CHAPTER ONE

Alternative Facts and the War on Truth

As highlighted in the introduction, there's a problem that affects us all. We're living in a media landscape where the truth is deliberately manipulated, trust has been catastrophically devalued and organized misinformation is a growth business.

This is a fundamental problem for democracy, with transparency and truth being such key foundations. The situation is based on two issues that combined to devastating effect: post-truth and fake news.

A debate at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos noted that due to 'hacking, leaking and disputing the facts, it's never been easier to distort the truth. Fake news and digitization present a major threat to global democracy. Social media in particular has changed the way we consume and share news and information and accelerated the spread of inaccurate and misleading content' (World Economic Forum, 2018).

This is underlined by a lack of trust in mainstream media organizations. A poll from Gallup noted that Americans' trust in

mass media peaked at 72 per cent in 1976 (Swift, 2016). By 2016 that figure had plunged to 32 per cent overall, but just 14 per cent among Republicans, a 'polarization' point that illuminates the increasingly toxic nature of partisan politics around the world regarding the inflammatory use of social media by politicians and voters from both ends of the political spectrum. The United States is hardly unique in having a population that mistrusts the media, but according to the *Financial Times* 'in few countries are views of journalists more defined by party allegiance and in no other has a president so weaponized that mistrust' (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2017).

While this book focuses on rebuilding brand authenticity in a distrusting world, as the political sphere plays such a major part in undermining people's trust in the world around them, it's vital to illuminate that overall context. In terms of political bias (let's face it, we all have one), I'll aim to take an even-handed approach to the subject; but as certain key personalities and countries are so prominent in this debate, those players will naturally figure strongly throughout this chapter.

Of course, truth is the crucial foundation here. A report from the Rand Corporation titled 'Truth Decay' explored the diminishing role of facts and analysis in, for instance, US public life. Their report identified four trends that characterized the issue: 'increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretation of facts and data, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, the increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion and personal experience over fact, and declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts' (Rand Corporation, 2018).

From a business point of view, the issues that I'll cover relate to brands of all varieties, as post-truth and fake news impact the people who consume brands in every sector, for the simple reasons that 'truth and trust' impact brands of every type. I'll discuss issues including what happens when the truth becomes devalued, the polarizing impact of social groups retreating into niche-interest echo chambers, how the mainstream media became portrayed as the 'enemy within', why tracking

technology and System One and Two thinking are such important considerations, and finally how our social media platforms have found themselves in the front line in the war against terror – which, once again, affects us all.

A government of lies

It's generally accepted that the playwright Steve Tesich coined the phrase 'Post-Truth' back in the 1990s, in an article titled 'A government of lies' which he wrote for *The Nation* magazine in reaction to the Iran/Contra scandal.

A quick recap on that infamous episode goes like this: President Reagan shocked the world when he went on US TV to inform the public that, despite repeated denials, his administration had covertly organized and funded US support for the Contra anti-Sandinista Government rebels in Nicaragua – support which had been specifically banned by Congress. To give this an additional twist, the funding was linked to an illegal deal swapping weapons with Iran, a country that was the subject of an arms embargo. The reason for that deal was to gain Iranian influence in assisting the release of US hostages who'd been kidnapped by Hezbollah in Lebanon.

As political intrigue goes, that one takes some beating. To quote an old saying, what could possibly go wrong? When the inevitable happened and this politically explosive story broke, the phrase 'Iran-Contra' became a talking point around the world, summing up incompetent government, political arrogance and dishonest public officials.

But it was the words that President Reagan used in his TV address, and the thinking behind them, that so intrigued Steve Tesich. The president said: 'A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not' (Reagan, 1987).

Americans were unfortunately familiar with being lied to by a president, with memories of Watergate still fresh in the mind. That scandal had shone a spotlight on President Nixon and his advisers, and their actions had horrified a public who at that point still generally viewed the United States as being a beacon, the shining 'City on a Hill' – a place where politicians, and presidents in particular, simply did not lie to the US public.

An impeachment process against Nixon 'for high crimes and misdemeanours' was started, although he resigned before matters were taken further. That meant Americans could feel good about themselves again, because, following the uncovering of his actions by a strong and independent press, governmental processes clicked into action and the democratic system had been seen to work.

However, what seemed to happen as a result of this 'public image catastrophe' for Brand America, linked in the public mind with the seemingly never-ending misery of the Vietnam war, was that hard truth became ever more intrinsically linked with bad news. And, without wanting to sound trite, US citizens wanted good news.

When Steve Tesich saw the result of President Reagan's admitting that he'd lied 'for emotional reasons' eventually leading to renewed popularity with the US populace, after a short dip, he wrote how the president 'perceived correctly that the public didn't want the truth. So, he lied, but didn't have to work hard at it. He sensed that we would gladly accept his loss of memory as an alibi. It had simply "slipped his mind" what form of government we had in our country' (Tesich, 1992).

The implications for the US republic were shocking and far-reaching, and Tesich's words resonated. Years later, at the International Populism Conference in Prague, Attila Antal referenced him as stating: 'We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world' (Attila, 2017).

President Reagan sensed that his supporters liked what he was doing and simply didn't care if what he said didn't actually correspond with the truth. Which, when you're in charge of the most powerful country on the planet, doesn't bode well.

So that's where the post-truth story 'officially' began, with the *Oxford Dictionary* defining it as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. They also stated that it had gone from being 'a peripheral term to being a mainstay in political commentary, often used by major publications without the need for clarification or definition in their headlines' (Midgley, 2016).

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However, as noted by the *Financial Times*, a vital difference in contemporary meaning is that 'Tesich used it to mean "after the truth was known" rather than our modern definition of a situation where the truth is irrelevant' (Noble and Lockett, 2016).

Reagan was also the first president to be in charge when 24-hour news reporting became the new normal, which was to have enormous implications for both post-truth and fake news with the ability to feed unverified stories, at speed, into the news cycle.

The origins of fake news go back through history, but there are clear links with the 'Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee Houses' made in 1672 by Charles II 'to restrain the speaking of false news, and licentious talking of matters of state and government' along with the salacious rumours spread by the political pamphleteers of the French Revolution, which was itself 'a revolution of the media'.

It's generally accepted that it was the blogger David Roberts who came up with the term 'Post-truth politics' in a piece he wrote for the US environmental magazine *Grist* in 2010 with that title. In the post, he said that 'voters don't generally know

much about politics or policy' and that they 'used crude heuristics to assess legislative proposals which ran counter to the idealized Enlightenment view'. He went on to say that we now existed in a time of 'post-truth politics: a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)' (Roberts, 2010).

