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Forbes Low



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**engage Who are you?**

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# engage

## Who are you?



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# Who are you?

**Misinformation, spin, lies and deceit have been around forever.**

**The global nature of the web-based information environment allows purveyors of all sorts of falsehoods and misinformation to make an international impact. As the tech giants fail to adapt, we need to wise up and be careful what we believe on social media.**

## Fake news

In record time, the phrase has morphed from a description of a social media phenomenon into a journalistic cliché. How did the term “fake news” evolve?

It was mid-2016, and BuzzFeed’s media editor, Craig Silverman, noticed a funny stream of completely made-up stories that seemed to originate from one small Eastern European town. “We ended up finding a small cluster of news websites all registered in the same town in Macedonia called Veles,” Silverman recalls.



They started to investigate, and shortly before the US election they identified at least 140 fake news websites which were pulling in huge numbers on Facebook. The young people in Veles may or may not have had much interest in American politics, but because of the money to be made via Facebook advertising, they wanted their fiction to travel widely on social media.

What Silverman and others uncovered was a unique marriage between social media algorithms, advertising systems, people prepared to make stuff up to earn some easy cash and an election that gripped a nation and much of the world.



## Pizzagate

On 8 December 2016, Hillary Clinton made a speech in which she mentioned “the epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year.”

“It’s now clear that so-called fake news can have real-world consequences,” she said. “This isn’t about politics or partisanship. Lives are at risk... lives of ordinary people just trying to go about their days, to do their jobs, contribute to their communities.” Some journalists at the time interpreted her remarks as a reference to “Pizzagate”, a bonkers conspiracy theory which sprouted and grew to tremendous proportions online.

It started with a rumour that sex slaves were being held under a Washington pizza restaurant, and ended a couple of days before Clinton’s speech, when a man entered the busy family-friendly restaurant with a rifle. Nobody was injured, and the man was arrested and sentenced to four years in jail.



## For real?

Sarah Abdallah (@sahouraxo on Twitter) has more than 125,000 followers, among them more than 250 journalists from mainstream media outlets. But how real is she?

Sarah Abdallah tweets constant pro-Russia and pro-Assad messages and her follower count is comparable to BBC journalists who regularly report on Syria. She describes herself as an “Independent Lebanese geopolitical commentator” but she has almost no online presence or published stories or writing away from social media platforms. A Google News search indicates that she has not written any articles in either English or Arabic.

According to a recent study by the online research firm Graphika, she is one of the most influential social media accounts in the online conversation about Syria, pushing misinformation about chemical weapons attack. The firm found that her account was primarily followed by different interest clusters: supporters of pro-Palestinian causes, Russians and Russian allies, white nationalists, extremist alt-right, far-right groups in Europe and conspiracy theorists.

These groups were instrumental in making the hashtag #SyriaHoax. That hashtag, pushed by Sarah Abdallah and influential American conservative activists, became a worldwide trend on Twitter.

## Scamming

Martin Lewis, a journalist and TV presenter, founded moneysaving-expert.com in 2003 and has since carved out a reputation as a trustworthy guru of personal finances.

Recently, he has been across the nation’s media complaining that this reputation is under attack. Scammers promoting various get-rich-quick schemes have taken to using his face and name in advertisements on Facebook, with one lady losing £100,000 in a scam. Repeatedly, Lewis (bottom left) has complained to Facebook about this and yet they keep on coming. So he is now suing the social network for defamation.

It is not easy for Lewis to identify the scammers lying about him as many of them are overseas. He has already complained to Facebook more than 50 times in the past year.

The Lewis scams should be an easier problem to solve, yet he still finds himself in uncharted territory. “We... have explained to Martin Lewis that he should report any adverts that infringe his rights and they will be removed,” says Facebook, an answer that does very little to help Lewis, nor give any encouragement that they would do anything in the future. Bluntly it states that none of this is their problem.



## What’s true?

The real impact of fake news has been the realisation that the public might not be well-equipped to separate quality information from false information.

People, and especially young people, have a hard time separating good sources of information from questionable ones or determining whether a photograph is authentic or fabricated. As a result, something that looks and feels real is given more legitimacy than an actual news source that students are familiar with, but dislike for ideological reasons.

We are increasingly polarised along ideological lines, and this can trigger motivated reasoning: an unconscious, biased way of processing information which makes even smart people believe in falsehoods that support their ideologies.

Although most of us still get our news online, more and more rely on news on social media, a platform that is greatly contributing to the spread of misinformation. Sadly, there’s no easy fix to the problem. Tweaking algorithms, something Facebook and Google are trying to do, can help, but the real solution must come from consumers and where they seek their news.