tsunami's of anger that you'll get across say, a platform like Facebook.

**Philip Seargeant:** One of the concerns about fake news is that it's used as a sort of propaganda, so it's used to deceive people, for particular political purposes. It's a very potent way of manipulating the population.

Another concept related to fake news is the conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are also based on false information.

They're a particular type of false information because they're based around a narrative which suggests that some centralised power of the government, whoever, are manipulating the people through secretive means.

**Quassim Cassam:** On the relationship between conspiracy theories and fake news, I think I'd say that they're closely related, but they're not the same.

A key element of the concept of fake news is that the people producing it don't themselves believe it. They realise that it is fake.

Now, if you think about an absolutely committed Sandy Hook or 911 conspiracy theorist, they're not putting it forward, because they're trying to misinform anybody or deceive anybody they're putting it forward because they think it's actually true.

**Angela Saini:** False scientific ideas or marginal outdated scientific ideas re-enter the mainstream, whether that's online or whether that's in academia, wherever it is, and nobody is immune from falling into these rabbit holes, it can happen to absolutely anyone.

The mechanisms by which that happens and how people get drawn into these things is so complex. And the people who spread misinformation and disinformation online are so smart they're really subtle in the way that they do it. They know exactly how to target people, and the Internet allows them to do that.

There's no doubt that there's an overlap between pseudoscience and conspiracy theories.

In fact, there are some pseudo-scientific conspiracies theories out there which are hugely popular and very often the ones that turn to pseudoscience or you know, some kind of marginal theory within the sciences, is we expect them to be people who are poorly educated or ignorant in some way, or maybe you know mentally imbalanced in some way.

That's very often not the case, it's often that they are well educated, quite smart, but very, very skeptical.

There's one thing they have in common, it's not any demographic but what they do share is a kind of mistrust of authority.

**Quassim Cassam:** The way that conspiracy theories relate to politics is very simple.

Conspiracy theories are political, they're theories that are politically motivated and that have political objectives.

A few years ago, there was a notorious shooting at an elementary school at Sandy Hook in Connecticut.

Conspiracy theories started to circulate, that the whole thing was a false flag that the kids who had been killed or supposedly been killed were actually actors, that no one died at Sandy Hook and the whole thing was put on by the Obama administration.

In an attempt to justify the policy of greater gun control. In fact, the people who were putting this theory forward were doing it because they had a political agenda, they could see that something like Sandy Hook would make people more supportive of the idea of greater gun control.

So what better way is there of deflecting calls for greater gun control than to say it never happened.

**Philip Seargeant:** Conspiracy theories tend to have a very similar ideology to each other and they're basically anti-establishment anti-institutional.

They see power as being illegitimately used to control the population. They usually simplify things in an exaggerated way, so everything has a very simple explanation.

Causality as a key issue, so things are always caused by something.

There's no sort of accident, no coincidence, everything has to have a cause, and usually that cause is the result of a human agent, so people are causing things to happen.

Which mark them out is different from the way that events actually happen, which are much more random, much more messy, much more complicated.

There are a couple of key reasons why fake news is an issue, why people are worried about it.

One is that from a political point of view, in a liberal democracy, the electorate make informed decisions based on reliable information.

So if the information is not reliable, if it's fake, fabricated or whatever, that undermines the power they have to make an informed decision and thus undermines what we understand as the democratic system.

**Quassim Cassam:** One thing that I think needs to be done in response to conspiracy theories and the growth of conspiracy theories is to actually educate people about these theories about what their

historical origins are and what their political agendas are, who benefits from their theories, what's in it for them.

**Yevgeny Kuklychev:** I work for first draft. We basically monitor the social media and various online spaces for various types of misinformation that could end up causing damage to society.

There is a number of ways that we've seen have been successful at reducing the volume of misinformation online.

In Taiwan for example, they have a very whole of society system which involves using fact checkers and using state regulators but also independent companies to come up with solutions to kind of reduce this noise.

One of the tools that we highly recommend is pre-bunking. It's when you see a data deficit or information deficit emerge, and the danger is that it would be filled by speculation or by false claims.

And we try and anticipate that and preempt it by making statements that are factually correct and by correcting those emerging narratives.

**Philip Seargeant:** Another issue is the way that fake news can cause problems in situations of national emergency.

So take for example the COVID pandemic. You need to have reliable information, trustworthy information, and if there's a lot of false information swirling around, that causes confusion and it undermines trustworthiness of institutions such as health organisations.

**Angela Saini:** So when you look at the map of anti VAX sentiment for example on social media so you can track social media tags and how these ideas spread, they will start in one place and slowly spread to other places in other countries.

And there is someone driving that that isn't just happening organically. There are political figures we know behind this. We know that Russian bots are the ones spreading some of this.

**Yevgeny Kuklychev:** I wouldn't say that Russia is the only agent of disinformation, I mean far from it, but I think the reason that Russia has been quite successful at it is partly because it has a sort of legacy infrastructure of disinformation that was there before the Internet emerged, and it was using the Western Liberties really, the press the Free Press that we have, the freedom of speech for people, including for people to say false things.

They were using that quite effectively to spread conspiracy theories that the main idea is to drive a wedge between Western societies and to polarise them further politically.

From Russia's point of view, whether or not the majority of the public would believe one claim or another was not as important as creating the heated debates and the kind of tensions that we've seen over the past four years.

And from that point of view, the media I think very late on, began to realise that in fact it's beginning to contribute more to the problem than to actually find solutions.

**Charlie Beckett:** For journalists, at least for good journalists, so called fake news is actually good news for them.

Because it offers the news industry a chance to differentiate itself from all the other rubbish that you might get on the Internet.

It gives journalists an opportunity to say no, you can trust us more.

We are better explaining the world than your cousin, who's on Facebook.

And so I think in that sense there's a political opportunity for journalists to show their public value.

**Angela Saini:** While I think it's valuable to have diverse opinions even at the most wacky ends, what we need to keep a mind of here, is that any risk to society as a whole is it going to cause any problems?

And if it is, then how do we draw these people out and the way we draw them out, at least, this is the approach that I take is through empathy and understanding, listening.

I think it's wise as citizens in the 21st century in an age in which the Internet is essentially a Wild West, to be as critical as possible always.

And I've certainly developed that sense myself, I really don't trust anything I read online these days and it takes many many checks, and a lot of reading around, and a lot of speaking to lots of experts before I'll fully believe anything.

**Charlie Beckett:** If you want to do something about improving the information environment, then really you should be looking at what the technology companies are doing and perhaps also asking yourself how do you behave when you're online.