For reasons of brevity (and to keep within the parameters of this book), I'm going to take a massive jump forward a couple of decades to begin to bring things up to date, and consider a world in which public discourse appears to be increasingly anti-fact. The manipulation of emotion clearly seems to work for politicians who've taken a lead from the classic consumer-brand handbook where any advertising agency will tell you that 'feelings beat facts'. This issue was outlined by the journalist Michael Deacon, who wrote: 'It's why modern political campaigners love using the words "positive, negative, optimism, pessimism": as they enable easy dismissal of criticism. Thus a politician who lies is "running a positive campaign", while opponents are "engaged in personal attacks". It's simple but effective. Facts are negative. Facts are pessimistic. Facts are unpatriotic' (Deacon, 2016).

Meanwhile, something that didn't exist in the initial Reagan 'Post-Truth' years came along and turned everything upside down for us all, journalists, voters and politicians alike. That was, of course, the internet and its intrinsic element, social media. So, let's look at how this impacted politics in particular.

Social media, where 'everyone has a voice'

It was during the presidency of Barack Obama that we saw the internet transform mass communication between government and citizens. The first president to be in office in the 'social media age', Barack Obama, took what was then seen as the radical step of broadcasting his weekly national address via YouTube. He

was the first president to put up photos on Instagram, use a Snapchat filter, make a podcast, post on Myspace or go live on the newly ubiquitous Facebook. Back in 2010, he'd also sent the first ever 'presidential tweet'.

When this ultra-democratic medium first began to gain mainstream international usage in the mid-2000s, the links between social media and political debate seemed wholly positive. Everyone could have their say – from bloggers to web activists to citizen journalists to just 'anyone with a view' – and so everyone could be heard. What could be healthier for politics than an open media where everyone could freely join the conversation, and all voices and viewpoints would be given equal access to the debate?

How social media was intended to be used, and how it is used, are two very different things.

That sounds unbelievably naïve now, yet it really did seem to be that way, back in the dim and distant past of 2006. This was the year that Twitter was founded, two years after Facebook, a year after YouTube and four years before Instagram. But then reality kicked in.

Or should I say kicked back. And kicked back hard. How social media was intended to be used, and how it turned out to be used, proved to be two very different things.

What soon became apparent was that, along with all the positivity, togetherness and happiness that social media brought, a dark side that really hadn't been considered soon began to show itself via extraordinarily divisive shows of strength across the political spectrum.

A pivotal thing to note relating to the lack of connection between voter and politician is the incredibly low levels of trust in media coverage given to politics – a lack of trust also being a key fault-line between consumer and brand, as portrayed throughout this book. According to the Pew Research Center, when it comes to Americans having trust in religious leaders versus the news media, more than twice as many do so 'a great

deal' (Kennedy, 2016). In the United Kingdom an Ipsos MORI veracity index indicating trust in professions also showed that more than twice as many people trusted priests to tell the truth as trusted the media (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

With reference to populist politicians leveraging this issue, the *Financial Times* pointed out that while Trump 'didn't invent the idea of mainstream reporters being left-wing, elite bogeymen who hate America, he's rebranded it masterfully for the #FakeNews age' (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2017). On people with this attitude, in his book *Alt-America* the author David Neiwert states that 'they cannot believe any kind of official explanation for events, actions, or policies, but instead seek an alternative one. This alters – or rather distorts – their relationship to authority' (Neiwert, 2017).

This is a key point to consider, because to quote the journalist Evan Davis: 'In 2016, the great political schism to divide Western societies switched from being a left–right one to being about liberalism and populism, each with different priorities, values and tribal allegiances. It's not hard to see why the term post-truth emerged; there were genuine changes in the way public discourse was conducted' (Davis, 2017). This polarization can also be seen as dividing between polarized stances such as 'openness and change' vs 'authority and order'.

In terms of 'genuine changes in public discourse', what we were then to see from President Trump was a use of social media in particular that confused US and international politicians, the mainstream media (or 'MSM') and the general public alike. For example, in a now famous tweet he declared: 'Fox News is much more important in the US than CNN, but outside of the US, CNN Int'l is still a major source of (fake) news, and they represent our nation to the world very poorly. The outside world does not see the truth from them!' (Trump, 2017).

This attack on one of the key foundations of democracy, a free and independent press, became a hallmark of Trump's behaviour from the time he began campaigning. But when it came

to accusations of fake news, as *Foreign Policy* magazine said: 'President Donald Trump is right. There is an epidemic of fake news in America. Only it's being perpetuated not by his political opponents but by him and his supporters' (Boot, 2017).

Alternative facts and fake news

A key issue going to the heart of fake news is quite simply one of clarification. While everyone's using the term, the problem is that its common use has grown to mean everything from actual lies to just something a politician doesn't agree with. Alongside this are increasing accusations of a 'deep state' made up of shadowy, autonomous power-brokers, using behind-the-scenes actions to undermine democracy to their own ends.

But a fundamental problem is that there isn't a globally defined illustration of 'fake news'. While each main media outlet may have its own working definition, I defer to the one used by the Atlantic Council's DFR Lab. Their definition of fake news is 'deliberately presenting false information as news'. They differentiate this from disinformation, which they consider to be 'deliberately spreading false information', and misinformation, which they take to mean the 'unintentional spreading of false information' (DFR, 2017).

According to Joseph Khan, Managing Editor of *The New York Times*, 'there's a spectrum between propaganda and spin and totally false maliciously created fake news. So, you can dispute where on the spectrum stories (like those relating to politicians) fall' (Khan, 2018). To illuminate just how widespread this issue is seen to be from a global perspective, where a lack of confidence in the media undermines trust and truth, in the annual Edelman Trust Barometer (probably the biggest study into trust) they found that on average 'nearly 70% of us worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon, with the media now the least trusted institution'. By the way,

it should be noted that Edelman reported 'people use the term "media" as both content and platforms in their findings, but while trust in platforms declined, trust in journalism has rebounded' (Edelman, 2018).

This 'issue with the facts' was shown to starkly visible effect as soon as President Trump took office, with his notorious claim that one and a half million people attended his inauguration and with Sean Spicer, the White House Press Secretary, famously backing up the claim (Ford, 2017). Those comments in turn were then supported by Senior White House aide Kellyanne Conway, who went on to NBC's 'Meet the Press' show to say that Sean Spicer hadn't been lying but had given 'alternative facts' (Jaffe, 2017).

That inauguration took place shortly after post-truth had been named 'Word of the Year' by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *Financial Times*, referencing the dictionary definition, commented that 'a less verbose way to describe the same phenomenon would be to say that it was the year in which emotion trumped fact. Or cruder still, it was the year of the lie' (Thornhill, 2016).

