

FREE PRESS

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RACISM

'We're not having it'

SUDDENLY A new campaign against media racism and xenophobia has taken off and won success against the UK national press and its persecution of migrants.

It was a response to the upsurge in racist attacks that followed the EU referendum that a social media campaign group was set up in August called Stop Funding Hate (SFH), initially to launch a petition to ask Virgin Media to stop advertising in the Sun. It got 40,000 signatures, the SFH campaign video got 5 million views, 150,000 shares and 80,000 likes. The Facebook page now has 176,000 likes and 58,000 Twitter followers.

Founder Richard Wilson says: "We were fed up with The Sun, Daily Express and Daily Mail constantly demonising migrants, so decided to try and do something about it by putting pressure on companies who advertise in those newspapers encouraging them to stop doing so."

Another petition asking the big supermarkets to stop advertising in The Daily Express got 7,500 signatures in its first three days.

But its biggest success was in ensuring that Lego, the Danish manufacturer of toy bricks, stopped advertising in the Daily Mail.

Responding to tweets from SFH, and a letter from a concerned parent on Facebook, Lego sent a message to SFH in October saying: "We have finished the agreement with the Daily Mail and are not planning any future promotional activity with the newspaper."

Reaction was overwhelmingly positive – a media coup for Lego as well – and now SFH has turned on the

middle-class darling store John Lewis. When the retailer released its much-hyped 2016 Christmas ad, the group responded with a glossy video of its own that contained footage of previous Christmas campaigns juxtaposed with the front pages of The Sun, Express and Mail.

The message was: the millions of pounds spent at Christmas go to fund advertising in newspapers that peddle fear, hostility and hatred. The parody video has had more than 6 million Facebook views.

John Lewis said it "fully appreciates the strength of feeling on this issue but we never make an editorial judgement on a particular newspaper". But a

number of its workers – "partners" in the co-operative – wrote to the store group's in-house magazine supporting the campaign and criticising the store's

hypocrisy. One wrote that even if managers don't make judgements, "customers do".

SFH enjoys the support of celebrities such as Lily Allen and Gary Lineker, who both made strong statements against the demonisation of migrants. TV football star Lineker has held talks with Walkers crisps, whose ads

he has fronted for years, about its advertising in the Sun, following his row with the newspaper over his views on the refugee crisis but no announcement had been made when Free Press went to press. (The Sun retaliated with a story that Lineker was being sacked by the BBC, which didn't happen.)

They're racist – it's official
TURN TO PAGE 2



No more plastic brick promotions in the Daily Mail



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FIGHT TO STOP THE DEATH OF NEWS
Local paper staff have had enough

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'FAKE SHEIKH' WAS FAKE REPORTER
Mahmood shielded for Murdoch profits

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PANIC OVER DODGY NEWS ONLINE
... as if the rest was all completely true

For all campaign news and info go to cpbf.org.uk
Email: freepress@cpbf.org.uk

RACISM

Official: Sun and Mail are branded as hate mongers

TABLOID NEWSPAPERS including The Sun and Daily Mail have come under fire for “hate speech” headlines that “encourage prejudice” in a report by a European human rights body.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), part of the Council of Europe, has raised concerns that “hate speech in some traditional media, particularly tabloid newspapers, continues to be a problem”.

In a report on the UK, the ECRI said “biased or ill-founded information ... that may contribute to perpetuating stereotypes” was still being disseminated by some sections of the British media. Tabloid newspapers were “responsible for most of the offensive, discriminatory and provocative terminology”.

The commission accused The Sun of publishing “inflammatory anti-Muslim headlines”, such as its front page “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” in November 2015 that featured the image of a masked terrorist with a knife.

In its report, the commission recommended that clause 12 of the editors’ code administered by IPSO, on discrimination, be amended to allow groups to submit complaints against biased or prejudicial reporting concerning their community. Currently the code is restricted to individuals.

It also called for British authorities to establish an independent press regulator according to the recommendations set out in the Leveson Report and recommended more “rigorous training” for journalists to ensure better compliance with ethical standards.



BROADCASTING

Last ditch fight for BBC funding

A REARGUARD action to save the BBC from bearing the cost of pensioners’ TV licenses is being mounted in Parliament, without the support of the corporation.

