

WHO can you TRUST?

3.12

Despite predictions that the traditional media were going to disappear in the internet age, newspapers, the radio and television have managed to survive. However, their survival has come at a price. Digital technology has given birth to social media, tools that allow ordinary people to create, share and exchange information without the need for the usual news channels. Moreover, social media is also attracting a large share of advertisers' money away from the traditional media. As a result, newspapers, the radio and television are always looking for ways to hurt their new rival and they are more than happy to publish stories that play on people's fears about how untrustworthy and unsafe social media is.

When Zilla van den Born left home for a five-week trip around South-East Asia, she promised her family in Amsterdam that she would keep in touch and she did. Zilla regularly uploaded photos to her Facebook page of herself on the beach, on sightseeing trips and dining out. She also made Skype calls to her family to tell them that everything was going just as she had planned. And it was, but not as she had led her family to believe, because Zilla hadn't gone abroad; she was holed up in her flat in Amsterdam.

The reason for Zilla's devious behaviour was her university project, which aimed to demonstrate how social media can distort the truth. Zilla certainly succeeded. In her flat she made out she was on holiday – photoshopping pictures by inserting images of herself into photos of South-East Asian beaches and temples. For the Skype calls, she used old Christmas decorations and a Chinese paper umbrella to disguise her bedroom and create an Asian hotel room. When Zilla finally let on that her holiday had been a hoax, her family admitted that they had been completely taken in. Zilla explained that the experiment demonstrated how today we can manipulate reality and the press loved the

story. Here was a perfect example of why people should only trust the traditional media. However, while the mainstream media takes every opportunity to expose the dangers of social media, social media has become good at demonstrating that the traditional press is also far from perfect.

As all football fans know, the sports media has to work harder between matches to fill their pages and sites. The most popular method of doing this is by speculating about the players that clubs might buy or sell, especially talented foreigners. However, many readers often suspect that these stories are the products of lazy journalism and, if not completely false, contain very little truth and a lot of exaggeration. One Irish football fan decided to find out by using social media to invent Masal Bugdov, a sixteen-year-old football superstar from the small Eastern European country of Moldova. The fan set up a Wikipedia page for the player that explained that Bugdov had already played for his national team and that his nickname was 'Massi'. He then wrote false press agency stories that claimed Bugdov would soon join Arsenal and sent them to sports blogs. The blogs accepted the stories as true, but the big surprise came when *The Times* newspaper included an article entitled Football's Top 50 Rising Stars. At number thirty on the list was 'Moldova's finest', sixteen-year-old Masal Bugdov, who had been linked with Arsenal and 'plenty of other top clubs as well.'

While most people would agree that the traditional press should warn people about the dangers of new technology, it is also good to know that social media can expose the unprofessional practices of some journalists. The more they zoom in on each other's unacceptable practices, the better for the readers.



Zilla's fake holiday