The mainstream media vs political partisanship

Taking this to a level of partisanship unseen in the mainstream media in recent elections has been radically biased, hyper-partisan news that tells niche audiences gathered in so-called 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers' what they want to hear. This classic case of confirmation bias is brought to them c/o media falling either side of the political spectrum. These include right-wing ones like Breitbart, Infowars and the Drudge Report, while on the left there are Slate, NPR and Mother Jones. I'll let you decide just how politically far 'right or left' these are….

This is noted by Yale historian David W Blight, who says: 'Millions of Americans on the right get their information from selective websites, radio shows and news networks, possessing all sorts of conspiratorial conceptions about liberals. Many on

the left also know precious little about the people who voted for Trump; coastal elites sometimes hold contemptuous views about people they "fly-over"' (Blight, 2017).

Just because these audiences are niche doesn't mean they are small; quite the opposite. These are the days of 'massive niche' groupings, so beloved of marketers who find them ideal targets for branded messaging. And even more so for political parties, who love preaching to the converted, when it's often niche voter groups that win elections owing to generally falling mainstream voter turnouts in elections. For instance, the winning margins in the 2016 US Presidential Election in states such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania were wafer-thin, being less than 1 per cent of voter turnout in each case – and only about 55 per cent of the US voting-age population cast their vote in the election, according to CNN (Wallace, 2016).

This is a serious problem if you consider that, according to a Pew Research Survey, '67% of American adults rely on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat for news' (Shearer, 2017). Many of them are accessing information via niche groups that have wildly skewed worldviews, views which are duly passed on and spread on a viral basis.

Vice Media had an interesting take on this in 2018 with their #LikeWhatYouHate campaign, which encouraged people to consider other points of view via bursting the filter bubble of their Facebook news feed. To do this, the creative agency Virtue Scandinavia and the digital studio Koalition created a tool to disrupt the Facebook algorithm by proposing people, organizations and parties that you disagree with, or hate, in order to balance out those fed to you by Facebook. According to Frederik Andersen of Vice Media Scandinavia: 'We made the tool to remind everyone about a world beyond our social filter bubbles and to show how easy it is to create a greater perspective and respect each other's views and opinions. I hope that we can help open that mindset and spark debate' (Kiefer, 2018).

That approach links with the one taken by the renowned website *AllSides.Org* which, according to their site, 'provides balanced news, perspectives and issues across the political spectrum. There is no such thing as unbiased news or truly non-partisan coverage – we use technology and the crowd to provide balance.'

I spoke about this with Martin Raymond, co-founder of The Future Laboratory, who told me:

> When a problem is that the truth might be inconvenient or difficult, social media allows us to develop 'truths' which aren't just fake and convenient but also allow people to create a different filter bubble and ecosystem, and I think that happened across the market. The Millennial Hipsters saw social media as a legitimate way to communicate but are now realizing that in fact within 'the lake' there are parts of the lake which are poisonous and parts of the lake that are good for them; whereas previously they were just interested in being part of the lake because they thought that was all that was important. The traditional media side has had a rude awakening in that it now needs to make really brilliant and carefully calculated statements and underwrite them in an honest way. Hence when I look at *The New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Washington Post*, their big push is towards verification. While it used to be about breaking news, now it's about verification journalism. There's a desire now to verify and to authenticate. What is interesting is that the same thing is happening online, and if the current generation of media publishers or even a new generation of media publishers get it right, they will become the new voices of truth and honesty and of authenticity.

I discussed that point with Emily Hare, who'd just left the strategic and creative intelligence experts Contagious to become Editor at The Honey Partnership. Her view was that:

> the public have it as a consideration now more than they had in the past, when they began to realize how they were being misled.

> It's tied into how people access information, which is what has led to Facebook changing its algorithms because so many people get their news through that. And it's led to people questioning sources that they would previously have seen as reliable. In some ways it's good for established sources. There's less investigative journalism going on with a lot of media companies; and it doesn't really help them build up their trust. So there are going to be a lot of people questioning sources and where their information comes from.

On 'questioning of information' and the way that fake news is passed on, it's also important to note that it isn't always the case that this is done in an unthinking manner. An article on Medium referencing the 'Ironic Truths of Meme Culture' pointed out that 'even people who share fake news are trying to tell a kind of truth too'. That piece went on to reference the annual SXSW Edu event, where it was argued that 'the assumption people really believe the claims they share, and therefore are stupid, is actually not so simple. They post it because they're making a statement and are offended if you say they've been duped' (Owens, 2018).

But it's the rage-filled and the insulting nature of contemporary political debate that concerns so many. According to the journalist Janice Turner: 'There is an arms race of rage in politics, escalated by social media. Each side clings to a childish stance: the others do it too, their trolls are worse, their threats more vicious. In truth, they have a common language. The aim is to vaporize those with whom you disagree' (Turner, 2017).

As for the viewpoints of those in charge of the platforms, as Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, put it: 'We have witnessed abuse, harassment, troll armies, manipulation through bots and human-coordination, misinformation campaigns, and increasingly divisive echo chambers. We aren't proud of how people have taken advantage of our service, or our inability to address it fast enough' (Dorsey, 2018).

Identity politics

In terms of this social divide and 'who we all are', at this point I need to say something about personal identity and the way in which voters appear to make their political choices in the modern age. This political division, by the way, also seems to have implications for consumer-brand choice: in the United Kingdom, research conducted into Brexit voters and their brand affinity by the polling organization YouGov showed that while Leave voters preferred brands like HP Sauce, Bisto and Birds Eye, Remain voters opted for Instagram, Airbnb and Spotify (Mohan, 2016).

Tim Marshall is a leading authority on foreign affairs with more than 30 years of reporting experience in 40 countries. According to him, 'Walls are going up. Nationalism and identity politics are on the rise once more. Thousands of miles of fences and barriers have been erected in the past decade, and they are redefining our political landscape' (Marshall, 2018). This defining of the political landscape is something that really interests Sarah Rabia, Global Director of Cultural Strategy at TBWA\Chiat\Day in Los Angeles. She refers to the documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis, whose work concentrates on psychology, sociology, philosophy and political history. He's made some absolutely stunning documentaries, including *Paranoia and Moral Panics*, *Bitter Lake* and *HyperNormalisation*. As she points out, 'we are living in a world of extremes. Adam Curtis talks about how governments and institutions create this good v evil narrative and they try to make it really simplistic, so they can control people and create a kind of fear and a sense of instability'.

