

# INTRODUCTION

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To serve as a model curriculum, this handbook is designed to give journalism educators and trainers, along with students of journalism, a framework and lessons to help navigate the issues associated with ‘fake news’. We also hope that it will be a useful guide for practising journalists.

It draws together the input of leading international journalism educators, researchers and thinkers who are helping to update journalism method and practice to deal with the challenges of misinformation and disinformation. The lessons are contextual, theoretical and in the case of online verification, extremely practical. Used together as a course, or independently, they can help refresh existing teaching modules or create new offerings. A suggestion of *How to use this handbook as a model curriculum* follows this introduction.

There was debate over the use of the words ‘fake news’ in the title and lessons. ‘Fake news’ is today so much more than a label for false and misleading information, disguised and disseminated as news. It has become an emotional, weaponised term used to undermine and discredit journalism. For this reason, the terms misinformation, disinformation and ‘information disorder’, as suggested by Wardle and Derakhshan<sup>2</sup>, are preferred, but not prescribed<sup>3 4</sup>.

## ***Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and ‘Fake News’, Disinformation and Propaganda***

This handbook has been produced in a context of growing international concern about a ‘disinformation war’ in which journalism and journalists are prime targets. In early 2017, as this project was being commissioned by UNESCO, a relevant joint statement was issued by the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE’s Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organisation of American States’ Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access

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1 Alice Matthews of ABC Australia and Tom Law of the Ethical Journalism Network contributed research, ideas and resources which are reflected in this introduction.

2 Module Two

3 The argument against using the term ‘fake news’ has been made by many writers and journalists themselves, including Basson, A. (2016) *If it’s fake, it’s not news*. <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/AdriaanBasson/lets-stop-talking-about-fake-news-20170706> [accessed 12/06/2018].

4 Wardle, C et al. (2018). “Information Disorder: the essential glossary”. Shorenstein Center, Harvard University. Available at: [https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/infoDisorder\\_glossary.pdf?x25702](https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/infoDisorder_glossary.pdf?x25702) [accessed 21/07/2018].

to Information. The Declaration expressed alarm at the spread of disinformation and propaganda, and attacks on news media as ‘fake news’. The Rapporteurs and Representatives specifically acknowledged the impacts on journalists and journalism:

*“(We are) Alarmed at instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including by stating that the media is “the opposition” or is “lying” and has a hidden political agenda, which increases the risk of threats and violence against journalists, undermines public trust and confidence in journalism as a public watchdog, and may mislead the public by blurring the lines between disinformation and media products containing independently verifiable facts.”<sup>5</sup>*

### **Disinformation is an old story, fuelled by new technology**

Mobilising and manipulating information was a feature of history long before modern journalism established standards which define news as a genre based on particular rules of integrity. An early record dates back to ancient Rome<sup>6</sup>, when Antony met Cleopatra and his political enemy Octavian launched a smear campaign against him with “short, sharp slogans written upon coins in the style of archaic Tweets.”<sup>7</sup> The perpetrator became the first Roman Emperor and “fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all”.<sup>8</sup>

But the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the weaponisation of information on an unprecedented scale. Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics. The platforms have become fertile ground for computational propaganda<sup>9</sup>, ‘trolling’<sup>10</sup> and ‘troll armies’<sup>11</sup>; ‘sock-puppet’ networks<sup>12</sup>, and ‘spoofers’<sup>13</sup>. Then, there is the arrival of profiteering ‘troll farms’ around elections.<sup>14</sup>

5 UN/OSCE/OAS/ACHPR (2017). Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and “Fake News”, Disinformation, Propaganda: <https://www.osce.org/fom/302796?download=true> [accessed 29/03/2017]. See also: Kaye, D (2017) Statement to the UN General Assembly on October 24th, 2017: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22300&LangID=E> [accessed: 20/8/18].