BBC bosses concluded a voluntary agreement with the new Conservative government last year to take over the cost of licences for the over-75s, estimated in the region of £1.3bn over five years.

The deal is part of the ten-yearly renegotiation of the BBC Charter due this year, and will mean that a fifth of its income will go on a welfare benefit that has always been a government responsibility.

The huge damage this would inflict on programming has prompted MPs to find ways of making the government think again.

One great regret has been that

the Charter settlement can be imposed by ministers without a vote in Parliament. But a group of BBC staffers worked out that another legislative measure might be used to overturn the move – via an amendment to the Digital Economy Bill going through Parliament.

The amendment enshrines in statute the responsibility of the government to determine the amount of the benefit and cover the cost. It was tabled by the Labour frontbench and co-signed by Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, SNP and the Green Party MPs.

Tory MP Sir Edward Leigh MP, a former chairman of the Public

Accounts Committee, said: “I don’t think it fair that the BBC pays this cost. It should be means tested as many over-75s can afford to pay for their licence-fees. If there is a cost, it should be for the taxpayer to pick up the bill. The BBC is not a welfare organisation, it a programme-making organisation.”

On November 28 the amendment was defeated in the Commons by 267 to 220, with only one rebel (Peter Bottomley) defying the Tory whip, and only the Democratic Unionist Party voting with the government.

But there are better prospects for the House of Lords, where the government needs the

Digital Economy Bill and Royal Charter to be completed before the Christmas recess. Peers have amendments prepared.

On top of this, Liberal Democrat peer Lord Lester is tabling a Private Bill to provide statutory underpinning to the BBC Charter itself. This will require that any major changes to BBC funding, governance and regulation are subject to parliamentary approval, rather than driven through by the Secretary of State at the culture department.

The gravity of the crisis facing the BBC was underlined in an earlier Lords’ debate on the BBC. Former Director General, Lord Birt, warned that cumulative raids on BBC revenue – and now the cost of the over 75s’ licences – mean that a “massive reduction of programming is simply unavoidable”.





Picket line outside the Newsquest office in Sutton, south London

LOCAL PRESS

Journalists at a newspaper group in south London are staging strikes for the very future of the industry. After 20 years of job cuts that have savaged the local press to maintain the profit margins of the Big Media chains, the Newsquest south London NUJ staff are saying ‘enough!’

A line in the sand

By a Newsquest striker

THE STAGGERING level of cuts that Newsquest has forced on its south London titles has taken our newspapers almost to the brink of destruction, but we the staff are determined to continue fighting back.

Job cuts were announced at the start of September in an already under-staffed newsroom, following a recruitment freeze implemented in May. One deputy managing editor, five content editors, four reporters and an editorial assistant were to go, plus a contract with outside photographers – the papers have none of their own.

A newsroom which just a year ago was struggling to continue with 38 members of staff was told to carry on with just 18 – to produce 11 weekly titles!

The NUJ chapel disputed the logic behind the cuts and the new structure that would see just one content editor in charge of the whole of south east and south west London. We were openly told that the new structure wasn't sustainable, and that the quality of the papers would plummet, but we were also told that the company didn't care.

Despite our best efforts, and even talks at ACAS, all attempts at negotiation were flatly refused. To Newsquest, editorial has become nothing more than “information next to the adverts”.

Reporters will lose the patches they care about and have worked hard for. They would be reduced to rewriting press releases and not covering any legal or political stories; any concept of journalism to uphold local democracy should be forgotten.

The company's target is an overhead cost



of £50 a page: every newspaper page printed must cost a limit £50, which covers essentially everything bar the lease of the building.

Newsquest's plan is to enforce this target nationwide – beginning with us.

To the £50-per-page model the quality doesn't matter, and nor does the fact we happen to be based in an expensive part of the country.

Our chapel is young and inexperienced, but we are all passionate about the papers we work on and the communities we serve. If management had ever taken the time to speak to us, they would have realised that we would not be the pushovers they had bargained for.

We unanimously voted for a week-long strike and were so overwhelmed by the generous donations of colleagues and groups around the country that we were able to continue for another week.

When we came back we followed a strict work to rule. So many reporters resigned in protest at the cuts that our office has been

staffed by just nine trainee reporters for most of this period. The most senior reporter left has been employed for just 18 months.