Occasionally, a book comes along that makes policy-makers sit up and take notice, an example being *The Road to Somewhere* by former editor of *Prospect* magazine David Goodhart. In it, he shows how political affiliations and voting patterns are now formed by identity rather than class and that people are divided into voter tribes he named as 'Anywheres or Somewheres'. According to the *New Statesman* magazine: 'Anywheres dominate

our culture and society, having portable "achieved" identities, based on educational and career success. Somewheres are more rooted in geographical identity who find the rapid changes of the modern world unsettling. They have lost economically; their working-class culture has disappeared, and their views marginalised in the public conversation' (Marr, 2017).

Back in the United States, voting for a man who said he would 'drain the Washington swamp' clearly felt like a highly positive step for his supporters, which demonstrates the levels of emotion – as opposed to rationality – involved when people consider which party or candidate for whom to vote. In the book *Democracy for Realists*, the authors describe how most voters 'simply decide which candidate they like and then ascribe policies they approve of to him or her, which are often completely incorrect. Most people have an incredibly weak understanding of what their chosen political party's policies actually are, not really knowing what it is that each party actually stands for' (Achan and Bartels, 2016).

It's the effect of the highly emotional information that voters get that led *The Economist* to state, in a special report on social media vs democracy, 'not long ago social media held out the promise of a more enlightened politics, as accurate information and effortless communication helped good people drive out corruption, bigotry and lies. Yet… far from bringing enlightenment, social media have been spreading poison' (*The Economist*, 2017). When 'spreading poison' is being done by social media, it's worth swiftly noting how and why the issue of speed is such an important factor, reflecting how the brain processes information.

System One and System Two

As any advertising agency will tell you, a key issue about how we use social media (in fact how we absorb any messaging) links

directly to so-called System One and Two thinking. In summary, the brain works on a dual-process model: System One is fast, driven by instinct and prior learning. Why this is important for ad agencies is because we don't concentrate on the vast majority of advertising, it just takes place while we're chatting to someone else or simultaneously looking at another screen, and so on. So, it's a big deal for people making TV commercials, as you might expect.

System Two, however, is slow, driven by deliberation, effort and logic. Even when we believe we are making decisions based on rational considerations, our System One beliefs, biases and intuition are what drive many of our choices. It's the 'secret author of many of the judgments you make', according to psychologist Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2012).

So… System One thinking drives which ads consumers unconsciously pay attention to, as well as what brands they buy as they rush around a grocery store while dealing with constant distractions. It has big implications for social media and politics, and thus all those creating political messaging.

In social media terms, political commentary (heard as part of the daily background buzz which surrounds us all) that sounds vaguely agreeable to our point of view is noted while in System One 'automatic browsing mode' and is therefore the mode by which most of us unthinkingly pass on information. You've done this and so have I, many times. And that 'pass it on' messaging – essentially digital word of mouth ie tweet to retweet – is precisely the form of communication that is most believed by others we know ie those we're linked with on social media.

So, we pass on important messages without thought, they're received by friends and acquaintances as having added credibility as they arrive from a known source ie us, and they're often then retweeted without hesitation. Thus the pattern goes on and the message is spread.

Now, the implications of users utilizing System One behaviour is a great thing if you're a consumer-brand advertiser with an impactful, likeable and motivating message to communicate ie if you're a Huawei, Kotak, Visa, Itau or Sky. But for a healthy democracy, this approach to social media is a terrible thing when it comes to political word of mouth.

The antidote to this is clear: if we just thought about what we were doing – literally just actively thought about it for even a few extra seconds – our System Two 'dual process' would kick in and perhaps make us question what we were reading, consider the ramifications of the contents of that post, and stop our potential 'automatic' retweet.

This is why a quick method of verifying factual vs fake news is to simply check to see if other major news organizations are reporting on the same story – if they are, then the chances are that the story stands up to an 'instant fake check'.

Why is this so important for politicians and elections? This worrying situation was given a sinister twist when social media found themselves weaponized.

Disinformation warfare

In print-media terms, fake news can actually be traced back to the days of Stalin, as in the doctoring, defacing or deletion of 'actual news imagery' which was discovered by the journalist David King in the early 1970s when he was researching the Russian Revolution and communist propaganda.

Years ago, the academic Francis Fukuyama spoke of 'Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt' being key macro issues impacting society, and the deliberate blurring effect of fake news in a post-truth world is what I'll highlight now, as it builds on a post-truth environment to create an 'infosmog' of falsehood, twisted truth, 'whataboutism', confusion, false-flag operations and, yes, downright lies. This results in a situation where having a crystal-clear

picture of 'The Truth' to which we can all refer becomes an ever more difficult, and sometimes impossible, goal.

It gets worse. The ability to create fake news is easy and fast – unlike real journalism – as its creators can create a false story (of the outrageous click-bait or 'intended to confuse' type), put it up online and move on to the next story at high speed.

In a report for CNN titled 'The Fake News Machine', their correspondent Isa Soares highlighted Veles in Macedonia, where numerous website creators are based and who manufacture false stories. According to CNN, 'the scale is industrial, with profits coming primarily from ad services such as Google's AdSense, which places targeted advertisements around the web. Each click sends cash back to the content creator. But, and this is crucial, what the young fake news producers are doing isn't illegal in their country' (Soares, 2017).

Leaving aside the 'location-legality' issue, taking on a fake news story and proving that it is fake also takes (or wastes) endless amounts of time. Many false stories that we 'know' are false are virtually impossible to disprove and so are left to float around in cyberspace or the public consciousness.

Causing even more of a problem is that this situation is also misused and cynically reframed by politicians who began, and continue, to simply deride as 'fake' any story that casts them in a bad light. Which, as Joseph Heller might have said, is about as classic an example of Catch-22 as you're likely to get.

But while all things fake news related may be terrible for ethics, they're correspondingly great for the media business, because people don't bother watching or reading 'boring' news, and if there's one thing that's actually reliable about fake news, it's that it is never boring. Fake news is loud, brash, outrageous, appalling and shocking. It may be false, but it's not dull. Which means the mainstream media finds itself currently kind of… stuck – to put it politely.

Social media go to war

The core aim of those state actors behind much of the fake news destabilization that we've seen over recent times has been to reduce everything reported by the mainstream media to the same 'maybe/maybe not' level of believability as that published by extreme sites and via word-of-mouth rumour. That is an issue of staggering importance. In what has now become a hugely reported official enquiry, Russian social media manipulation of the US 2016 Election was officially organized, meticulously planned and ruthlessly conducted. According to an Atlantic Council case study: 'The Russian government's propaganda and influence operations use a "full spectrum" model spanning social and traditional media. Some channels are overt and official; others are covert and claim to be independent. All work together to create the appearance of multiple voices and points of view, masking a coordinated approach' (Nimmo, 2018).

