Fake news is ‘weaponised social media'

By Louise Marsland

3 Aug 2017

Fake news is the new battleground for media freedom as social media is “weaponised” for propaganda purposes and fake news, commented Huffington Post South Africa editor-at-large, Ferial Haffajee.



Luke McKend. Credit: Ashraf Hendricks, GroundUp.org.za

Haffajee was taking part in a panel on *Fake news and Media Sustainability*, chaired by writer Marianne Thamm, at the *Daily Maverick’s* The Gathering 2017 Media Edition in Cape Town. Thamm was in conversation with Haffajee; Google South Africa country manager, Luke McKend; and SA National Editor’s Forum (Sanef) media freedom sub-committee chair, Sam Mkokeli.

Haffajee, herself the victim of a fake news smear campaign via Twitter - discovered through the #Guptaleaks email dump to have been orchestrated by the London public relations firm Bell Pottinger, hired by the Gupta interests – spoke of how she was targeted a day after writing a story on state capture in South Africa.

“This is the new battleground for media freedom. Fake news is a brilliant propaganda campaign: to quote an editor from the Philippines, it is the ‘weaponisation of social media’.”

Haffajee thought Twitter didn’t understand that their accounts were being used in a massive propaganda campaign and found it difficult to get action taken against the fake accounts which were targeting her and purporting to be from her.

Mkokeli spoke about how journalists were increasingly facing intimidation in South Africa. “There are journalists who can’t step outside their homes without a bodyguard. I am proud to enjoy freedom as a South African journalist, to live in a free society to do my job. What [Andile] Mngxitama (from the Black Land First movement) does, is take us away from that. They want to intimidate us, they want us to stop writing about state capture.”

A handful of BLF members had tickets to The Gathering 2017 and were barred from entering today by the *Daily Maverick* and security. They were refused entry after having disrupted another *Daily Maverick* forum held by its journalists on the #Guptaleaks scandal in Johannesburg, a week ago. The event had to be halted.

“The media is a public tool to make sure the public has the right to know. This is the space that Mngxitama is playing in. This is not just about the media, the attack is also meant for good South Africans, it is meant to silence politicians, silence the media, it’s about a bigger issue,” reiterated Mkokeli.



Media freedom is a cornerstone of democracy

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Vital craft

Haffajee’s key learnings from the Shelly Garland fake blog issue which impacted on the fledgling *Huffington Post South Africa* team and led to two editors losing their jobs, was that the painful event could have happened to anyone in the media, although in this particular case, not all checks and balances were followed at the media channel.

“Editing and curation are vital crafts. The question we haven’t properly thought through is how that blog landed so easily in our newsroom, how it resonated so completely and what it means for the race debate in our country.

“We have put in place much tighter controls. We refer upward anything we feel is in violation of code and constitution. It is also part of a much bigger rethink.”

McKend agreed that Google’s role was very important in curtailing the proliferation of fake news. “Our mission is to index world’s information and make it accessible to everyone. Some of those results are inaccurate, misleading… it is deeply in our interest to make sure whatever part of our business, whether it is search, or a display ad, our role is to make sure that ecosystem works well together, otherwise it falls apart.”

In order to deal with fake news issues, Google is ensuring that the right skills are in place in the media to help combat the spread of fake news. “We can’t do it all on our own.”

For example, Google is currently training 6000 journalists across major centres in Africa in data skills and tools, thereby contributing to the industry in a meaningful way.



6,000 African reporters to be trained in digital journalism

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“It’s like an arms race, you are always going to have people who disseminate propaganda, and we will see a lot more technology come into play,” said McKend. “The huge amount of content makes it impossible to curate with people only.

“But we all need to be prepared to pay for great news, otherwise what’s the point? Where are the people who are consuming it? I made a decision recently to pay for all the news I consume. We have to take responsibility as consumers for the payment of news. We can’t abdicate responsibility, if we value the content, we need to pay for it,” he emphasised.

Fake news

In an interview with Bizcommunity.com following on his talk, McKend said it was a constant battle to prevent fake news gaining traction.

“We have had to change our policies to deal with people trying to game Google and monetise fake news. We have been geared to respond to more extreme publishing behaviours, i.e., content on bullying, intimidation…. Some of the content is more subtle than that and misrepresentation is now a big part of that. Now, if someone misrepresents themselves, we are able to take those ads down.”

Between November and December 2016, Google took down 300 000 sites that misrepresented themselves, including fake news sites. Much of that had to include human intervention.

“We don’t want fake news sites to profit from misrepresentation. We need to suck the lifeblood out of what they do by removing their ability to make money.”

However, not all propaganda sites are for profit, and there is a fine line between determining whether someone’s opinion that they are entitled to print, is fake news, McKend pointed out. “What we are trying to do by investing in fact checking agencies in Europe, is to find ways for journalists to have the resources they need so they are not caught out by fake news.”

Google have also introduced a new tag in the UK and Germany, which identifies whether a site is a trusted site or not, based on a variety of different signals.

Said McKend: “The best defense against fake news is other journalists. The real strength of South Africa’s democracy is the journalists who have done the hard work on whether something is fake news or not. But journalism today requires a different skills set, which is why we are so heavily focused on the training aspect.

“One of the roles we can play is to provide journalists with the tools and skills required. We are also in the early days of how we work with what is true or not, we will have to evolve very quickly… and come up with more robust means to solve this problem. Facebook also plays a role here and journalists have to help us out.”

McKend described it as a bit of an “arms race”. “We have a lot of experience in people gaming our systems, our ad systems, to try promote their content. We are bringing that experience to bear now on a completely different category of content, and fortunately we have a skills set inside the business. It is impossible to catch everything, but we can be a good player, rather than a bad player in this ecosystem.”

The last word goes to Haffajee: “Human beings are smart, people recognise shit, so some of the fake news just died. But here’s the thing I learnt: the idea of white monopoly capital, the hashtag that we now know was started by Bell Pottinger, bounced through the internet very fast and resonated very quickly. In a fundamentally skewed and unjust economy, that is why that idea didn’t just die, because there was a lot of reality in it.”

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

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