

# FAKING IT

FAKE NEWS AND HOW IT IMPACTS ON THE CHARITY SECTOR



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### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who kindly agreed to be interviewed for this report. Helen Magee is a writer and producer. She is the author of a previous IBT report, *The Aid Industry - what journalists really think*. Front cover picture courtesy of MSF © Maud Veith/SOS Mediterranee, Rescue of a rubber dinghy, November 2017. Design by birdy.

### About IBT

IBT (the International Broadcasting Trust) works with the media to ensure that audiences remain engaged with global issues. We regularly publish research and organize events to encourage a greater understanding of the changing media landscape and its impact on the charity sector. We are a membership-based organisation. If you are interested in joining please see our website [www.ibt.org.uk](http://www.ibt.org.uk)

# FOREWORD

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Fake news is of course a very topical issue and much has been written about it, but this is the first report that examines the implications of fake news for the charity sector.

In an increasingly strident online environment it's much harder for charities to be heard. It's also easy for them to fall victim to false accusations, which often originate online but gain traction through mainstream media. Sometimes misinformation is disseminated by NGOs, whether intentionally or not.

As many institutions, including charities, suffer from a loss of trust, some audiences are more likely to listen to their family and friends than to traditional news sources.

In this report we examine the phenomenon of fake news and look at specific examples that have had a direct impact on charities, particularly those involved with international development. And we make recommendations to help charities negotiate the increasingly complex media landscape and rebuild trust amongst their supporters, the media and the general public.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This is the first report that looks at the implications of fake news for the charity sector. Half of adults in the UK use the internet to access news, yet a Channel 4 survey found that only 4% could correctly differentiate between true and fake news.

This report explains how misinformation is incentivised and spread by social media platforms. It gathers together a number of examples of fake news from across the sector which range from malicious fabrications about individuals to attempts to sway public attitudes against the rescuing of refugees.

The phenomenon of fake news has been extensively investigated mainly looking at the role of social media platforms and the impact on political debate. The impact on other areas of public life, such as charitable organisations, has been less well explored.

Charities working in the development sector need to address the challenges of communicating in an increasingly volatile online environment. Gaining and retaining trust is essential if they are to convince the public of the value of their work, but this becomes more difficult within the polarised debates that dominate social media.

The circulation of misinformation *about* NGOs, malicious or otherwise, carries a reputational risk. It must be carefully monitored, and where necessary, challenged.

Misinformation disseminated *by* NGOs carries an even greater reputational risk. All content has to be accurate, relevant and, if based on information from another source, rigorously verified.

Conflicts and natural disasters are increasingly accompanied by rumours and misinformation on social media making humanitarian operations in these areas even more difficult.

Only strong communication strategies, built around clear core values, will ensure that NGOs are heard above the increasing stridency of competing voices on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

An important theme of this report is loss of trust – western society has been experiencing a loss of faith in the established order for many years. This loss of trust has particularly affected politicians and the media, but it is affecting charities too. There is a growing tendency online to trust friends rather than authoritative sources. This affects all organisations disseminating information on the internet, including NGOs.

Rebuilding trust is a major challenge for NGOs. There are new rules for organisations in any sector if they are to retain trust in the digital age. Openness, accountability and inclusivity are key.

Regulation of social media platforms is very much on the political agenda, but so far they have avoided the type of regulation that controls the mainstream media by insisting on their role as intermediaries rather than publishers or news organisations.

The growth of fact checkers has spiralled since the spread of fake news online. Two of the longest established services in the UK are the BBC's Reality Check and Channel 4's FactCheck. At the moment, there is little evidence to determine how successful fact checking is in debunking fake news stories.

Good journalism has always involved checking sources and verifying evidence and the same rules apply to NGOs. Amnesty has set up its own Digital Verification Corps to ensure that all content in its research is authentic.

Whilst it is essential that NGOs ensure that any information provided or shared by them is accurate, it is equally important that they are transparent about their sources and methods of authentication. Being prepared to share their methodology is another way of building trust with the media.