The newspapers have shrunk dramatically. Mistakes are regularly made, and new trainee reporters are told to upload copy straight online without anyone else seeing it. Stories are repeated week after week, and the group is now asking readers to write and submit their own stories straight into the system.

We are criticised if we try to attend court and spend much of the time answering calls from angry readers. Production staff are being forced to write leisure and sport copy on top of their normal jobs for no extra pay – and no one has even been told what time off, if any, they can have over Christmas.

We refuse to accept that this is the way to run a company. Management may openly tell us that our jobs don't matter, but the outpouring of anger and disappointment from the communities who love their local papers is telling us the opposite, and saying it far louder.

We are keeping our fight to save local newspapers, because it is not just our newspapers we are fighting for.



Newsquest is the UK's second largest publisher of regional and local newspapers with 205 titles (“brands” they call them). Profits last year were £70 million or 25 per cent on a £280 million turnover. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of the American media group Gannett Company.

It was the worst of media crimes

FOR 25 YEARS it was fine to lie and cheat, to target harmless people and put them behind bars, as long the money you made was going to Rupert Murdoch.

While others working for Murdoch's London newspapers endured arrest and trial and in some cases prison; while the company itself, News Corporation, came to the brink of corporate prosecution and lost all its senior bosses; and while the very newspaper industry was rocked by the most severe crisis in its history, it was "carry on conning people" for Mazher Mahmood.

And while using underhand means to expose real criminality is firmly in the public interest, their use to entrap the innocent but gullible and set them up for prison sentences is not.

But Mazher Mahmood, who relished his tawdry persona as a "fake sheikh", was protected by the same corrupt combination that kept the criminality of phone-hacking under wraps for so long: the national press and the Metropolitan Police.

Phone-hacking was a diabolical intrusion into people's lives, but it didn't criminalise them. The people who were jailed in the aftermath of that affair were the confidential sources sacrificed by newspaper bosses, who handed their identities over to police to save their own skins.

All it cost News Corporation was an enormous amount of money -- £300 million at a recent estimate -- but the exploits of Mazher Mahmood could cost them even more. Lawyers are salivating at the prospect, with more than 40 civil cases already prepared on behalf of the fake sheikh's hapless victims and a claim from solicitor Mark Lewis that the damages could top £800 million. News UK, as the company rebranded itself, says it will "vigorously defend" the cases.

Certainly they never spared expense when it came to Mahmood, who could splash out endlessly not just on silly costumes and a luxury lifestyle but fake venues and websites, bribes and criminal informants. He was a little industry, and led a charmed life in the company.

Forced out of the Sunday Times for messing with the computer to cover up a mistake in 1988, he went to the News of the World where he began to mint money for Murdoch. When the NoW was shut down in 2011 at the height of the hacking scandal nearly all the staff were sacked, but not Mahmood, who was found a safe berth back at the Sunday Times, much to the reported annoyance of its journalists.

When the Sun on Sunday was launched, he moved again and there directed the sting that led to his downfall: the entrapment of pop singer Tulisa Contostavlos into supplying him

The downfall of the one-time News of the World 'Fake Sheikh' is mighty retribution against Rupert Murdoch and the rottenness of his London newspapers. **TIM GOPSILL** recounts why it took so long

with cocaine. Like dozens before her she was prosecuted by compliant police, but the trial collapsed when Mahmood was shown to have tampered with the evidence.

News UK suspended him on full pay and paid for his defence when he himself faced trial, for conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. He was sentenced to 15 months.

As with the phone-hackers, he has been protected not just by the Murdoch papers but the whole popular press, who cranked up the supposed mystique of the "fake sheikh". There was a bizarre taboo on any publication of images of his face, as if he was a state secret agent. No-one dared break the spell.

Even Lord Leveson, when Mahmood was summoned to give evidence to his inquiry, allowed him to sit behind a screen. Why? If he was such a master of disguise, then his victims, reportedly thirsting for bloody revenge, wouldn't recognise him would they?

When the BBC was producing a Panorama programme on his case, he sought an injunction

against the use of footage of his appearance. The Attorney General's office wrote to advise the BBC "to consider whether it is in the public interest for the BBC to broadcast a programme at this time. The proposed broadcast may have the potential to prejudice any trial, should Mr Mahmood be charged." The programme did go ahead, and so of course did the trial.