Once it began its domination of the social media universe, it didn't take too long for Facebook, and the implications for utilizing this in destabilizing society, to catch the eye of the intelligence networks. Fake news strategists aim to blur reality and reposition facts as just 'potential answers' from differing partisan perspectives. Manipulating trust, or rather the lack of it, and causing confusion, and particularly a lot of it, can cause utter chaos among enemies. Therefore, Facebook and other key platforms found themselves swiftly involved in a new digital version of espionage.

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According to the British MP Damian Collins, chairman of Parliament's Culture, Media and Sport Selection Committee, who has shown immense leadership in challenging the people,

organizations and governments involved in fake news and media manipulation: 'In the US election (of Donald Trump) the top twenty fake news stories were far more widely shared than the top twenty real stories. That's fake as in really fake; fake quotes, fake facts' (Rifkind, 2017).

The type of fake news that we've unfortunately become used to has been taken to a whole new level by the latest innovation, augmented reality, and by advances in artificial intelligence, video editing and computer graphics, which includes voice-morphing and face-morphing technology. The implications of this were noted by Damian Collins at a debate into 'Restoring Trust' at the London School of Economics, where he talked about this delivering:

> a worrying level of sophistication and fakery that's becoming so good, that for people who want the truth, they may have no option but to fall back on trusted new brands. Augmented Reality makes it easy to create fake films, of people giving fake speeches, being at events they never attended; with the quality being so good, you can't tell the difference between that and the real thing. Who do you trust in that environment? That doesn't mean to say that there aren't very good young news companies that use social media really well, like 'Now This' in New York. But in short, greater transparency on where information is coming from is one of the best things that we could achieve; because that at least allows the consumer to weigh up the evidence of what they're viewing and use their own judgements on whether they think it's true or not. (Collins, 2018)

The statistic that really highlighted the scale of the problem was when Facebook admitted that Russian-purchased adverts had reached nearly 130 million Americans during the Trump/Clinton 2016 election battle (White, 2017), supplemented by staggering amounts of online posts on social media platforms. Let's not forget that Facebook owns Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp,

with the majority of 'active users' reposting their social media messages on a cross-platform basis.

A report from San Francisco for *The Guardian* noted how US lawmakers 'released a selection of Facebook ads bought by Russian operatives and listings of imposter Twitter accounts, revealing how foreign actors sought to sow division among Americans. The ads and profiles targeted liberals and conservatives on a range of hot-button topics, including police brutality, immigration, race relations, Islamophobia and LGBT rights' (Solon, 2017).

About this issue of 'sowing division', the journalist Ben Macintyre wrote that 'President Putin manages a steady flow of disinformation and fake news through the Kremlin's troll farms, to sow division and confusion, and in the Russian phrase "powder the brains" not only of his own people but a worldwide audience' (Macintyre, 2017).

As investigations into attempts to influence the 2016 US Presidential Election got under way, the Digital and Cyberspace Policy Program run by the Council on Foreign Relations reported that 'more aspects of Russia's approach to information warfare are coming to light. A steady stream of new disclosures reveals a complex blend of hacking, public disclosures of private emails, and use of bots, trolls, and targeted advertising on social media designed to interfere in political processes and heighten societal tensions' (Giles, 2017).

On that theme, the World Economic Forum debated this issue in Davos, where a panel including Jimmy Wales (founder of Wikipedia) and Joseph Khan (Managing Editor of *The New York Times*) witnessed Zeinab Badawi from BBC News highlight a range of accusations that Russia 'weaponizes information'. As she said, 'there are many accusations from various sources including NATO, the French President, the British Prime Minister, the German Government, and the American Government. They all say that Russia as a state actor is a perpetrator of fake news, and it uses stations such as RT' (Badawi,

2018). She also quoted President Macron of France, who said 'Russia Today and Sputnik were agents of influence and propaganda that spread falsehoods about me and my campaign' (Serhan, 2017).

RT, the Russian media company, were represented at the debate by Anna Belkina, their deputy editor in chief, who said those accusations 'were false, in fact demonstrably false, and that RT had been a target of false information spread about it' (Belkina, 2018).

Noting the Russian side of the story, it was interesting to hear that Russian President Vladimir Putin's government warned the United States not to meddle in their 2018 election. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused the United States of 'direct interference into the electoral process' after the State Department criticized Russia's decision to ban anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny from running for president (Mosbergen, 2017).

Facebook, Google and Twitter have testified in front of congressional committees to discuss Russia's alleged attempt to influence the presidential election by spreading misinformation online. The three companies had already admitted that, unknown to them, Russian-backed accounts used their respective sites to share and promote content aimed at stirring political unrest. At those official hearings, Facebook's General Counsel Colin Stretch said: 'The foreign interference we saw is reprehensible. That foreign actors, hiding behind safe accounts, abused our platform and other Internet services to try to sow division and discord to undermine the election, is an assault on democracy that is directly contrary to our values and violates everything Facebook stands for' (Shaban, 2017).

When Mark Zuckerberg testified in front of Congress, he said that 'the highly sophisticated Russian approach to spreading its influence online had left Facebook at a distinct disadvantage. We're in an arms race with Russia but Artificial Intelligence will save us. Our idealistic and optimistic company failed to

understand that Facebook could be used for harm as well as good' (Groll, 2018).

So, fake news, which started out as a jokey catch-all term for something fun, has also become deadly serious. Social media giants have morphed from being set up as high-tech cash-machines that enable advertisers to sell us more stuff that we very probably don't need, to now being repositioned as AI-driven election-winning behemoths.

Facebook or Fakebook? Twitter or Twister?

It's clearly the responsibility of the massively powerful social media platforms to stand up against fake news, as with their epic financial power comes a huge social responsibility to fight against this onslaught, just as they've been forced to do against issues ranging from cyber bullying to trolling and online hate speech. It was depressing to note that Mark Zuckerberg told Congress that the 'best solution' to misinformation (AI technology) wouldn't be ready for up to another decade.

In order to enact legislation to force them to do so, Damian Collins, the chair of the UK Government's DCMS committee looking into the matter, suggested that, as far as their obligations and responsibilities were concerned, 'the government should introduce an offence of "Failing to Act" when material has been reported to a company either because it was illegal or against that company's own community guidelines' (Collins, 2017). But as he also said, 'the evidence handed over by Twitter to investigators so far is only the tip of a very large iceberg' (Mascarenhas, 2017), noting that 'Twitter has identified 2,752 accounts linked to the St-Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, a Russian "troll factory", which sent out 1.4 million messages in just over two months. The same accounts also posted content relating to UK politics' (Whale, 2017).