6 See a timeline plotting selected manifestations of ‘information disorder’ - from Cleopatra’s era to the present - in a guide published by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) Posetti, J & Matthews, A (2018): <https://www.icfj.org/news/short-guide-history-fake-news-and-disinformation-new-icfj-learning-module> [accessed 23/07/2018].

7 Kaminska, I. (2017). *A lesson in fake news from the info-wars of ancient Rome*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/aaf2bbo8-dca2-11e6-86ac-f253db7791c6> [accessed 28/03/2018].

8 ibid

9 See: Oxford Internet Institute’s Computational Propaganda Project: <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/> [accessed 20/07/2018].

10 See Module Seven of this handbook for case studies demonstrating these threats

11 Rappler.com (2018) Fake News in the Philippines: Dissecting the Propaganda Machine <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/rich-media/199895-fake-news-documentary-philippines-propaganda-machine> [accessed 20/07/2018].

12 Gent, E. (2017). Sock puppet accounts unmasked by the way they write and post. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2127107-sock-puppet-accounts-unmasked-by-the-way-they-write-and-post/> [accessed 19/07/2018].

13 Le Roux, J. (2017). Hidden hand drives social media smears. <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-01-27-00-hidden-hand-drives-social-media-smears> [accessed 19/07/2018].

14 Silverman, C et al (2018) *American Conservatives Played a Role in the Macedonian Fake News Boom of 2016* BuzzFeed <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/american-conservatives-fake-news-macedonia-paris-wade-libert> [accessed 20/07/2018].

Although times and technologies are different, history can give us insight into the causes and consequences of the contemporary phenomenon of ‘information disorder’ that this handbook seeks to address. To ensure nuanced reporting of this crisis, journalists, journalism trainers and educators (along with their students) are encouraged to study disinformation, propaganda, hoaxes and satire as historical features of the communications ecology.<sup>15</sup>

The development of journalistic strategies to combat disinformation should therefore be undertaken in the knowledge that information manipulation goes back millennia, while the evolution of journalistic professionalism is comparatively recent<sup>16</sup>. As journalism has evolved, fulfilling a normative role in contemporary society, the news media has mostly been able to operate apart from the world of fabrication and covert attack, shielded by journalism that aspires to professional standards of truth-telling, methodologies of verification, and ethics of public interest. Journalism has itself gone through many phases and iterations of differentiating itself from the pack. Today, even with a variety of ‘journalisms’, it is still possible to identify the diversity of narratives in real news stories as members of a common family of distinct ethics-driven communications practice which also seeks to be editorially independent of political and commercial interests. But before the evolution of such standards, there were few rules about the integrity of information being put into mass circulation.

The spread of Gutenberg’s printing press from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century onwards was indispensable to the rise of professional journalism, but the technology also enabled amplification of propaganda and hoaxes which sometimes implicated media institutions as perpetrators.<sup>17</sup> Broadcasting took possibilities for propaganda, hoaxes and spoofs to a new level as, inter alia, the now infamous *War of the Worlds* radio drama demonstrated in 1938.<sup>18</sup> The rise of international broadcasting also often saw instrumentalisations of information beyond the parameters of professional and independent news, although purely ‘invented’ stories and direct falsifications have generally been more the exception than the rule in the narratives of different players.

We can learn something, too, from the long history of people being taken in by ‘April Fool’s’ jokes – including the occasional journalist<sup>19</sup>. Even today, it is often the case

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15 Posetti, J and Matthews, A (2018) A short guide to the history of ‘fake news’: A learning module for journalists and journalism educators ICFJ <https://www.icfj.org/news/short-guide-history-fake-news-and-disinformation-new-icfj-learning-module> [accessed 23/07/2018].

16 See Module Three of this handbook

17 See for example, what is said to the first-large scale news hoax – ‘*The Great Moon Hoax*’ of 1835. Detailed here: Thornton, B. (2000). *The Moon Hoax: Debates About Ethics in 1835 New York Newspapers*, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 15(2), pp. 89-100. [http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327728JMME1502\\_3](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327728JMME1502_3) [accessed 28/03/2018].

