

Fake news: Welcome to the Mad Hatter's tea party

By  Danette Breitenbach

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"I feel as if I am Alice in Wonderland and the Mad Hatter is in charge." These are the words Maria Ressa uses to describe the landscape within which journalism operates in today. Ressa, the CEO and executive editor of Rappler, a social news network which uses a hearts and minds approach to news through a unique mood navigator. This network is making specific reference to fake news, something she has experienced first-hand, with threats made to harm her, including rape, on social media platforms, in particular Facebook.



Image credit: Sebastien Decoret - [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com)

Fake news was the topic of one of the sessions at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference that took place recently at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) campus in Johannesburg.

Ressa says while we view social media as freedom of expression, the reality is that while news groups are liable for what they put up, these social media platforms are not. "In the old world you would be liable for what you said; in the new world you are not."

Therefore, what we are seeing is not free speech. "Fake news sites use free speech to stop (or stifle) free speech by flooding the channels with so much information that it is difficult for others to be heard and because it is on such a scale, you think it cannot be a lie. If you are told something so many times, eventually you believe it."

In 2015 to 2016 when Facebook invited all the news groups onto the platform, we thought great! However, the platform utilises the same algorithms whether a site producing fake news or not, so we are all mixed up together and a person has to choose what they want to believe," she adds.

Local journalism and regulation can combat fake news

She likens fake news to a city with no traffic lights, and some of the drivers are paid to crash more cars. That city needs transparent laws and punishment. "The intent of fake news is to bash you. This is how autocratic systems gain more power. We have not found a solution to this."



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There is the assumption that if a person knows it is fake news they will not pass it on. This is not so, says Anya Schiffrin, director of International Media, School of International and Public Affairs Columbia University. "It is like smoking, you know it is bad for you, but you do it anyway. In much the same way people continue to pass on fake news."

She adds that while you can change some facts in a person's mind, if it is an issue that people are emotionally invested in, then you cannot change it.

One way to combat this is to have more local journalism, says Schiffrin. Another option, while no one wants censorship, is regulation. "Regulation, together with policies and taxation for social media platforms," she adds.



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For her, fact checking is only a small part of combating the problem of fake news. "This is not to say we must not do it or give up on it. It is part of the culture of truth and journalism."

Fact-checking can change stories are viewed

While the social media platforms need to be like journalists, fact-checking is an old-world solution that does not work in the new world, says Ressa. "It is technology that we need to deal with, as it is technology that has led to the situation we now find ourselves in. Technology allows fake news to move fast; while fact checking is a slow process."

Lee Mugambi, deputy editor, Africa Check, the continent's first independent, non-partisan fact-checking organisation based in Johannesburg, South Africa disagrees. "Communications have changed. People look for information, it is part of how they experience the world. Fact-checking can help to change how they view the stories. We cannot just say it does not work; we must continue to chip away at it. If you repeat something often enough, then you have a better chance at changing their response. "

To combat fake news, he believes it needs to be defined better. "I do not agree with the term fake news and believe it is inadequate to what we are facing and until we define what is happening, we are shooting bullets in a dark hole. We need to define it, challenge it and then move the conversation forward."

For Ressa, the short-term solution is the platforms themselves. “Media education is the medium-term solution and the longer term is media literacy, but this is going to take years and in the meantime it is an immediate problem that needs to be solved.”

Leon Willems, director of Policies and Programmes, Free Press Unlimited, moderated the session.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

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