In the UK, ground-breaking research by *The Sunday Times* found evidence of attempts by Russia to influence the result of the UK General Election in 2017. As their report stated, '16,000 Russian bots tweeted on British politics. 80 per cent of the automated accounts had been created in the weeks before the vote'. On fake accounts identified by *The Sunday Times*, it wrote that 'academics said these were just the tip of the iceberg and called on Twitter to investigate fully the true scale of Russian meddling in British politics' (Insight Team, 2018).

The New York Times reported how senior Facebook executives faced much tougher questioning by the UK's DCMS parliamentary committee than Mark Zuckerberg had during his testimony before Congress, and that one member noted dryly: 'I'm delighted to hear that Facebook has a head of integrity.' That piece also quoted Damian Collins of the DCMS committee as saying: 'many people would look at what's happened recently and say the case for greater regulatory scrutiny of the way the tech companies work is appropriate. I don't think you can put that genie back in the bottle' (Satariano, 2018).

There is, however, some good news about activity that has taken place and that continues to do so. Facebook told millions of users who liked or followed any of the hundreds of Facebook and Instagram pages created by Russian actors that they were ensnared in an alleged misinformation campaign (Nicas, 2017). (Users have access to a tool to check if they followed any of the pages, which were designed to look as if they were run by Americans but were actually created by the pro-Kremlin Internet Research Agency.)

Google announced back in 2017 that it had made major changes (called 'Project Owl') as part of its efforts to fight against fake news that was 'polluting' its search results. This enhanced the public's ability to analyse results and report content, enabling users to inform Google if they came across something wrong or objectionable. Another major change to the search

engine was that they started to give more weight to what they termed 'more authoritative' information.

But, as reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, when Mark Zuckerberg appeared in front of Congress in early 2018, 'it highlighted how unprepared Congress is to impose game-changing rules on the social network. The proceedings brought into stark relief how San Francisco innovation can be more nimble than Washington bureaucracy' (Halper, 2018).

Which brings us to the killer point impacting media brands that seek to be authentic in a post-truth world inundated with fake news. These organizations have a clear and present danger around them (including attempted sting operations aimed at undermining the credibility of the media) and a horrendous task ahead of them. An example of a sting happened to *The Washington Post* with the Roy Moore scandal, where the BBC reported that 'a source told the newspaper she had been impregnated as a teenager by US politician Roy Moore. The Post said its research debunked her story, and that she worked for a group called Project Veritas, which "targets the mainstream news media"' (BBC, 2017).

The 'horrendous task ahead of them' includes the basic business-model issues, where the need to get effective subscription models set up and to wean them away from advertising is, currently, seemingly the most obvious way to destroy the click-through model which is itself so destructive, and so tied into the world of fake news.

That key problem was summed up by Gillian Tett in the *FT* who suggested that the next time you complain about the media, ask yourself how you expect 'fair' mass-market journalism to be funded and run – and if you are willing to pay for it. But she also noted a core human issue that also drives the situation: 'the trouble is that partisan social media is free – and readers seem to be hungry for this. So how can we support real news when most voters keep flocking to entertaining stories that are (at best) partisan and (at worst) deliberately fake?' (Tett, 2017).

As we've seen, some media organizations have already fought back and others are joining the fight to earn our trust. This is truly vital. According to *The Economist*, 'The stakes for liberal democracy could hardly be higher' (*The Economist*, 2017).

Fighting back re: the war on truth

The implications for international press freedom could not be more serious. To quote Brian Klaas of the LSE and author of *The Despot's Apprentice*, 'American efforts to promote press freedom in authoritarian regimes abroad have been destroyed by Trump's tweets. Imagine trying to press Myanmar to release its jailed journalists from the State Department while the Myanmar government screams "fake news!" and cites his tweets' (Klaas, 2017).

In response to all this media abuse and fake news, there have been some great instances of the mainstream media fighting back. *The New York Times* campaigned to 'unite the nation against alternative facts'. *The Drum* magazine, noting how media brands have used marketing to turn accusations of fake news into page views, reported on numerous advertising campaigns. Those included *The Wall Street Journal* 'attempting to forge trust with the public by positioning itself as the antithesis of fake news'. The *FT* took a stance against fake news with their 'Thinking Beyond Black and White' campaign, and *The Atlantic* magazine encouraged more cynicism from readers by urging them to question its answers (McCarthy, 2017).

Sarah Rabia from TBWA/Chiat/Day Los Angeles referred to this when I spoke with her, where she started the conversation by talking about polarization:

> We see two main approaches when it comes to this: either think smaller – identify your tribe (Seth Godin wrote a great book on this called *We Are All Weird*) where it's about getting more

> radical about a shared issue alongside those people who you really connect to. Or you try and break the filter bubbles, which are connected to trust and fake news. *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* both have slogans about the whole picture and that the truth has never been more important.

She went on:

> There are lots of media organizations popping up now: a company called All Sides.org was created by a Republican that worked in Silicon Valley and he said 'we thought that the internet would make everything fairer and give us a broader world view but actually it has narrowed our view and put us in these bubbles'. His site reveals media bias, it shows you the same story but how it can have different angles. What we saw in our Pan-Activism study is there is a desire to see different sides of the story. So people are really making an effort to engage in a conversation with someone with different beliefs or they are reading a different newspaper with a different agenda, because people want a balanced view. I think that's interesting as a new form of activism. Things often aren't simply black and white. I think the middle ground will re-emerge because there used to be a moderate majority and now maybe we've all become too tribal and subcultural. Why is this important to us? Because brands in particular are trying to find commonalities and connection points.

Talking about the other side of the story, in this instance the media advertising messages focusing on fake news, Russia Today ran a #QuestionMore campaign which took aim at those who might accuse it of being part of the problem. For instance, following the US Elections, RT ads poked fun at Hilary Clinton with roadside posters that said 'Stuck in traffic? Lost an election? Blame it on us!'

There's been a lot of discussion about antidotes to all this, one idea being those on either side of the political spectrum acting as whistle-blowers on fake news coming from their own side ie

the left wing denounce fake left-wing-generated stories, with the same action taken by those on the right.

Most politicians on either side are, of course, 'good people' who just disagree on the most effective means of implanting positive change in society. Both sets of them see fake news and the world of post-truth damaging the world around them, and thus their voters' lives. This isn't to deny everyday reality in some sort of utopian fantasy. Politics will always be a tough, and less than entirely clean, environment. To quote the *Financial Times*: 'Lies, seduction, persuasion, hypocrisy and flattery have always attended public life; alternative facts and fake news have been part of the feedstock of politics and journalism for centuries' (Barber, 2017).