18 Schwartz, A.B. (2015). *The Infamous “War of The Worlds” Radio Broadcast Was a Magnificent Fluke*, *The Smithsonian*. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/infamous-war-worlds-radio-broadcast-was-magnificent-fluke-180955180/#h2FAexeJmuCHJfSt.99> [accessed 28/03/2018].

19 Laskowski, A. (2009). *How a BU Prof April-Fooled the Country: When the joke was on the Associated Press*, *BU Today*. <https://www.bu.edu/today/2009/how-a-bu-prof-april-fooled-the-country/> [accessed 01/04/2018].

that news satire – which has played an important role in the service of accountability journalism<sup>20</sup> - is misunderstood by social media users who disseminate it as if it were straight news.<sup>21 22</sup> In some cases, echoing historical manifestations, there are layers beneath layers, with purportedly satirical sites being part of a wider network designed to reap internet advertising profits via gullible consumers who click and share. This affects not only ‘imposter’ content, but also the credibility of news<sup>23</sup> – which is all the more reason why journalists should make determined efforts to ensure their reporting is accurate in the first place. It is also a strong argument for societies to equip audiences with the competencies of Media and Information Literacy<sup>24</sup> so that people have a clear and critical appreciation of the evolving genres and conventions across news media, advertising, entertainment and social media.

History also teaches us that the forces behind disinformation do not necessarily expect to persuade journalists or broader audiences about the truth of false claims, as much as cast doubt on the status of verifiable information produced by professional news producers. This confusion means that many news consumers feel increasingly entitled to choose or create their own ‘facts’, sometimes aided by politicians seeking to shield themselves from legitimate critique.

Fast forward to 2018 and the proliferation of powerful new technological tools. These, along with the character of social media and messaging platforms that have limited quality control standards for determining what constitutes news, make it easy to counterfeit and mimic legitimate news brands to make frauds look like the real thing. Increasingly, it is also possible to engineer audio and video in ways that go beyond legitimate news editing in order to make it appear that a particular individual said or did something in some place, and to pass this off as an authentic record<sup>25</sup>, sending it viral in the social communications environment.

Today, social media is fuelled by many kinds of content, ranging from the personal to the political. There are many instances produced overtly or covertly by governments, and/or an industry of public relations companies under contract to political or commercial actors. As a result, countless bloggers, Instagram ‘influencers’ and YouTube stars

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20 Baym, G (2006) *The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism* in *Political Communication* Taylor and Francis Volume 22, 2005 - Issue 3 pp 259-276 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10584600591006492> [accessed 20/07/2018].

21 Woolf, N. (2016) *As fake news takes over Facebook feeds, many are taking satire as fact*, The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/17/facebook-fake-news-satire> [accessed 01/04/2018].

22 Abad-Santos, A. (2012). *The Onion Convinces Actual Chinese Communists that Kim Jong-Un is Actually the Sexiest Man Alive*, The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/onion-convinces-actual-chinese-communists-kim-jong-un-actually-sexiest-man-alive/321126/> [accessed 28/03/2018].

23 See Module Three of this handbook for an expansion on this theme

24 See Module Four

25 Solon, O (2017) *The future of fake news: Don't believe everything you see, hear or read* in The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/26/fake-news-obama-video-trump-face2face-doctored-content> [accessed 20/07/2018].

promote products and politicians without disclosing that they are paid to do so. Covert payments are also made to commentators (often with false identities) who seek to affirm, discredit or intimidate in online fora. In the midst of this, journalism loses ground, and itself becomes a subject not just of fair criticism, but also existential attack.

Now, the danger is the development of an ‘arms race’ of national and international disinformation spread through partisan ‘news’ organisations and social media channels, polluting the information environment for all sides in a way that can come back to haunt the initiators themselves.<sup>26</sup> Where disinformation campaigns have been exposed, the result has been major damage to the actors involved – both the implementing agencies and their political clients (see the recent cases of Bell-Pottinger<sup>27 28 29 30</sup> and Cambridge Analytica<sup>31 32</sup>).