This transparency extends to NGOs accepting when they get something wrong and admitting when they don't know something as much as when they do.

In a less trusting and more questioning society, NGOs no longer have the right to attention. Digital technology brings challenges but also opportunities. The same kind of algorithms used by social media platforms will allow charities to target niche groups within their community more effectively.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

At a time when public confidence in many institutions has declined, rebuilding and maintaining trust should be key pillars of NGOs' communications strategies.

Poor data control and misleading information undermine trust. There should be a stronger focus on accuracy and transparency now that NGOs are subject to higher levels of scrutiny – and a public commitment to correct errors when they occur.

Fake news and misinformation about NGOs and their work should be monitored and challenged when appropriate.

Key staff should be offered training in verification methods to ensure all information sources are authenticated.

Consideration could be given to the establishment of an international aid fact checking organisation that serves the whole sector.

Strong branding will be essential so that NGOs can differentiate themselves from other less reliable information sources.

Original, creative storytelling using all the techniques and formats that digital technology offers should appeal to a sense of hope rather than pity.

Guidelines should be provided to communications and field officers on the risks of social media. Staff should be protected against online abuse and supported when things go wrong.

Digital advertising agencies should be carefully briefed to exclude certain sites and the appearance of adverts on inappropriate sites should be monitored.

Investment in relationships with trusted media outlets will help to reinforce and amplify messaging.

## INTERVIEWEES

**Jamie Angus** Deputy Director, BBC World Service Group

**Fergus Bell** News and Media Consultant

**Samantha Bradshaw** Researcher, Oxford Internet Institute

**Neil Breakwell** Vice President, News and Current Affairs, Vice Media

**Kathryn Dalziel** Social Media Officer, MSF

**Sam Dubberley** Manager, Amnesty International Verification Corps

**Paul Gill** Head of Digital Engagement, Oxfam

**Gemma Gillie** Head of Press, MSF

**Richard Grange** formerly Head of News, ActionAid

**Phil Harding** Media Consultant

**Girish Menon** Chief Executive, ActionAid

**Nic Newman** Visiting Fellow, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

**Sally O'Connell** Head of Digital, ActionAid

**Daniel Pearl** Factual Commissioning Editor, Channel 5

**Sean Ryan** Director of Media, Save the Children

**Will Tucker** Communications and Advocacy Consultant

**Patrick Worrall** Senior Producer, Channel 4 FactCheck

## INTRODUCTION

This is the first report that looks at the implications of fake news for the charity sector. According to Ofcom, in 2017, 49% of adults in the UK used the internet to access news, an increase of 13% on the previous year.<sup>1</sup> Yet a Channel 4 survey conducted in February 2017 found that only 4% of respondents could correctly differentiate between true and fake news.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of fake news has been extensively investigated and analysed, particularly since the US election and the EU referendum, mainly with regard to the role of social media platforms and the impact on political debate. The impact on other areas of public life, such as charitable organisations, has been less well explored. Nevertheless, there are implications for this sector which, like political institutions and the media, has also experienced a decline in trust.

Charities working in the development sector need to address the challenges of communicating in this volatile online environment. Gaining and retaining trust is essential if they are to convince the public of the value of international aid, but this becomes more difficult in the increasingly polarised debates that dominate social media. The circulation of misinformation *about* NGOs, malicious or otherwise, carries a reputational risk. It must be carefully monitored, and where necessary, challenged. Misinformation disseminated by NGOs carries an even greater reputational risk. All content has to be accurate, relevant and if based on information from another source rigorously verified.