A way forward that may appear from the world of entrepreneurs is (as pointed out by Mark Zuckerberg) artificial intelligence. According to Dhruv Gulati in a *Wired* magazine piece about his 'Factmata' start-up, 'the idea is a system that uses AI to detect stuff that is potentially misleading, including fake news, rumours, hoaxes. Everything, in short, that isn't entirely true. If a statement deviates in any way from the strict truth, his system will be able to spot it' (Manthorpe, 2017). The FT also reports on companies looking for ways to help clients willing to pay for taking on fake news. 'Some such as Crisp or New Knowledge started out fighting terrorism. Others such as Cisco and Digital Shadows are seeing the parallels with cyber security, using tactics developed to defend against hackers to battle against fake news' (Kuchler, 2017).

Dealing with next-generation entrepreneurs is obviously key for the dominant media platforms in a world driven by likes, clicks and attention; but do they have what it takes and are they genuinely willing to take action? Moves from those like Facebook suggest that action is indeed (or 'finally' some might say) being taken. They will, for instance, expose users to more 'Related Articles' that show a wider range of perspectives about particular issues. According to Samidh Chakrabarti from Facebook's civic engagement team, talking about how it thinks its technologies have impacted global democracy: 'I wish I could

guarantee that the positives are destined to outweigh the negatives, but I can't. Facebook has a moral duty to understand how these technologies are being used and what can be done to make communities like Facebook as representative, civil and trustworthy as possible' (Ingram, 2018).

That statement, according to Axion, shows 'a continued effort on Facebook's part to be more transparent about the way its platform has steered away from its original mission of promoting openness and democracy' (Fischer, 2018).

The key issue of 'platform responsibility' remains the absolute killer question, of course, together with the safe-harbour liability provisions concerning whether the likes of Facebook are 'conduits of information' or publishers, with the legal status that follows. Mark Zuckerberg has long argued that Facebook is a tech company, not a media company, and that Facebook acts as a conduit for information and discussion rather than as a publisher (Brown, 2018). The social media expert Mari Smith, following Mark Zuckerberg's appearance before Congress, said: 'Zuck has pushed back for years saying that they're not a media company. However, when over 45 per cent of Americans get most of their news from Facebook, it's a publishing platform and I do think they need to comply with rules around being a media company' (BBC Newsnight, 2018).

The anti-tech backlash is pushing back against 'tech-utopianism', which is clearly in deep trouble.

But along with all the positive elements of social media that we mustn't forget, the psychological effects that social media have across society are also, finally, causing Silicon Valley to pause and reflect. The anti-tech backlash is pushing back against 'tech-utopianism', which is clearly in deep trouble. Now 'tech-humanists', whose nucleus is the Center for Humane Technology in San Francisco, argue that social media products 'are designed to be maximally addictive, in order to harvest as much of our attention as they can'. The unintended, or perhaps intended,

consequences of this business strategy 'where everyone is distracted, all the time, is that their products threaten our health and our humanity'. The way out of this mess is improved design 'intended to be less addictive and less manipulative… building products that don't hijack our minds' (Tarnoff and Weigel, 2018). Good intentions to be sure, but to work they'll need a genuinely catalytic form of disruption.

Looking away from the corporate perspective to a governmental level, Britain and various other European countries have historically taken a far tougher line than the US Government in relation to regulating the major tech brands that distribute fake news. The UK Government announced that it had taken action to combat numerous methods of information warfare used by states such as Russia and had set up a 'National Security Communications Unit' to combat fake news. According to *The Times*, 'A national security capability review identified a gap in Britain's ability to tackle state-sponsored disinformation operations designed to influence and disrupt daily life, as is alleged to have happened during the US presidential elections'. The prime minister's spokesman said: 'We are living in an era of fake news and competing narratives' (Haynes, 2018).

To begin to draw this chapter to a close, following Donald Trump's infamous 'Fake News Awards' a clarification of what actually constitutes 'fake news' vs truthful information is an ever more vital issue. According to Reporters Without Borders, 'Predators of press freedom have seized on the notion of "fake news" to muzzle the media on the pretext of fighting false information' (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Referencing the US presidential campaign, PolitiFact, the fact-checking website, found that '51% of Donald Trump's statements were mostly or completely false' (Thornhill, 2016).

On the 2020 US Elections, and many other forthcoming elections in other parts of the world, something we now know is that recognizing fake news is only going to get harder, with new technology (as demonstrated at places such as the Consumer

Electronics Show) meaning that we now need to question not just what we read in the papers, but things that we see and hear in the online and broadcast media. Owing to facial and speech copying technology delivering 'more real than real' images and sounds, to quote The Tyrell Corporation, this is going to become a 'Fake News Mk2' issue, with the weaponizing of information moving on from the basic type of fake news and misinformation that we've unfortunately grown used to in recent years.

According to a piece about what journalists can do about machine reality and deepfakes, the *Columbia Journalism Review* stated that 'nothing online is quite as it appears, now less than ever. Thanks to a new breed of neural network machine-learning algorithms, video, images, voice, and text can be synthesized. Imaginary faces can be realistically fabricated by computer. Videos of politicians *produced as you might control a puppet*' (Diakopoulos, 2018).

In social media terms, and with reference to the fallout from the role played by Facebook in the 2016 US Presidential Election, Facebook has taken up the battle against fake news by utilizing third-party fact-checkers, starting by fact-checking images and videos as just one of numerous updates to protect civic engagement. As part of these actions, 'Facebook will focus on combating foreign interference, removing fake accounts, increasing ad transparency, and reducing the spread of fake news. In addition to monitoring for the spread of misinformation, Facebook is proactively readying itself for upcoming campaigns that seek to sway political and cultural events in different countries' (Perry, 2018).

It was also highly encouraging to note the announcement from the Atlantic Council that their Digital Forensic Research Lab was launching a partnership with Facebook, 'aiming to ensure that the tools designed to bring us closer together aren't used to instead drive us further apart'. The report went on to say that they were 'building a digital solidarity movement, a community driven by a shared commitment to protect democracy

and advance truth across the globe. This partnership's a crucial step towards forging digital resilience' (Kempe, 2018).

Facebook announced what they called 'major new initiatives' on fake news, which included 'launching an updated "news literacy campaign" to teach users how to identify false news and prevent it from spreading, … [they] called upon academics to help measure the volume and effects of misinformation on its platform, and released a short film, *Facing Facts*' (Jefferson, 2018).

The scale of the problem with which Facebook are confronted was summed up by an announcement that, in three months alone, they'd uncovered and disabled nearly 540 million fake accounts, which were in addition to the millions of fake accounts that they prevented daily. But as *The Guardian* responded when also noting the increasing movement of 'bad actors' to WhatsApp owing to its encryption software, 'this is interesting as it seems to suggest either a dramatic change in external circumstances or that the company, wilfully or unknowingly, underestimated the problems of fake accounts in the past'. To deal with this, 'Facebook is betting the ranch on artificial intelligence as the solution to the problem' (Naughton, 2018).