The consequence of all this is that digitally fuelled disinformation, in contexts of polarisation, risks eclipsing the role of journalism. Even more, journalism based on verifiable information shared in the public interest – a recent historical achievement that is by no means guaranteed – can itself become discredited when precautions are not taken to avoid it being manipulated. When journalism becomes a vector for disinformation, this further reduces public trust and promotes the cynical view that there is no distinction between different narratives within journalism on the one hand, and narratives of disinformation on the other. This is why the history around the contested use of content, and its various forms, is instructive. Appreciating the multi-faceted evolution of 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘information disorder’ should aid better understanding of the causes and consequences of an unprecedented global threat – one that ranges from harassment of journalists by state-sanctioned ‘troll armies’ to the manipulation of elections, damage to public health and failure to recognise the risks of climate change.

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26 Winseck, D (2008). *Information Operations ‘Blowback’: Communication, Propaganda and Surveillance in the Global War on Terrorism*. *International Communication Gazette* 70 (6), 419-441

27 The African Network of Centers for Investigative Journalism, (2017). *The Guptas, Bell Pottinger and the fake news propaganda machine*, TimeLive. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2017-09-04-the-guptas-bell-pottinger-and-the-fake-news-propaganda-machine/> [accessed 29/03/2018].

28 Cameron, J. (2017) *Dummy’s guide: Bell Pottinger – Gupta London agency, creator of WMC*, BizNews <https://www.biznews.com/global-citizen/2017/08/07/dummys-guide-bell-pottinger-gupta-wmc> [accessed 29/03/2018] and Segal, D. (2018) *How Bell Pottinger, P.R. Firm for Despots and Rogues, Met Its End in South Africa*. New York Times, 4 Feb 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/business/bell-pottinger-guptas-zuma-south-africa.html> [accessed 29/03/2018].

29 Haffajee, F. (2017). *Ferial Haffajee: The Gupta fake news factory and me*. HuffPost South Africa. [online] Available at: [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/2017/06/05/ferial-haffajee-the-gupta-fake-news-factory-and-me\\_a\\_22126282/](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/2017/06/05/ferial-haffajee-the-gupta-fake-news-factory-and-me_a_22126282/) [accessed 06/04/2018].

30 See Module Seven

31 Lee, G. (2018). Q&A on *Cambridge Analytica: The allegations so far, explained*, FactCheck, Channel 4 News. <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/cambridge-analytica-the-allegations-so-far> [accessed 29/03/2018].

32 Cassidy, J. (2018). *Cambridge Analytica Whistleblower claims that cheating swung the Brexit vote*, The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/a-cambridge-analytica-whistleblower-claims-that-cheating-swung-the-brexit-vote> [accessed 29/03/18].

## ***A handbook to help counter the disinformation crisis***

As a curriculum, this handbook falls into two distinct parts: the first three modules frame the problem and give it context; the next four focus on responses to ‘information disorder’ and its consequences.

Module One, *Why it matters: truth, trust and journalism*<sup>33</sup> will encourage thinking about the broader significance and consequences of disinformation and misinformation, and how they feed the crisis of confidence in journalism.

The second module, *Thinking about ‘information disorder’: formats of misinformation and disinformation*<sup>34</sup> unpacks the problem and gives a framework for understanding the dimensions of the problem.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in most parts of the world, the fragile trust in media was declining before social media platforms entered the news arena, offering spaces and tools for anyone to share information.<sup>35</sup> The reasons are varied and complex. The 24/7 online world with its insatiable demand for news content at a time of newsroom cutbacks changed journalism, as is outlined in Module Three, *News industry transformation: digital technology, social platforms and the spread of misinformation and disinformation*.<sup>36</sup> Now, it is the sheer scale, enterprise and reach of fraudulent news being shared online that has created a fresh crisis for journalism, with implications for journalists, media and society.<sup>37</sup>

So, how should those promoting journalism, including educators, practitioners and media policymakers respond? *Combatting misinformation through Media and Information Literacy*<sup>38</sup> is the subject of Module Four.