The BBC's lawyer in the case made the observation that Mahmood was seeking to preserve, not his identity, but his livelihood. The whole charade was of course to protect, not Mahmood's visage, but Murdoch's profits.

"The self-styled Fake Sheikh was in fact a fake journalist", wrote the one national colleague who did try to nail him. Just as the Guardian's Nick Davies doggedly pursued the phone hackers, so did the same paper's media blogger Roy Greenslade, who had worked with him on the Sunday Times, maintain a lone crusade against Mahmood.

"He invented stories," Greenslade wrote, "and induced people to commit crimes they would never have done without his encouragement. Some were fragile, especially the immigrants who formed so many of his targets. Some were offered disproportionate inducements."

THE POLICE were heavily into Mahmood's operation. He served up convictions on a plate, creating the crimes and delivering the evidence. With spectacular cases, he would invite them along to swoop for the cameras on a Saturday afternoon, in time for the NoW's deadline.

Such was the strange story of the plot to kidnap Victoria Beckham. Five men had been inveigled by an agent-provocateur called Florim Gashi who organised a perfunctory "casing" of the Beckhams' home, where they found themselves dramatically nicked at the gates. Gashi -- an asylum seeker from Kosovo who has since been deported -- worked for Mahmood, who paid him £10,684 for the job.

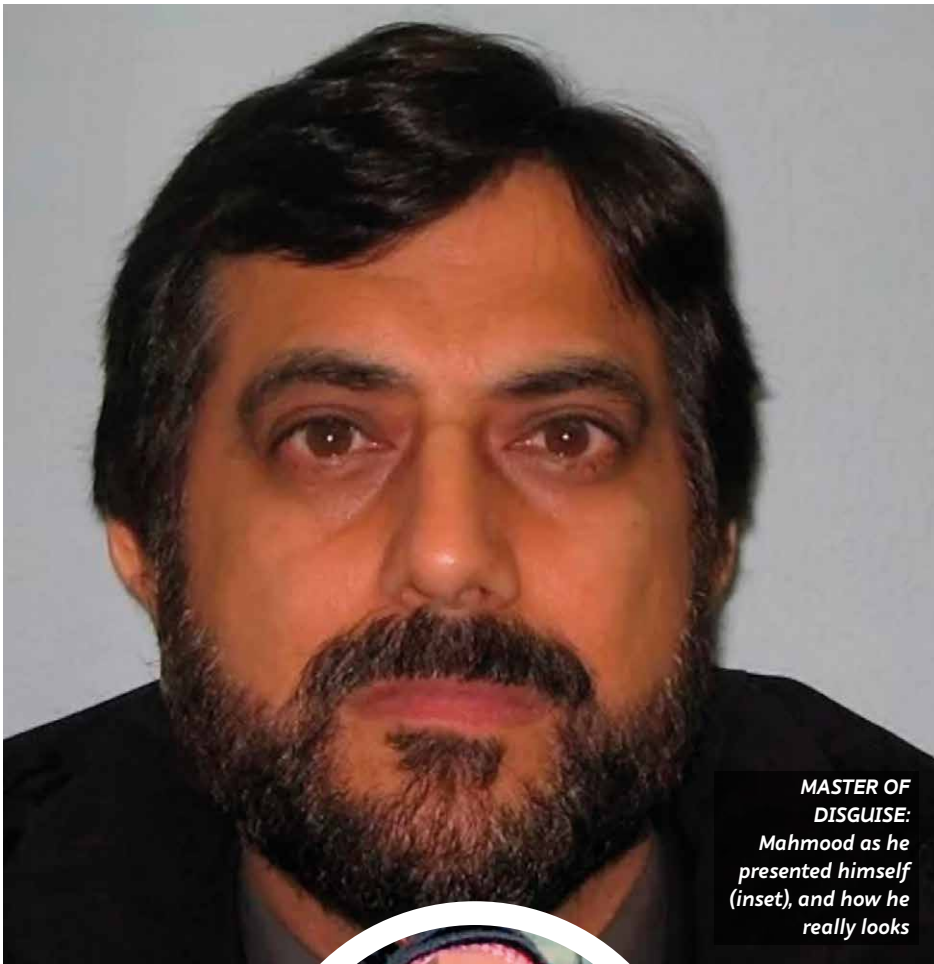
The case collapsed in court and the judge referred it to the attorney general as a possible contempt of court. The attorney cleared the paper. The Press Complaints Commission staged its own inquiry, which to nobody's surprise at all

