

Safrea unravels the fake news phenomenon

 By Leigh Andrews

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Fake news, post-truths, alternative facts - call it what you will, there's a definite need to cut through the clutter of bias, opinion and untruths getting published as hard news. Here's what Herman Wasserman, professor of media studies at UCT and Lauren Green, senior analyst at BrandsEye mentioned at Safrea Cape Town's recent fake news event.

The month kicked off with news of an international alliance set to [combat the spread of fake news](#) and improve public understanding of journalism across the globe.

It's a positive step as fake news is simply everywhere these days, especially online where there are fewer gatekeepers than before. This means anyone can publish 'news' at the click of a button, spreading misinformation and damaging the credibility of the publishing industry overall.



That's why there's a strong local move against fake news too – at 6pm on 23 March, the South African Freelancers' Association (Safrea) Cape Town hosted a fake news event. On the night, speakers Wasserman and Green discussed the rise of fake news in South Africa and abroad, and how media professionals can buck the trend.

Wasserman's main points are summarised below...



Herman Wasserman, professor of media studies at UCT.

"We're living in a 'post-truth era', where public opinion is shaped by ideas that appeal to emotion and personal belief rather than objective facts. The media ecology has changed with a move to online commercial media, cutbacks to investigative journalism, the sharing economy and the 'filter bubbles' we find ourselves in – confirmation bias. Fake news plays into these fears, biases and preconceptions."

On the point of what consumers can do to ensure they're linking to credible online news sources, Wasserman recommends making use of fact-checking services and platform tagging through Google and Facebook. We also need **greater media literacy** in terms of learning how to spot fake sites, and a rising trend amongst users as creators and curators to take responsibility and think before sharing. Doing so will strengthen links between journalists and audiences in doing what fake news producers won't – investigate, analyse,

contextualise, research and connect not only facts, but truths that resonate.

I also chatted to Green post-event...



Lauren Green, senior analyst at BrandsEye.

■ ***Talk us through the current scourge of fake news. What has led to this, and what's the result on reliable publishers, advertisers and readers alike?***

There are important distinctions to be made within the holdall category of 'fake news'. There is no doubt of the increase in explicitly fake news based on content lacking veracity but we also have, for example Donald Trump lambasting the media who disagree with him as being 'fake news'.

“ White House Correspondents Dinner will be full of lying Neocon hacks, ignorant morons & [#FakeNews](#) propagandists pic.twitter.com/hoSycwGBza— Ian56 (@Ian56789) April 11, 2017 ”

Media bias is something that has always existed in subtle ways – more recently we've seen the rise of a so-called 'alternative online press', whose bias is significantly more explicit (i.e. [Breitbart](#)). Also, within the context of fake news, there should be a distinction between highly sensationalised 'click bait' news and content that aims to shift political or social discourse.

Social media has obviously led to an increase in the dissemination of this content – it's no longer limited to face-to-face interaction or dark corners of the web. There is also the added legitimacy of stories being shared by respected authors, close friends or acquaintances. Actor James Woods, for example, tweeted a lot about voter fraud during the US election.

What we saw when we analysed the reaction to a fake story about Hilary Clinton being endorsed by an Isis leader is that fake news can have real traction. Through our crowdsourced analysis we found that 87% of the authors who shared this article believed it to be true. In what appears to be **confirmation bias** in action, the motive for sharing fake news was that it bolstered their reasons for distrusting the candidate. When the FBI announced that no wrongdoing had been found within the email scandal, this story received very little traction.

Simply lumping all these categories together may be a reason for citizen confusion and in this context of blurred boundaries, it may be that citizens themselves are not making distinctions between bias or content that contests their world view, alternative online press and explicitly fake content. This obviously has the possibility of seeding distrust of any news source.

📌 **Definitely. What's the difference between fake news that originates in SA to the rest of the world then?**

The SA online news sites producing fake content with sensationalist headlines, e.g. "On his first day in office, Donald Trump said he will arrest Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe and SIX other African leaders before the end of February."

Or there's, "South Africa offers Khama Billiat, Tendai Ndoro and others permanent residency so they can play for Bafana Bafana." These seem only to be aiming at clickbait. These sites produce a mixture of fake and true stories, more often than not accompanied by incredibly sensationalist headlines. We don't seem to have a prevalence of hyperpartisan sites as in the US and elsewhere in the world.

South Africa's fake news disseminated through social media, particularly through Twitter, appears to be politically motivated. Our analysis on the "[paid Twitter](#)" phenomenon has shown that there is a clear attempt to undermine the treasury and defend the Guptas.

📌 **How can we each do our part to squeeze out fake news?**

The first rule is for people to never share articles they haven't read in full! Also, if citizens are reading from an unfamiliar source they should do their best to investigate the source. If an article seems too outrageous to be true, consumers should first check what other credible news sources have followed the story.

Hopefully we don't see the kind of confirmation bias we saw in the US, which allows fake stories to travel far further than they should. But as the conversations around fake news and media bias become more commonplace, hopefully consumers will become more discerning. Africa Check has created a [great guide](#) on this.

Seems it's up to everyone to get things back to a clear moral, ethical standpoint. Don't believe everything you read...

[Click here](#) for more from BrandsEye on fake news and [click here](#) for more from Safrea, which regularly holds free events for its members.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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