Conflicts and natural disasters are increasingly accompanied by rumours and misinformation on social media making humanitarian operations in these areas even more difficult. People need fact-based information about key global issues such as climate change and migration. Only strong communication strategies, built around clear core values, will ensure that NGOs are heard above the increasing stridency of competing voices on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

This report attempts to provide the first overview of the “post truth” media landscape in which NGOs now operate and explains how misinformation is incentivised and spread by social media platforms. It gathers together a number of examples of fake news from across the sector which range from malicious fabrications about individuals to attempts to sway public attitudes against the rescuing of refugees, and it offers recommendations on how to manage online communications effectively. It draws on some of the numerous reports and articles that have been written on trust and fake news in recent months and 15 telephone interviews, one face-to-face interview and one email interview conducted from September to December 2017 with NGOs, journalists and social media analysts.

## TRUST

Western society has been experiencing a loss of faith in the established order for many years. This loss of trust has particularly affected politicians and the media, but it is increasingly affecting charities too. If NGOs can address the issue of trust directly then there is almost certainly an opportunity for them to build their brands as trusted sources of information.

A number of reports have investigated levels of trust during 2017. The methodologies differ and sample sizes vary, but the main findings reveal a continuing decline. The 2017 *Edelman Trust Barometer Report* surveyed more than 33,000 respondents across 28 countries and found that trust in all four institutions – business, government, NGOs and media – declined in 2017, a first since Edelman began tracking trust.<sup>3</sup> The steepest decline was recorded in the media.

The report also revealed that for the first time, trust in NGOs had fallen to nearly the same level as trust in business. In the US, China, Japan, Germany and the UK trust in NGOs fell below 50 percent. In the UK, recent years have seen high profile failures of governance in charitable institutions, such as Kids’ Company, whilst aggressive fundraising practices, reflected in the Olive Cook case, have been widely criticised. Trust in international aid agencies has been undermined by media stories about fraud and corruption, for example the loss of £3.8m of the money raised by the Red Cross to tackle the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the size and influence of some of the leading agencies has opened them up to a degree of scrutiny not experienced in the past. The right wing press has always questioned the case for international aid, but the particular problems faced by NGOs working with fragile states and authoritarian regimes mean that it can be difficult to account for every pound spent. Sean Ryan, Director of Media at Save the Children, explains that although robust systems ensure that Save loses only 0.06% of its money to fraud, *it must still be ready to defend its record to those who may not be fully aware of the complex challenges faced in the most hostile environments.*

It has been suggested that more people in the UK and US are turning to the organisations they do trust and supporting them through subscription. The Guardian, for example, now has more than 800,000 subscribers from 140 countries and the New York Times has more subscribers than at any time in its 164-year history. Kathryn Dalziel, Social Media Officer at MSF in London, argues that the latest Edelman Trust Barometer results reveal that trust in NGOs has declined the least out of the four main sectors it surveys. She believes *this gives NGOs a real opportunity to be taken seriously as an information source, and trusted in some cases more than traditional news and government*

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# ‘People don’t trust experts; they trust their friends more and social media encourages this.’

Nic Newman, Reuters Institute

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sources. She explains how they try to maintain trust at MSF:

*Firstly, we ensure that we only talk about situations where we actually have staff on the ground. Secondly, being as transparent as possible in our messaging about where our money comes from and where it goes is an important way to build trust. Also, our website clearly shows on its homepage that 89% of money we raise is spent on our medical projects, with 1% on office management and 10% reinvested in fundraising. This can reassure people who have lost trust in the charity sector as a whole due to media stories about other charities misusing funds. In addition, our social media channels help us to build our community (and in turn build trust) by having an open and honest dialogue about what is happening on the ground in countries where MSF operates.*

The Reuters Institute’s *Digital News Report* explores the changing news media landscape across 36 countries in Europe, North and Latin America and Asia Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Its 2017 report found that in many countries, the underlying causes of a lack of trust stem from perceived political bias in the mainstream media and a more general political polarisation in society. Nic Newman, lead author of the report, believes that several factors feed into a loss of trust:

*Journalistic standards, sensationalism, no clear distinctions between news and opinion – particularly in the US and UK. But there’s also a wider thing going on, it’s about trust in institutions more generally. People don’t trust experts; they trust their friends more and social media encourages this.*

