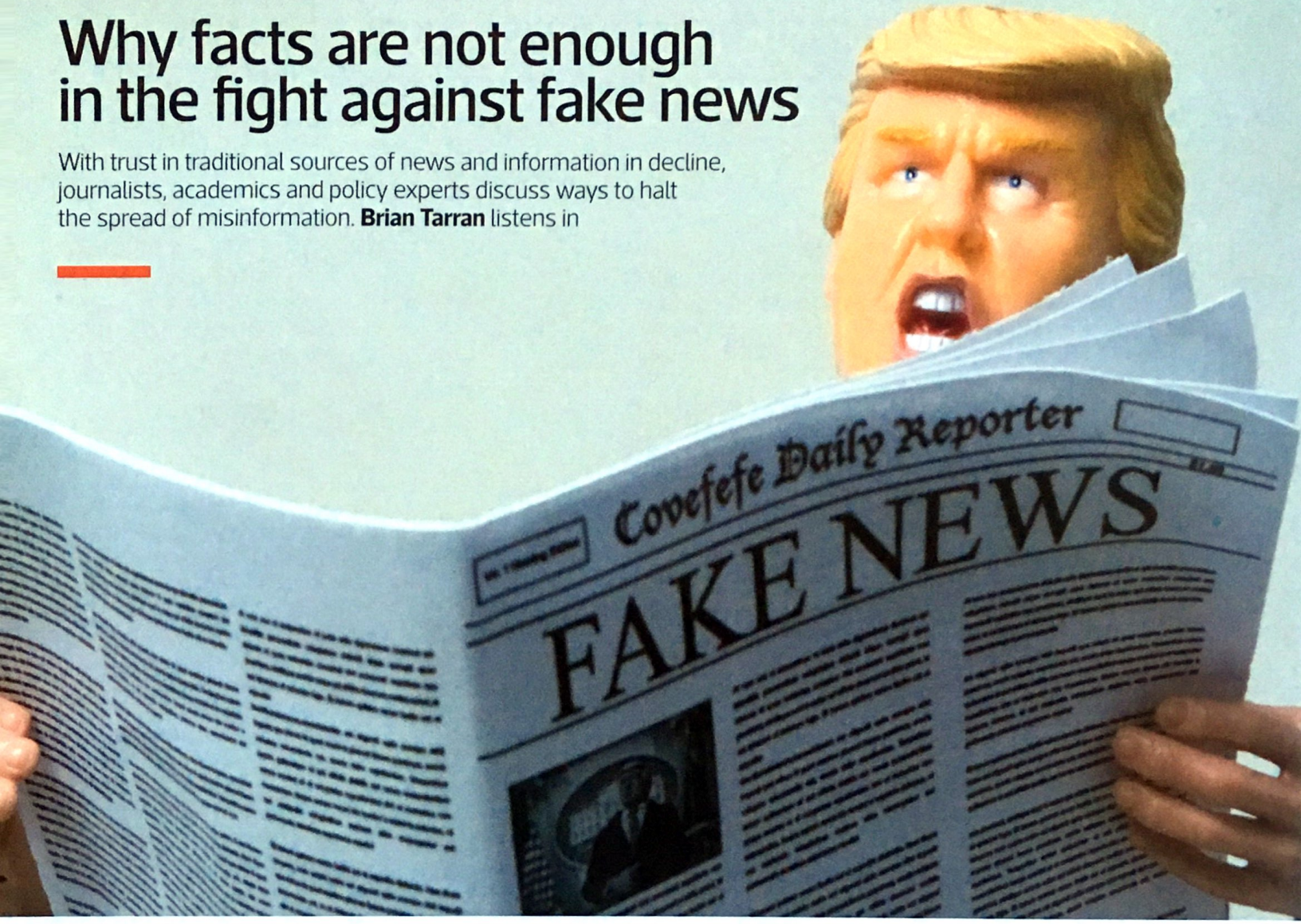
Why facts are not enough in the fight against fake news

With trust in traditional sources of news and information in decline, journalists, academics and policy experts discuss ways to halt the spread of misinformation. **Brian Tarran** listens in



You might have read that we live in a "post-truth" era in which facts no longer matter and emotion reigns supreme. But Dorothy Byrne takes issue with the idea of anything being "post-truth". "You can be pre- or post-breakfast," she says, "but you can't actually be pre- and post-truth; it's a different form of concept." Likewise, Byrne says, there is no such thing as "fake news". "If it's fake, it can't be news because news is about something that actually happened."

However much one might dispute the labels, "post-truth" and "fake news" are problems that many have been grappling with since Britain's referendum on EU membership, and even more so since the Donald Trump candidacy became the Donald Trump presidency.

As head of news and current affairs for British broadcaster Channel 4, Byrne is acutely aware of the danger of misinformation and the harm it can do to the public's perception of what is real. Speaking at a recent London conference, organised by the Westminster Media Forum, she told how Channel 4 conducted a survey of the British public, asking them to distinguish between several true stories and several fake ones. "Only 4% of people got all the answers right," Byrne says (bit.ly/2xMZivt). "That is genuinely very worrying."