£25m MIGHT JUST COVER IT

AS THE QUEUE forms to extract money from News UK over Mahmood's stings, first place has been grabbed by Sarah Ferguson, one-time Duchess of York, who wants £25 million for lost earnings due to damage to her reputation.

In one of Mahmood's stories that genuinely served the public interest, she was allegedly tricked into offering to introduce him to her former husband Prince Andrew for £500,000. Ferguson is seeking an additional undisclosed sum for "distress".





MASTER OF DISGUISE:
Mahmood as he presented himself (inset), and how he really looks

exonerated the NoW.

The legal alarm was raised time and again. In 1999 the jury at the trial of the Earl of Hardwicke on a drugs charge sent the judge a note saying: "Had we been allowed to take the extreme provocation into account, we would undoubtedly have reached a different verdict." Nothing came of it. On other occasions, of course, juries did manage to acquit.

In 2005, because of concerns, the Met conducted a review of Mahmood's cases. It was led by Robert Quick, a senior officer in the anti-corruption command. A source told Greenslade that detectives interviewed Mahmood who told them he had "bent officers" as informants, but police decided there was insufficient evidence to prosecute.

The source added: "Quick said he had 'concerns that the relationships were improper' between the top echelons of Scotland Yard and the NoW. He had proposed investigating the NoW in 2000 but this had been 'blocked from above.'"

The most astoundingly missed opportunity to put a stop to Mahmood's game came in 2006 when, once again, a case was handed to them on a plate. None other than Florim Gashi decided to come clean and offer evidence to the police. He later told Greenslade: "I am responsible for innocent people going to jail. I tricked them, and I'm ashamed. It's time to tell the truth."

As well as the Beckham affair he confessed that the much-vaunted story of a "child for

sale" was also faked. An 18-year-old woman had supposedly offered to sell her two-year-old daughter to Mahmood for £15,000, but Gashi said: "I got her boyfriend to persuade her to do it. She didn't know what was happening. She was a good mother and I regret being involved."

In another case, in 2005, an Albanian immigrant, Besnik Qema, was convicted for obtaining cocaine and forged identity documents on behalf of a woman who contacted him through an Albanian-language chatroom. The "woman" was Gashi. Qema spent five years in jail before a lawyer took up his case, which was referred it back to the court where the prosecutors offered no evidence and the conviction was quashed. No action was taken against Mahmood.

Again, after interviewing Gashi, police concluded there was insufficient evidence to substantiate his allegations.

But now there are plenty of cases ripe for overturning. The Crown Prosecution Service has already dropped a number of live cases and reviewed 25 past convictions. Eight of those involving mainly high-profile individuals have been taken up by the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

As Roy Greenslade has written: "If other journalists, and most especially the police, had taken notice ten years ago, a lot of innocent people would have been spared from Mahmood's brand of journalism."

NOW THERE MUST BE A LEVESON PROBE

AFTER MAZHER Mahmood was jailed, a number of his victims gathered outside the Old Bailey in London to demand that his activities be investigated by the Leveson Inquiry.

A second stage of the sensational inquiry into the practice and ethics of the press was postponed in 2013 because of impending trials into phone-hacking and the bribery of public officials. Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to resume stage 2 - an examination of law-breaking and improper conduct within media organisations and whether police were complicit - when the trials were over.

The last cases concluded in the summer, but government has shown no inclination to put that into effect.

Former TV actor John Alford, whose case is among those being taken up by the Criminal Cases Review Commission, said: "It's taken over 20 years for some of us, but finally a judge and a jury of our peers has woken up to Mazher Mahmood's lies.

"We would now like to ask Parliament to honour their promise to the British people and implement Leveson part two."

The victims were backed up by the former senior Metropolitan Police officer Robert Quick, the one-time head of counter-terrorism at Scotland Yard, whose investigation into Mahmood's methods in 2005 was closed down by Met chiefs. He said that "clearly there is a strong case" for holding the second part of the inquiry".