In the end, it is the discipline of verification that separates professional journalism from the rest<sup>39</sup> and this is the focus of Module Five, *Verification: fact-checking 101*<sup>40</sup>; Module Six, *Social media verification: assessing sources and visual content*<sup>41</sup> is very practical, dealing with challenges of verification and evidence-based journalism which have been thrown up by digital technology and social media.

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33 See Module One

34 See Module Two

35 Edelman. (2017). *2017 Edelman Trust Barometer- Global Results*. Available at <https://www.edelman.com/global-results/> [accessed 03/04/2018].

36 See Module Three

37 Viner, K. (2017). *A mission for journalism in a time of crisis*. [online] *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/16/a-mission-for-journalism-in-a-time-of-crisis> [accessed 03/04/2018].

38 See Module Four

39 Kovach, B. & Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The elements of journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect*. New York: Crown Publishers.

40 See Module Five

41 See Module Six



In the process of enabling everyone to be part of the news process, the social web has resulted in the loss of centralised gatekeepers.<sup>42</sup> Journalism is feeling the consequences, but as with any technology-driven disruption, it takes time to assess, measure and formulate responses. There is inevitably a period of catch-up before research and concrete best practice emerge.

Disinformation is a truly global problem, extending beyond the political sphere to all aspects of information, including climate change, entertainment, etc. However, to date, many of the documented case studies, initial responses and early funding for research and tools, have emanated from the U.S. where the global tech giants are headquartered, and US President Donald Trump's accusations that media institutions and journalists are proponents of 'fake news' have stirred action and funding.

The global picture is evolving daily, particularly with responses from individual States – many of which are considering regulation and legislation to tackle the problem. The tech giants, too, have stepped up efforts to try to engineer disinformation and misinformation off their platforms.

While this publication was being developed, the European Commission produced a report<sup>43</sup> based on an inquiry<sup>44</sup>, amid concerns that disinformation and misinformation are harmful to all of society.<sup>45</sup> Politicians and public policy bodies in individual countries from Australia to the Philippines, Canada, France, the UK, Brazil, India and Indonesia were considering what to do in response.<sup>46</sup> Regarding legislation, Germany moved first with a new law to fine digital platforms heavily if they do not remove 'illegal content', including 'fake news' and hate speech, within 24 hours of being reported.<sup>47</sup> Malaysia's parliament also passed an Anti-Fake News Bill in April 2018, but this was repealed in August.<sup>48</sup> An updated list of state responses has been compiled by Poynter.<sup>49</sup>

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42 Colón, A. (2017). *You are the new gatekeeper of the news*. [online] *The Conversation*. Available at <https://theconversation.com/you-are-the-new-gatekeeper-of-the-news-71862> [accessed 03/04/2018].

43 European Commission (2018). Final report of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. [http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc\\_id=50271](http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=50271) [accessed 03/04/2018].

44 European Commission (2017). *Next steps against fake news: Commission sets up High-Level Expert Group and launches public consultation*. [online] Available at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-4481\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4481_en.htm) [accessed 03/04/2018].

45 Ansip, A. (2017). *Hate speech, populism and fake news on social media – towards an EU response*. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/ansip/announcements/statement-vice-president-ansip-european-parliament-strasbourg-plenary-debate-hate-speech-populism\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/ansip/announcements/statement-vice-president-ansip-european-parliament-strasbourg-plenary-debate-hate-speech-populism_en) [accessed 03/04/2018].

46 Malloy, D. (2017). *How the world's governments are fighting fake news*. [online] *ozy.com*. Available at <http://www.ozy.com/politics-and-power/how-the-worlds-governments-are-fighting-fake-news/80671> [accessed 03/04/2018].