But the problem that Facebook itself poses to society was summed up during the questioning of Mark Zuckerberg by MEPs at the European Parliament. One of them, Guy Verhofstadt, who called on Facebook to cooperate with the EU's antitrust authorities and said that they 'enjoyed a monopoly', asked Zuckerberg ;are you in fact a genius who has created a digital monster that is destroying our societies?' (Rankin, 2018).

As *Wired* magazine stated in an exclusive about fake news and future elections, 'what'll happen as the problem gets more complex? False news is only going to get more complicated, as it moves from text to images to video to VR to, maybe, computer–brain interfaces. Facebook knows this and says "Two billion people around the world are counting on us to fix this"' (Thompson, 2018).

'Fixing things', or perhaps 'fixing things badly', was done in fake news terms when the Russian journalist Arkady Babchenko, aided by the Ukrainian authorities, faked his own assassination. This was then widely reported by the world's media, who were outraged when the trick was revealed a day later. 'Journalists warned that Mr Babchenko had effectively given Russia free rein to write off its alleged involvement in any other extra-judicial killings as fake news. RT mocked publications and broadcasters who had reported on the apparent murder, saying huge apologies had to be made by Western media organisations' (Bennetts, 2018a). *Wired* magazine reported that 'the faked murder plot has raised concerns from Moscow-based journalists who say the plot may further erode trust in the media. Establishing the truth in Russia is incredibly difficult, in part because so few independent outlets exist' (Matsakis, 2018). *The Times* reported that 'the staged death could only lead to more accusations of fake news at a time when the distinction between credible and non-credible sources was becoming more crucial'. Reporters Without Borders described it as a 'pathetic stunt' while the president of the International Federation of Journalists said that 'by spreading false evidence the Ukrainian authorities have seriously eroded the credibility of information (Bennetts, 2018b). As also reported by *The Times*, 'A free society depends on public trust in official truthfulness. Ruses corrode that confidence, at home and abroad. Russia is rightly criticised for using news as a political weapon. To critics, Ukraine just did something similar. Defending our societies against Putinism will be fruitless if we resort to Putinising ourselves' (Lucas, 2018).

Orwell lives on

To be clear about just how vitally important this all is, in her excellent book *Who Can You Trust?* Rachel Botsman states that 'without trust, and without an understanding of how it is built,

managed, lost and repaired, a society cannot thrive. Trust is fundamental to almost every action, relationship and transaction' (Botsman, 2017).

With reference to this issue, Kantar conducted a 'trust in news' global survey in 2017 (via 8,000 people) which found that 'social media and digital-only news platforms have sustained major reputation damage as a result of the "fake news" narrative during recent election cycles. People retain a strong belief that quality journalism is a fundamental cornerstone of a democratic society. However, news organizations are under more scrutiny than ever before' (Cooke, 2017).

The impact on those news organizations regarding their advertisers is, of course, a critical issue when, according to CNN, 'many brands have been startled by the rise of fake news'. The editor in chief of CNN Digital Worldwide stated that 'the concept of brand safety should be expanded in a way that more clearly demarcates trustworthy content sources from purveyors of fake and misleading material. Marketers want an environment that stands for truth, facts and integrity' (WARC, 2018).

The concept of fake news demonstrates that the battle to defend objective truth is as important as ever.

So, we *all* have to face facts, and to do that, the lying has to stop. Because, and to quote the journalist David Aaronovitch, 'democracies partly rely on journalists whose aim is both to arm citizens with the knowledge they need to make decisions and also to connect them with each other as a civil society. If you debase this, then nothing is sacred, least of all the facts' (Aaronovitch, 2017).

It was well reported that, with remarkable serendipity, the election of Donald Trump coincided with George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becoming a bestseller once again.

The preface to the recent *Orwell on Truth*, referencing a description by President Trump's spokeswoman of a comment by

him 'as an "alternative fact" rather than a lie', noted 'the concept of fake news could have come from the Ingsoc regime in the superstate of Oceania. These developments demonstrate that the battle to defend objective truth is as important as ever, and that George Orwell lives on' (Johnson, 2017).

The problem, of course, is who gets to decide what is the truth and what is a lie. The *Financial Times* points out that President Donald Trump 'has blurred the boundaries, apparently giving licence to would-be demagogues across the world. For Mr Trump, fake news is what is propagated by his critics. For his critics, it is the dissemination by Mr Trump and his supporters of "alternative facts" to explain persistent anomalies in their account of reality' (Financial Times, 2018).

'But don't despair,' stated Timothy Garton Ash, 'if Orwell and Solzhenitsyn did not surrender in the face of Goebbels and Stalin, it would be pathetic for us to give up now.' He referenced the great poet John Milton, 'who wrote of Truth with a capital T', quoting 'Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a fair and open encounter', but as Garton Ash noted, 'there is much we can do to make the grappling fair and open' (Timothy Garton Ash, 2016).

The media is at the forefront of the war on truth, but society, and thus the people acting as citizens or consumers within it, need to be able to trust the media (of all descriptions) and rely on the information they're given.

It's encouraging to note that some individual journalists and a small number of newspapers, sites and broadcasters are so rightly admired for the extraordinary efforts they go to in order to gain such trust and respect from the public. But a large percentage of the media, of all descriptions, needs to urgently rebuild their levels of public trust and thus regain their brand authenticity, in a distrusting world.

I'll finish by quoting one more advert and one more article, both of which appeared on World Press Freedom Day. The advert was part of a series for UNESCO which ran across top

media titles, with the intention of encouraging media plurality and for us to engage with different perspectives. (Reporters Without Borders also marked the day with a strong campaign that attacked fake news and disinformation.)

The ad I'll quote ran in *The New York Times*. Created by Droga5, it proposed that we 'Don't just read The New York Times, read the Wall Street Journal, Atlantic, National Review, Guardian, Economist, Financial Times, Los Angeles Times, Repubblica, Helsingin Sanomat, Chicago Tribune; watch the BBC, CNN, NBC, MSNBC, and listen to NPR. Read more. Listen more. Understand more. It all starts with a free press'.

As for the article, it was published by the 'ideas and perspectives' platform *Medium* and, explaining the context of journalism in the current era, highlighted 'Local news under siege. Reporters targeted for doing their jobs. Facts subject to debate. Lies spreading faster than truth. Quality journalism in peril. And the stakes – for our personal wellbeing, for the health of our democracy and the world – are just beginning to be understood. What can help? Quality journalism' (Levien, 2018).

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