This insert consists of **2** printed pages.

Katharine Viner discusses the disruption of truth in journalism.

1 One Monday morning last September, Britain woke to a depraved news story. The prime minister, David Cameron, had allegedly committed an "obscene act with a dead pig's head". "A distinguished Oxford contemporary claims Cameron once took part in an outrageous university dining society event, involving a dead pig," the Daily Mail reported. The authors claimed their source was an MP, who had apparently seen photographic evidence of it.

2 Then, after a full day of online merriment, something shocking happened. Isabel Oakeshott, the journalist who had written the article, went on TV and admitted that she did not know whether her scandalous scoop was even true. Oakeshott went even further to absolve herself of any journalistic responsibility: "It's up to other people to decide whether they give it any credibility or not." An unusually brazen defence, it seemed that journalists were no longer required to believe their own stories to be true, nor, apparently, did they need to provide evidence. Instead it was up to the readers – who do not even know the identity of the source – to make up their own minds.

3 Twenty-five years after the first website went online, it is clear that we are living through a period of dizzying transition. For 500 years after Gutenberg, the dominant form of information was the printed page: knowledge was primarily delivered in a fixed format, one that encouraged readers to believe in stable and settled truths. Now, we are caught in a series of battles: between truth and falsehood; the connected and the alienated; between an informed public and a misguided mob.

4 In the era of the printing press, words on a page nailed things down. Despite the conflicting truths on any given subject, what was printed felt like the truth, at least until the next day brought another update or a correction, and we all shared a common set of facts, often fixed in place by an establishment. This arrangement was not without flaws: too much of the press often exhibited a bias towards the status quo and a deference to authority, and it was prohibitively difficult for ordinary people to challenge the power of the press. Now, people distrust much of what is presented as fact – particularly if the facts in question are uncomfortable, or out of sync with their own views – and while some of that distrust is misplaced, some of it is not.

5 However, this does not mean that there are no truths today. It simply means there is no consensus on the truth and with no way to achieve it, chaos soon follows. Increasingly, what counts as a fact is merely a view that someone feels to be true – and technology has made it very easy for these "facts" to circulate with a reach that was unimaginable in the Gutenberg era (or even a decade ago).

6 In the digital age, it is easier than ever to publish false information, which is quickly shared and taken to be true – as we often see in emergency situations, when news is breaking. Sometimes rumours like these spread by deliberate manipulation, in which a corporation or regime pays people to convey their message. Whatever the motive, falsehoods and facts now spread the same way. As online harassment expert Danielle Citron describes it, "people forward on what others think, even if the information is misleading or incomplete, because they think they have learned something valuable." This cycle repeats itself with unstoppable momentum. You share a friend's post on Facebook, perhaps to show kinship or agreement or that you're "in the know", and you increase the visibility of their post.

7 Algorithms such as the one that powers Facebook's news feed are designed to give us more of what they think we want – which means that the version of the world we encounter every day in our own personal stream has been invisibly curated to reinforce our pre-existing beliefs. When Eli Pariser, coined the term "filter bubble" in 2011, he was talking about how the personalised web –

in particular Google's personalised search function, which means that no two people's Google searches are the same – means that we are less likely to be exposed to information that challenges us or broadens our worldview, and less likely to encounter facts that disprove false information that others have shared.

8 Social media companies have become overwhelmingly powerful in determining what we read – and enormously profitable from the monetisation of other people's work. The closed space of a chat app which teenagers, especially, spend more and more of their time on is even more restrictive. As the pioneering Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan wrote, the "diversity that the world wide web had originally envisioned" has given way to "the centralisation of information" inside a select few social networks – and the end result is "making us all less powerful in relation to government and corporations".

9 In the last few years, many news organisations have steered themselves away from public interest journalism and towards junk-food news, chasing page views in the vain hope of attracting clicks and advertising – but like junk food, you hate yourself when you have indulged in it. The most extreme manifestation of this phenomenon has been the creation of fake news farms, which attract traffic with false reports designed to look like real news, and are therefore widely shared on social networks. A news-publishing industry desperately chasing down every cheap click does not sound like an industry in a position of strength, and indeed, news publishing as a business is in trouble. Many journalists have lost their jobs in the past decade because of a problem with funding journalism.

10 We must not allow the chaos of the present to cast the past in a rosy light. Of course, journalists have got things wrong in the past, more often unintentionally, but these were rejected by the majority who preferred accurate news. But what is new and significant is that today, rumours and lies are read just as widely as facts – and often more widely, because they are wilder than reality and found by news companies to be more exciting to share. The increasing prevalence of such an approach suggests a fundamental change in the values of journalism – a consumerist shift.

11 We should be careful, however, not to dismiss anything with an appealing digital headline as clickbait – appealing headlines are good if they lead the reader to quality journalism. My belief is that what distinguishes good journalism from poor journalism is labour: the journalism that people value the most is that for which they can tell someone has put in a lot of work – where they can feel the effort that has been expended on their behalf, over tasks big or small.

12 The shift to digital publishing has been a thrilling development for journalism – it has meant new ways to get stories – from our audience, from data, from social media. It has presented new ways to tell stories – with interactive technologies and now with virtual reality. It has given us new ways to find new readers in surprising places; new ways to engage with our audiences, opening ourselves up to debate. Serious, public interest journalism is demanding, and there is more of a need for it than ever. It helps keep the powerful honest; it helps people make sense of the world and their place in it. Facts and reliable information are essential for the functioning of democracy – and the digital era has made that even more obvious.