This tendency to trust friends more than authoritative sources affects all organisations disseminating information on the internet, including NGOs. Research conducted in the US by The Media Insight Project suggests that an organisation’s credibility is significantly affected by what kinds of people are sharing its content on social media sites such as Facebook.<sup>6</sup> As news and media consultant Fergus Bell makes clear:

*This makes it difficult for organisations disseminating information because their information is not necessarily received first hand. There is so much more information out there now and organisations are not in charge of how and when people receive it.*

The Aid Attitude Tracker (AAT), funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has been surveying 8,000 people in Great Britain, France, Germany and the United States every six months since 2013. Will Tucker, a communications and advocacy consultant, supports NGOs to use the evidence gathered by the AAT to improve their public communications and engagement. He

reports that over the last four years, the tracker has found that those who have little or no trust in charities has increased from 19 to 22% and those who say they have a great deal of trust has dropped from 38 to 33%. He acknowledges that the decline is part of a general trend in society, but also sees the impact of negative stories – *trigger factors that gnaw away at the propensity to trust.*

The general lack of trust highlighted in many reports creates a potential vacuum says Rachel Botsman, who writes and researches about the ways in which technology is transforming trust. She argues that this vacuum *gets filled with conspiracy theories, comforting biases, unfounded accusations and sleights of hand* – what many would now categorise as “fake news.”<sup>7</sup>

## FAKE NEWS: HOW TO DEFINE IT.

There are many definitions of fake news. The Collins Dictionary defines it as *false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.* Guardian writer, Paul Chadwick, suggests *fictions deliberately fabricated and presented as non-fiction with the intent to mislead recipients into treating fiction as fact or into doubting verifiable fact.*<sup>8</sup> The Oxford Internet Institute prefers the use of the term “junk news.” Samantha Bradshaw, a researcher with the Institute, says it is *characterised by highly polarising content, uses a lot of emotional, racist, homophobic language and is purposively misleading.* In a report for the Reuters Institute on consumers’ perspectives on fake news, Nielsen and Graves offer the following categories: satire, poor journalism, propaganda, some forms of advertising, and fabrication.<sup>9</sup> Their research findings suggest that:

*From an audience perspective, fake news is only in part about fabricated news reports narrowly defined, and much more about a wider discontent with the information landscape – including news media and politicians as well as platform companies.*

First Draft, the US-based verification network founded in 2015, sees fake news as a range of misinformation categories:

- False connection – headlines and captions don’t support the content
- False context – genuine content shared with false contextual information
- Manipulated content – genuine information or imagery manipulated to deceive
- Satire or parody – no intention to cause harm but potential to fool
- Misleading content – misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual
- Imposter content – impersonation of genuine sources
- Fabricated content – content that is totally false, designed to deceive and harm.<sup>10</sup>

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Little of this is new and in the past much of it might simply have been called propaganda. But the phenomenal growth of social media in recent years has created the possibility for misinformation to be produced and disseminated on a hitherto unimagined scale. Concern has led the UK Parliament to set up an inquiry into fake news and the US Congress to hold hearings into Russian online involvement in the presidential election. On November 13th 2017 Prime Minister Theresa May told business leaders in London that Russia was “planting fake stories” to “sow discord in the West” and two days later it was reported that researchers at the University of Edinburgh had identified over 400 fake Twitter accounts operating from the Russian Internet Research Agency and attempting to influence UK politics during the EU referendum campaign.<sup>11</sup> It is now believed that in the run-up to the US election, 130 million US citizens saw Facebook posts deliberately planted by Russian agents. This is propaganda for the digital age and it is the speed and reach of social media that concerns Phil Harding, a media consultant:

*The deliberate manufacturing of news stories to amuse or mislead is nothing new. But the speed and make up of social media means that nowadays the lie gets halfway round the world before anyone can think to challenge it.*

However fake news is defined, the term is now widely used and has been weaponised by some political leaders, most obviously Donald Trump, but also others like Aung San Suu Kyi, to attack the mainstream news media and impose their own version of events.

