**An era of fake news?**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-04-05

THE danger that misleading or false information poses to society has been grimly demonstrated during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the deadly threat from the virus, many people`s response across the world has of ten been shaped by misinformation fed through digital platforms. This has either made them trivialise the disease or resort to `cures` without any basis in science and only because they were circulated in social messaging as a `remedy`.  
  
Vaccine hesitancy in many parts of the world has also largely been driven by rumour and conspiracy theories.  
  
This prompted the World Health Organisation early in the pandemic to coin the term `infodemic` to refer to the flood of information and exponential spread of fabricated content. The head of WHO, Tedros Adhanom, declared: `We`re not just battling the virus, we`re also battling the trolls and conspiracy theorists that push misinformation and undermine the outbreak response.` Top UN officials repeatedly warned of the grave social and health ramifications of the proliferation of misinformation and underlined the need to immunise the public against f alse news.  
  
While the global health crisis has seen a stream of false stories the realityis that fake news is all around us today. This presents new challenges to social stability in what has been called the post-truth era, a term that emerged a few years ago. It refers to a phenomenon, itself not new, that is generally described as one where facts are discarded and criteria for establishing the truth are contested. Instead, there is a prevalence of views that only align with people`s per sonal pre dilections or emotions.  
  
Why has fake news become so common today? Is it really so new? What explains its pervasiveness now? How damaging are the ramifications of a postfacts environment? Fake news is of course not new. Fabrications and untruths have always been around. So have efforts to manipulate the truth. Fact fudging has antecedents in propaganda, long use d to manipulate opinion for political aims. Propaganda comprising deceptive narratives has usually been deployed by states or political leaders and aimed at enemies abroad or opponents at home. Disinformation has been used by countries against adversaries throughout history.What distinguishes fake news from propaganda is that individuals and non-state actors are now using it with abandon in the digital age. This makes it unprecedentedly pervasive.  
  
Its more pronounced nature means that in its current form false news is a more recent phenomenon.  
  
It has been widely noted that it was after the Brexit vote and president Donald Trump`s 2016 election win that debate and concern emerged about the political and ethical implications of these events in which misinformation is commonly believed to have played a role in influencing voters. What then came to be called post-factual politics was described as involving deliberately disseminated f alsehoods that misguided the debate and misled people.  
  
What explains the omnipresence of fake news today? It is generally agreed that this has much to do with the proliferation of information channels and expansion of social media in the digital era.  
  
Communication technology now dominates our lives like never before. Online platforms are widely regarded as the main vehicles for the spread of misinformation. Fake news easily circulates due to the magnifying power of social media and becomes viral in this mostly unregulated environment.  
  
Anonymity on social media platforms gives the purveyors of false stories and trolls the comfort that they will not be held accountable for the lies or hate messages they disseminate. Anyone can post fake news on social media without fear of retribution.  
  
Facebook and Twitter have been the object of mounting global criticism for this reason. Despite the raging controversy over their role, social media giants who wield immense power have yet to undertake ef fective self-regulation. A Unesco report notes that steps taken are at best `patchy`. As Timothy Garton Ash once wrote in The Guardian, these digital platforms have become `unprecedentedly powerful amplifiers of lies` and `the profit motive pushes them towards the dark side, via algorithmic maximization of the currency of attention`. In fact, their business model prevents them from instituting real checks on divisive content and `digital wildfires`.  
  
The spread of fake news has also been linked to the rise of populist leaders who feel no compunction in knowingly selling fact-free narratives. Trumpperfected the politics of lies. He consciously used `alternative facts` and manipulated opinion by espousing conspiracy theories and fabricating threats to further his political career. But he wasn`t alone. Demagogues and their followers across the world have employed similar means for political gain, playing on people`s vulnerabilities by communicating f alsehoods.  
  
A plausible connection has also been made between the prevalence of fake news and political polarisation. This is because in polarised society and politics people choose to believe what their partisan side transmits or what accords with their own views. They only listen to news media or follow online sites which echo their own bias. Living in information or digital`bubbles` makes them susceptible to anything disseminated by their chosen information channel, true or false.  
  
The harmful repercussions of the fake news phenomenon are manifold. An environment where truth is blurred can have f ar-reaching consequences misleading people, damaging social cohesion by eroding a sense of shared interest, debasing politics, undermining civic obligations, and even sowing public disorder.  
  
Also, as president Barack Obama once famously remarked `fake news is a threat to democracy`.  
  
When political debate is degraded by falsehoods and bereft of reason, democracy is jeapardised. By playing off and reinforcing polarisation, narratives based on untruths that demonise `the other` corrode a sense of community and are deeply divisive. Trust also declines in public institutions as misleading information often sows doubts and cynicism. The pernicious effects of hate speech, harassment, online extremism and lies spread against minorities need no elaboration.  
  
How these dangers can be mitigated is an imposing challenge of our times. Solutions offered range from greater online regulation, increased monitoring and oversight by social media companies to removing toxic content and ending user anonymity.  
  
How effective they can be remains to be seen.  
  
Regulating technology is one thing but it is uncivil human behaviour that really needs to change. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.