47 Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection. (2017). *Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks (Network Enforcement Act, netzdg)*. [online]. Available at: [http://www.bmjv.de/DE/Themen/fokusthemen/netzdg/\\_documents/netzdg\\_englisch.html](http://www.bmjv.de/DE/Themen/fokusthemen/netzdg/_documents/netzdg_englisch.html) [accessed 03/04/2018].

48 Malaysia scraps 'fake news' law used to stifle free speech. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/17/malaysia-scraps-fake-news-law-used-to-stifle-free-speech> [accessed 18/08/2018].

49 Funke, D. (2018). *A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world* (Poynter). Available at <https://www.poynter.org/news/guide-anti-misinformation-actions-around-world> [accessed 13/07/2018].

Freedom of expression advocates fear that legislation will hurt the very democratisation of information and opinion that new technologies have enabled. In some countries, legislation could be used to silence critical media.<sup>50</sup>

For many journalists, who believe strongly in freedom of expression and have long regarded themselves as essential support players in democratic societies<sup>51</sup>, how to deal with ‘information disorder’ is a complex issue. It is also personal: online attacks on journalists, particularly women, are all too common and in many cases they pose physical and psychological danger while chilling journalism, as outlined in Module Seven *Combatting online abuse: when journalists and their sources are targeted*.<sup>52</sup>

Disinformation and misinformation go beyond challenging journalists’ reputations and safety. They question their purpose and effectiveness, and they perpetuate the degradation of journalism to the detriment of civic discourse. Improving standards and social relevance is in the interests of all future journalists, and to society as a whole. This handbook should challenge researchers, students and practitioners alike to consider and debate how journalism can better serve open societies and democracies in the new context because:

*“A functioning press and democracy require criticism, transparency, and consequences for journalistic mistakes. They also require that we’re able to collectively distinguish them from lies and deception. Otherwise...real information will be painted as fake, and manufactured (rubbish) gets presented as fact.” - Craig Silverman<sup>53</sup>*

### **A note on ethics and self-regulation**

Professional standards for ethical and accountable journalism are an important defence against disinformation and misinformation. Norms and values providing guidance to people doing journalism have evolved over the years to give journalism its distinctive mission and modus operandi. In turn, these uphold verifiable information and informed comment shared in the public interest. It is these factors that underpin the credibility of journalism. As such, they are woven into the fabric of this handbook.

In this context, it is worth citing what Professor Charlie Beckett from the London School of Economics sums up as the potential value of the ‘fake news’ crisis for journalism:

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50 Nossel, S. (2017). *FAKING NEWS: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth*. [ebook] PEN America Available at [https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PEN-America\\_Faking-News-Report\\_10-17.pdf](https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PEN-America_Faking-News-Report_10-17.pdf) [accessed 03/04/2018].

51 McNair, B. (2009). Journalism and Democracy. In: K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch, ed., *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, 6th ed. [online] New York: Routledge

52 See Module Seven

53 Silverman, C. (2018). I Helped Popularize The Term “Fake News” And Now I Cringe Every Time I Hear It. BuzzFeed. Available at <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/i-helped-popularize-the-term-fake-news-and-now-i-kringe> [accessed 03/04/2018].



*“...fake news is the best thing that has happened for decades. It gives mainstream quality journalism the opportunity to show that it has value based on expertise, ethics, engagement and experience. It is a wake-up call to be more transparent, relevant, and to add value to people’s lives. It can develop a new business model of fact-checking, myth-busting and generally getting its act together as a better alternative to fakery.”<sup>54</sup>*

While seeking to be ‘truth-tellers’, journalists cannot always guarantee ‘truth’. Nevertheless, striving to get the facts right, and producing content that accurately reflects the facts, are cardinal principles of journalism. But what does ethical journalism look like in the Digital Age?