### **FAKE NEWS: HOW IT WORKS**

The Edelman Trust report sees a direct correlation between a decline in trust and the growing power of social media platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter.<sup>3</sup> Many users now receive their information via these powerful platforms which the report argues has made it easy for *billions of people to tune more deeply into proximate peers, tune out all others and validate their world view.* Facebook continues to be the largest social network service in the UK. In March 2017, Ofcom reported that it attracted a digital audience of 39.7 million (more than three-quarters of active internet users). This was considerably larger than Twitter (21.9 million) and Instagram (19.4 million).<sup>1</sup> Samantha Bradshaw describes the scale of Facebook worldwide:

*There are now 2.1 billion active monthly users, which is larger than the population of any country in the world. As a self-defining community, it is only second in size to Christianity.*

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, has stated that the goal of the platform is to *build the perfect personalized newspaper for every*

*person in the world.* Complex news feed algorithms select relevant posts for individual users based on their likes, clicks, shares, comments and hides. They enable users to prioritise posts from friends and family. Thus instead of being faced with the huge amount of information circulating daily on the net, users can customise what they receive. Facebook can also monitor the amount of time spent on an individual post and the response to videos posted on news feeds. If a user turns up the volume on a video or makes it full-screen, for example, the algorithm will interpret that as engagement, and will show similar videos higher up in the user’s feed.

One of the downsides of personalised news feeds is the creation of the “echo chamber.” Critics argue that platforms like Facebook and Twitter are designed to provide users with information that they already agree with, strengthening existing biases and political prejudices, and polarising the political discourse. However, Google argues in its submission to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Inquiry into Fake News, that the *rise of fact-checkers and a greater plurality of news sources have given citizens much greater access to information in order to consider the veracity of news stories. In fact, Ofcom reports that most consumers do rely on more than one news provider, with an average of 3.5 sources used in the UK.*<sup>12</sup>

When algorithms are used in conjunction with “bots” (computer programmes that can automatically generate messages and mimic genuine accounts), this creates a powerful tool for political manipulation. In 2014 Twitter acknowledged that 23 million active users are actually bots.<sup>13</sup> The Computational Propaganda Project at Oxford University’s Internet Institute has researched the use of social media to manipulate public opinion in nine countries (Russia, Taiwan, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, and the United States). They found that bots are being used to propel fake news and other misinformation across platforms like Facebook and Twitter.<sup>14</sup> Speaking on the Today programme in November 2017, Professor Philip Howard, Principal Investigator of the Project, explained *that bots are very good for negative campaigning, conspiracy theories and rumours. Their aim is not to plant just one false story, but to spread multiple stories in order to create confusion.*

But the manipulation of political views is not the only motivation behind the fabrication of news. The digital economy is based on advertising and digital advertising rewards attention. Sensationalist news stories and deliberate fictions are often created for commercial gain. An analysis by BuzzFeed has revealed the extent of the fake news industry in Macedonia.<sup>15</sup> At least 140 US politics websites were launched there in 2016. These websites were then signed up to an online advertising programme like GoogleAdSense. The majority of

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# ‘NGOs need to monitor the information that is shared about them and, where they are the subject of fake news, they need to recognise it and fix it.’

Fergus Bell, News and Media Consultant

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posts put up on the sites were taken from extremist sites in the US. A sensationalised headline would be written to accompany the item and it was then shared on Facebook. The more people who clicked on these stories, the more money they earned from the advertising on their websites. Two of the most successful posts – claims that the Pope endorsed Donald Trump and that Mike Pence had said Michelle Obama is *the most vulgar first lady we’ve ever had* – generated significant advertising revenue for the owners of the sites.