The campaign group Hacked Off, formed in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal, said: "Given the number of appeals against convictions secured on the basis of the evidence of this convicted liar, the need for the second part of the Leveson Inquiry - which would include looking at the relationship between the press and the police - is overwhelmingly clear."

LEVESON law on regulation must be implemented too **TURN TO PAGE 8**

When was it ever

The election of Donald Trump led to a great panic in the USA about 'fake news'. Viral false stories about the candidates originating from specially set up websites spread like fire through social media which were blamed for the shocking outcome, whether they influenced it or not.

Even in the USA, you might have thought, people will vote for more substantial reasons than gossip.

Similar anguish was heard among the political class in the UK, where media were blamed for reporting the wild claims of prominent 'leave' campaigners after the EU referendum.

Casting around for others to blame for the collapse in the public's confidence in them, they are calling it 'post-truth politics'. Anyone would think that neither media nor politicians had ever lied before.

Sure there is a problem, though it's not the politicians who are suffering it but the public, cheated out of half decent news by rich, bloated, complacent Big Media corporations that have abandoned their democratic duty to keep proper check on the politicians ... and are blaming social media!



GARY HERMAN locates the sources of the fake stories in the US and concludes that social media are never likely to change

THE COUNTRY Donald Trump will begin to govern in 2017 bears the name of a fraudulent explorer whose fake records of his adventures on the far side of the Atlantic were picked up by an early cartographer with an eye for a marketing opportunity.

Amerigo Vespucci's name went down in history, not because of his achievements, but because of the stories he invented about himself.

Post-truth politics has been with us for a long time.

After the brouhaha, we can see Boris Johnson's referendum porkies and Trump's ludicrous promises for what they were. But the media seem once to have held politicians to account.

Today, budget cuts, 24-hour news, political agendas, opinion and entertainment masquerading as fact, and an increasing reliance on content generated by the public and PR machines have helped undermine traditional news values and the practice of following them.

Fakery is seen as a phenomenon of social media but all the media have been complicit in creating it. All the media reported Johnson and friends with straight faces, never questioning even the plausibility, much less the truth, of their claims.

All the media promulgated the rumours and fantasy policies that constituted—in the absence of any actual experience or qualifications—Trump's application for the position of President.

But social media may well have started the fake news explosion. Possibly it began with the arrival of "citizen journalism" over a decade ago, when digital technology opened up news production to anyone with a mobile phone, and the mainstream media embraced it as a means of acquiring cheap and popular copy.

The result was a flood of intemperate blogs and posts, and the occasional well-documented hoax.

Things now seem so bad, and conventional news channels so impoverished, that Facebook is within spitting distance of becoming America's major source of news.

The Pew Research Center says 66 per cent of US adults use Facebook as a news source. And Facebook is central to the way fake news happens.

Facebook uses computer algorithms to select news posts from feeds supplied by a range of sources, which often lack independently verified credibility. Many of these sources will be the websites used to create rumours in the first place.

In the Trump case, the process involved a variety of pop-up websites with names like WorldPoliticus.com, TrumpVision365.com, and USConservativeToday.com. These are "clickbait" sites, enticing people to click on links using eye-catching headlines and images.

According to one person who worked on clickbait sites, writing anonymously on the Guardian website: "Most [clickbait sites] rely heavily on Facebook." Their object may be to generate revenue by enticing people to click on links that end up on pages with ads. The sites I've investigated are aimed specifically and exclusively at promoting rumour and fake news on Facebook (and Twitter).

The network of pro-Trump websites and Facebook pages, like USA Newsflash, USA Daily Politics and MediaZone News, are all linked and endlessly circulating the same rumours and fake news in what has been described as "the echo-chambers of electronic gossip".

It is often possible to detect a fake website because of its amateurish design, its poor grammar, its tendency to overuse upper case and exclamation marks, and the fact that it will may well use the off-the-shelf

Social media have no culture of journalism nor any understanding of journalistic ethics

WordPress templates.