About the conference
"Fake news - scope, public trust and options for policy" was organised by the Westminster Media Forum. Further details are online at bit.ly/2eBpKUF

Equally disconcerting is the realisation that it will take more than facts, figures and evidence to combat the spread of fake news. A surfeit of facts will not make up for a deficit of trust.

Loss of confidence

Surveys frequently record a decline in trust in the institutions of media and government, which inevitably leads people to doubt the information these institutions produce. (The Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, makes for depressing reading – bit.ly/2xN8jEC.) This loss of confidence in traditional sources of news and information has left people more open to alternative sources, especially those that are

channelled through people they *do* trust: friends, family and colleagues – the people they connect with through social media, and with whom they share opinions and stories, whether real or fake, informed or misguided.

Matthew d'Ancona, a *Guardian* columnist and author of the book *Post-Truth* (see review, page 45), traces the roots of this crisis of trust to the financial crash of 2008. "I think the impact of that moment is still being felt around the world in all sorts of ways," he says. But in Britain it was followed by other crises, including stories of the misuse of parliamentary expenses, the hacking of mobile phones by certain newspapers, and a sex abuse scandal involving the late TV presenter Jimmy Savile.

"All these institutions, which had acted as gateways and arbiters of information and authority, were under attack as never before," says d'Ancona. "Parallel to that you had perhaps the greatest technological revolution since the Industrial Revolution, much of it a glorious and extraordinary achievement." He is referring to the rise of digital and social media platforms, and the tools they afford for the creation and distribution of content outside of traditional media structures.

Fake news has thrived in this environment for several reasons. First, people can now create content unburdened by the layers of editing and fact-checking that news organisations typically employ to stop most – if not all – errors and mistruths from making it on air or into print. Second, through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, individuals have the means to push their content to a potentially huge audience.

Third, and most important perhaps, it can be hard to distinguish between real and fake news sources within social media platforms, where content is aggregated into a single "news" feed – mixing updates from friends and family with identical-looking links to stories across the web. Matt Rogerson, head of public policy for the Guardian Media Group, says that "quality news brands have become less discernible" in this context, "making it harder than ever to determine which news sources to trust and which to avoid". Martin Moore, director of the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London, puts it more bluntly when he says that "quality news content produced for [these] platforms is not distinguished from junk news produced to gain attention".

Attention is the currency on which digital media thrives. Likes, shares, comments and other forms of user engagement make content more noticeable, more discoverable and more likely to pop up in a user's feed. Fake headlines such as "Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president" and "WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS ... then drops another bombshell!" are effective at generating engagement. A Buzzfeed analysis (bzfd.it/2xMIWTp) found that in the three months before the 2016 US presidential election, the top 20 fake election stories on Facebook generated a million more engagements than the top 20 "mainstream" news articles – and all these extra clicks help generate revenue in the digital advertising ecosystem, further incentivising the production of fake news (see "The fake news factory").

The fake news factory
A February 2017 article in *Wired* magazine profiles a group of residents of the town of Veles, Macedonia, who found a way to turn fake news into a real source of income during the 2016 US presidential election. They used social media shares to drive clicks to websites they owned, which then generated ad revenue through automated advertising engines, the most famous of which is Google AdSense. Read the article at bit.ly/2euGtZZ.

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Emotional appeal

Fake news on social media is in some sense "a flight from the complexity of the world in which we live", says Steven Erlanger, London bureau chief of the *New York Times*. "It appeals to people who really want simple explanations for everything." But fake news also satisfies another need: serving up stories that people either *want* or *feel* to be true, even if the facts say otherwise. This appeal to emotion is a central component of the post-truth phenomenon, says d'Ancona – post-truth being "the broader epistemological context in which fake news is thriving".

"Post-truth is not lies," he says. "We've always had lies, we've always had mendacity, we've always had attacks on veracity – that's as old as human communication. Post-truth is a very specific and very twenty-first-century problem, which is where emotion trumps factual assessment and evidence."

This problem, d'Ancona says, "will not sort itself out simply because people have a love of the truth and eventually all the fakes and the phoneys and the frauds will be found out". The growing number of fact-checking organisations is an "encouraging" development, he believes, but he identifies a need for a greater focus on digital literacy, particularly as part of the school curriculum.

Matt Tee, chief executive of the UK's Independent Press Standards Organisation, defines "digital literacy" as "helping people to understand whether the content they're reading is reliable". He points to a couple of initiatives that aim to achieve this: thetrustproject.org, which is part-funded by Google, and the News Integrity Initiative (bit.ly/2x9iJ4u), backed by Facebook (which also has its own journalism project, one ambition of which is to "curb news hoaxes" – see bit.ly/2x92e8u).

But, warns d'Ancona, "We need to acknowledge that just bombarding people with facts is not enough, and that the answer to fake news is to wrap our response to it in an emotionalism that does not compromise factual accuracy, but acknowledges [that] the way in which people respond to information has changed."

Byrne agrees that "you can't just feed people a whole load of facts ... we are social animals, we relate to other people, so we have to always have a mixture of telling people's human stories while at the same time giving context to those stories and giving the real facts". Admittedly, that is hard to achieve within Twitter's 140-character limit, or when creating a 60-second explainer for Facebook. It is "a real challenge", Byrne says, "but I think it's one that can be answered. You don't need an hour to tell a whole story." ■