Ethical journalism that values transparent practice and accountability is a vital piece of the armoury in the battle to defend facts and truth in an era of ‘information disorder’. News journalists must be independent voices. This means not acting, formally or informally, on behalf of special interests. It also means acknowledging and publicly declaring anything that might constitute a conflict of interest - in the interests of transparency. As Professor Emily Bell of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University has explained, core professional journalism values are about:

*“Making sure news is accurate, being accountable for it if it is not accurate, being transparent about the source of stories and information, standing up to governments, pressure groups, commercial interests, the police, if they intimidate, threaten or censor you. Protecting your sources against arrest and disclosure. Knowing when you have a strong enough public interest defence to break the law and being prepared to go to jail to defend your story and sources. Knowing when it is unethical to publish something. Balancing individual rights to privacy with the broader right of the public interest.”<sup>55</sup>*

In the face of unscrupulous politics, the crisis of ‘information disorder’, manifestation of online hate, proliferation of ‘content-marketing’, advertising, and the self-serving spin of public relations, news organisations and journalists should still prize ethical journalism as the central pillar of a sustainable model of practice - even while battling financial and trust crises. Democracies, too, should have a role in defending journalism, and in protecting them and their sources where public interest justifications come into play.

54 Beckett, C. (2017). ‘Fake news’: *The best thing that’s happened to Journalism at Polis*. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2017/03/11/fake-news-the-best-thing-thats-happened-to-journalism/> [accessed 04/03/2018].

55 Bell, E. (2015). *Hugh Cudlipp Lecture* (Full text), The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/28/emily-bells-2015-hugh-cudlipp-lecture-full-text> [accessed 01/04/2018].

Ethical codes<sup>56</sup>, designed to support information gathering and verification in the public interest, are what distinguish journalism, and in particular news reportage, from other types of communication. This is of increased significance in the Digital Age where there is not just a democratisation of communications, but also a constant flow of disinformation, misinformation, falsehoods and abuse. In this context, ethical journalism is even more important, as a framework for establishing models of journalism that favour trust and accountability in the interests of building meaningfully engaged relationships with audiences.

Trust in reporting that is accurate, accountable and independent, is essential to winning over audiences and enabling a common public sphere in which debate can occur on the basis of shared facts. Informed audiences who engage with, and share, credible content are essential antidotes to the spread of disinformation and misinformation.

To embed and enforce these core values in a changing media environment, newsrooms and media organisations adopt and adapt codes of conduct and create mechanisms for the public to hold them to account - press councils, readers' editors, editorial policies, and internal ombudsmen are features of these self-regulation structures. Such structures allow for errors to be identified in a professional peer-review context, they can facilitate public acknowledgement of mistakes and require corrections, and they help to enforce professional norms concerning the standard of publishing in the public interest. While often derided as 'toothless tigers' by critics who favour external regulation of the news media, these structures serve an important purpose in the context of the disinformation crisis: they help strengthen professional accountability and transparency and thereby can reinforce community trust in journalism. They also help to mark out the distinctive characteristics of journalism that adopts the discipline of verification to achieve accuracy and reliability, distinguishing it from disinformation, propaganda, advertising and public relations.


### ***From 'journalist' to journalism***

The days when journalistic ethics were confined to the business (if not always fully respected) of a career or occupation/profession have become history. This is widely recognised, including by the United Nations, such as in the Secretary General's 2017 report on Safety of Journalists A/72/290<sup>57</sup>, which reads:

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56 See, for example, the Australian Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance's 'Journalist Code of Ethics'. Available at: <https://www.meaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/> [accessed: 04/03/2018].