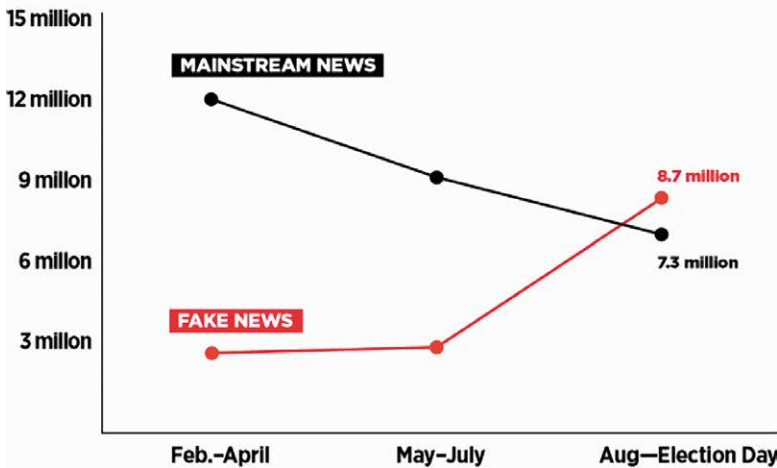
But the link to Facebook can help build trust in content. Once inside what one writer has described as "Facebook's walled garden", which removes the context of a post making them all look alike, it becomes harder to distinguish truth from rumour and lie.

You could be pretty sure that a story headlined "BREAKING: TRUMP JUST MADE FIRST MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENT AS PRESIDENT" was fake because it was dated 14 November 2016 in its earliest (but by no means its only) appearance, on the americanreviewer.com website.

The capitals and use of the word "BREAKING" are signs, and it's a simple matter to use a search engine to identify the sites featuring the same story. Here are a few of them: nationalinsiderpolitics.com, departed.com, nbcpoll.com, lockerdome.com, rightforever.com, conservativefighters.com,

all true?

Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories



BUZZSUMO

Graphic from Buzzfeed shows more clicks for fake than for 'real' stories in US election

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO

usnewsflash.com, endingthefed.com.

Most of these sites are only intended to send stories to popular Facebook pages read by right wingers, racists, creationists and capital punishment enthusiasts. Many of them have only existed for a few months. A programme of creating pro-Trump sites to share lies and rumours was part of his campaign from at least January 2016.

The internet companies are eager to express concern. Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, recently admitted that there is a problem with fake news. "We take misinformation seriously," Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page. "We know people want accurate information."

Google's CEO, Sundar Pichai, has admitted that fake news stories could have had an impact on the US election. "At Google we have always cared about bringing the most relevant, the most accurate results to users," he told the BBC, "and that is where almost all of our work goes at the end of the day."

But the problem is that social media platforms have no culture of journalism or any understanding of journalism ethics.

Yet they are publishing something that looks like news. They rely on automated processes to do things that, as yet, can only be done reliably by experienced and trained human beings, and they do not want to invest in the human capital necessary to ensure that fake news is not allowed to run rampant.

Producing trustworthy news is vital to the health of democracy and our political lives, and democratic governments have responsibilities in the matter to establish an independent system of oversight for news sources; and at the same time to protect public service news providers from the commercial market as well.

This makes the involvement of government

■ A WIDELY shared story used a picture of younger Donald Trump with a quote he reportedly gave a magazine 20 years ago: "I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They're the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'd still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific." Trump never said that.



■ A STORY in the Denver Guardian in the US claimed that an FBI agent investigating Hillary Clinton had been killed in a house fire in Colorado. It prompted the Denver Post - a real newspaper -- to explain that there is no such paper as the Denver Guardian. Its listed address was a car park.



Satire: is it also false?

CALLS TO clean up "fake news" are leading to a new panic – that measures taken by the internet giants might censor such deliberately false "news" as satire. Stories on satirical sites are obviously untrue, and how do they differ from disinformation stories?

Google and Facebook have promised reforms to the way they approach fake news, by tinkering with their algorithms, improving the ability to classify misinformation, allowing easier reporting of false content and marking it with warning flags. Could these lead to mickey-taking material being suppressed?

According to the Media Briefing, the satire sites don't seem to be worried, because the source of their stories is clear and they are confident they won't be tagged as misleading. In fact, they would like to see a "satire" tag adopted to emphasise the difference.

Facebook has trialed such a tag but not rolled it out. Richard Smith, managing editor at Newsthump, said: "There is no reason why they couldn't extend that functionality, and add a similar 'fake news' tag to sites known for such content. I certainly wouldn't have an issue with that." He says the difference is that "we want people laughing with us, not outraged".

John O'Farrell, editor of NewsBiscuit ("the news before it happens"), said: "When NewsBiscuit says 'Lego Refuses to Build Trump's Wall' – it's not true but it's not misleading either; it's informative because what is obviously a joke says something deeper about how ridiculous Trump's plans for a wall are."

At the Daily Mash, Editor-in-Chief Neil Rafferty believes that a satire label on Facebook would help address the issue and "differentiate between ourselves and the liars". He is positive about satire not getting caught up in the clampdown. "As long as we are doing our job properly we don't see it becoming a big deal."

Trust: the tabs do even worse

FACEBOOK IS a more trusted news source than the Sun or Daily Star, according to the BBC's 2016 survey into media impartiality.

In the annual exercise, Opinion pollsters Ipsos MORI asked 1,864 adult to rank major sources by trustworthiness and impartiality and totted up the scores. Top, as is always the case, was BBC News itself, trusted by 7.4 per cent, followed by ITV (6.6 per cent) and Channel 4 News (6.2 per cent).

Below the national broadcasters came, in rough order, the "broadsheet" newspapers, then the news websites, then the tabloids.

Bottom were The Sun (3.5 per cent) and the Daily Star (3.6), while the Daily Mail was trusted by 4.1 per cent. Of the big online sources, Facebook and Twitter both scored 3.9 per cent while Google News did better on 5.2 per cent. Sky News, Five News (both 5.5) and Al Jazeera (4.7) were judged to be less impartial than the other broadcasters.

ANYTHING to stop an independent arbiter

THE LONG RUNNING saga of establishing an independent regulator for the newspaper industry formally ended in October when the government-appointed Press Recognition Panel (PRP) announced that Impress had met the criteria set by Lord Leveson in his 2012 report.

But it's not the end of the story, as national newspaper bosses, who threw every obstacle they could lay their hands on in Impress's path, have launched a judicial challenge to the PRP's decision.

The move gives them time to pile the pressure on culture secretary Karen Bradley to block the legal move that could, potentially, heavily penalise publishers who failed to register with a recognised regulator. The move – Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Bill 2013 – could lead to publishers having to pay the legal costs of parties suing them, even if they won.

Even though the decision of Parliament in 2013 was uncontentious and perfectly clear, it required a further decision whenever a regulator was authorised. And Bradley succumbed to the owners' pressure and declined to trigger Section 40.

Instead she announced a further 10-week "consultation" – over something already voted into law – leaving an open door for the publishers to push at.



The publishers' front organisation, the News Media Association (NMA), then launched its judicial review against the PRP. It said Impress "falls short of the recognition criteria in a number of material respects which are not capable of cure".

As part of its exhaustive preparations Impress set up an intricate funding system to meet the requirements that its funders must be completely independent of the regulator, which itself must be able to guarantee its long term viability.

The source of most of the funding, however, is a charitable trust set up by the family of

IPSO is financed and totally controlled by powerful interests in the industry

Max Mosley, the wealthy motor racing tycoon whom the press believe is bent on revenge for a sensationally intrusive story on his private life published by the News of the World in 2008.

Mosley himself finances the pressure group Hacked Off, which certainly does campaign against the national press; but the funding structure has been approved by the PRP as sufficient to ensure Impress's total independence from the trust.

But the NMA said the arrangement "effectively gives Mr Mosley a monopoly over the



funding arrangements of Impress. The funding of Impress cannot reasonably be said to be independent."

The association also said that Impress is "unable effectively to regulate the press" because of its small membership of UK news publishers, the majority of whom are signed up to another regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

IPSO is openly financed by and totally controlled by powerful interests in the industry and makes no serious pretence at independence. Most publishers are members precisely because they know it will never rigorously police them.

It has never applied for recognition by the PRP, acknowledging that it could not possibly meet the criteria for independence. Yet it has no compunction in judging others by standards it disdains to meet itself.

And its masters in the national papers boardrooms are confident that Karen Bradley will never activate the clause that could make their defiance of independent regulation self-defeating.

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