57 Available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1304392?ln=en> [accessed on 16/06/2018].

 “The term ‘journalist’ includes journalists and other media workers. Journalism is defined in document CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 44, as ‘a function shared by a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, as well as bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the Internet or elsewhere.’”<sup>58</sup>

In the same spirit, UNESCO’s General Conference refers to “journalists, media workers and social media producers who generate a significant amount of journalism, online and offline” (Resolution 39, November 2017)<sup>59</sup>. The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, endorsed by the UN’s Chief Executives Board in 2012, notes: “the protection of journalists should not be limited to those formally recognized as journalists, but should cover others, including community media workers and citizen journalists and others who may be using new media as a means of reaching their audiences”.<sup>60</sup>

Journalism, in this light, can be seen as an activity guided by ethical standards of verifiable information shared in the public interest. Those who claim to do journalism may extend wider than those who are journalists in the occupational sense, while those who are employed as, or who identify as journalists, may occasionally or even systematically fall short of producing content that counts as accurate, fair, professional and independent journalism in the public interest. What matters is not the formal or claimed status as much as the character of the content being produced.

While journalism is based on the exercise of freedom of expression, which is every individual’s right, it is a specialised exercise which sets itself up as adhering to specific standards that mark it out from other forms of expression (e.g. poetry, public relations, advertising, disinformation, etc.). These standards are intimately bound up with the ethics of professional journalistic practice.

### ***Is transparency the new objectivity?***

Objectivity can mean many things. In the sense of a distance from subjectivity, it is a contentious theme in professional journalism. It can be striven for, but it is rarely possible, and may not always be desirable in the face of brutality or inhumanity (for example, fair and independent reporting would not give the same moral credence to the claims of those who have been convicted of committing war crimes as those

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58 See also UN documents A/HRC/20/17, paras. 3-5, A/HRC/20/22 and Corr.1, para. 26, A/HRC/24/23, para. 9, A/HRC/27/35, para. 9, A/69/268, para. 4, and A/HRC/16/44 and Corr.1, para. 47.

59 Records of the General Conference. 39th session. Paris, 30 October – 14 November 2017. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002608/260889e.pdf> [accessed 02/07/2018].

60 UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. 1CI-12/CONF.202/6 [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/un-plan-on-safety-journalists\\_en.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/un-plan-on-safety-journalists_en.pdf) [accessed 03/11/2017].

of people who have survived them – although even the latter should not be above investigation into their veracity). But **fairness, independence, accuracy, contextuality, transparency, protection of confidential sources and perspicacity**<sup>61</sup> in reporting build trust, credibility and confidence.

In 2009, Harvard University researcher Dr David Weinberger declared that, “Transparency is the new objectivity”<sup>62</sup>. The same year, the former Director of the BBC’s Global News Division, Richard Sambrook, explained that transparency, not objectivity, was delivering trust in the ‘new media age’:

“...news today still has to be accurate and fair, but it is as important for the readers, listeners and viewers to see how the news is produced, where the information comes from, and how it works. The emergence of news is as important, as the delivering of the news itself.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Points of difference**

The core components of professional journalistic practice above do not mean there is just one form of journalism. These objectives can be fulfilled in a range of journalistic styles and stories, each embodying different narratives that in turn are based on different values and varying perspectives of fairness, contextuality, relevant facts, etc. For example, media outlets may have varying takes on a given news story (some even ignoring it), without moving out of the ‘information business’ into the realms of disinformation and misinformation (see next chapter *Using this handbook as a model curriculum*, and Modules 1, 2 and 3). However, it is when content departs from journalistic principles per se, and especially when it still poses as news, that we are no longer dealing with journalism, but a particular form of disinformation.

This Introductory chapter has highlighted the range of issues raised by the ‘fake news’ debate, providing the context for the explication, analysis and learning modules that follow.

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61 See ‘core principles’ in the next chapter

62 Weinberger, D. (2009). *Transparency is the new objectivity*. <http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2009/07/19/transparency-is-the-new-objectivity/> [accessed 28/03/2018].

63 Bunz, M. (2009). *How Social Networking is Changing Journalism*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2009/sep/18/oxford-social-media-convention-2009-journalism-blogs> [accessed 28/03/2018].