Online advertising not only incentivises the dissemination of fake news, it can also create other problems. Algorithms are used in programmatic advertising which allow the buyer to target tailored messages to specific individuals. It is now the way in which most digital advertising is bought by advertisers and presented to consumers online. But an investigation by The Times revealed that bad programmatic buying by agencies on behalf of well-known brands, including charities, was leading to the appearance of their adverts on hate sites and YouTube videos produced by supporters of groups such as Islamic State and Combat 18. This practice can generate tens of thousands of pounds a month for extremist groups.<sup>16</sup> Paul Gill, Head of Digital Engagement at Oxfam, is very aware of the dangers of being associated with inappropriate organisations: *we monitor and listen to the online audience about Oxfam adverts that may appear on certain sites. We use an advertising network that has a blacklist in place, but we also maintain our own in-house blacklist. We remove stuff very quickly when necessary.*

## MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

More than four in ten UK internet users regard their smartphones as the most important device for accessing the internet.<sup>1</sup> In 2014 Facebook acquired WhatsApp, the free messaging service for smartphones, and by the summer of 2017 it had one billion daily users. It was designed to keep people’s messages private and secure by limiting groups to 256 people, and automatically encrypting all messages. But it’s more difficult to monitor fake news here than on the big social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The messaging platform is widely used in countries where people have little access to mobile data and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in the US suggests concern is growing about the spread of misinformation it is encouraging:

*From fake news about last month’s election in Germany and this week’s Catalan independence vote, to rumours about storms in sub-Saharan Africa and fake kidnapping schemes in Brazil, hoaxes are spreading like wildfire in private groups on the platform.<sup>17</sup>*

## THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON NGOS

UK based NGOs have become accustomed to criticism and

misinformation at home in the right wing tabloid press. An analysis by BuzzFeed in January 2017 found that fake news sites have struggled to take hold in the UK political sphere because we already have highly partisan news outlets.<sup>18</sup> Will Tucker argues that this type of misrepresentation can often be more pernicious than the more easily identified outright fabrication found on social media. He points to the press coverage of the “Ethiopian Spice Girls” story from the beginning of 2017 when government funding for a girls’ empowerment programme called Yegna was withdrawn after The Daily Mail described it as a “blood boiling” waste of taxpayers’ money.<sup>19</sup> Many of these newspaper stories gain an even greater audience when they are shared on social media platforms.

Aid agencies are also subject to attack in the countries where they work. Kathryn Dalziel believes that the biggest threat from fake news is when it *circulates in a population where we have a project. It can be extremely detrimental and, in some cases, life-threatening to patient populations and our staff if there is misinformation about our intentions for being in a particular town or region.* Richard Grange, former Head of News at ActionAid, points out that it is not necessary to attack NGOs directly: *we often say unpopular things, so one way for opponents to deal with this is to create an atmosphere of distrust and social media is a useful tool for this.*

## FAKE NEWS AND ONLINE ABUSE ABOUT NGOS

Fergus Bell, who has done training and consultancy work in the aid sector suggests that:

*NGOs face a two-fold problem. They have to verify information on the ground that will help them determine where it’s safe or unsafe to operate. But they are also bearing the brunt of misinformation and fake news about their ground operations. They need to monitor the information that is shared about them and, where they are the subjects of fake news, they need to recognise it and fix it. This is difficult because fake news spreads so quickly.*

The Red Cross in the US came under attack from a raft of fake news stories in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Texas. In one video posted on Facebook which subsequently went viral, it was alleged that the charity had stolen donated items from churches in Houston and then sold some of the items and burned others. The claim was found to be “mostly false” by online fact checking organisation Snopes.<sup>20</sup> Snopes also investigated claims that the Red Cross was charging victims of the hurricane for its services. The fact checker concluded that this was a false claim rooted in the fact that the Red Cross did, at one time, charge WWII soldiers for off-base food and lodging.<sup>21</sup>

Immigration provokes polarised views in both mainstream and

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social media. It is therefore unsurprising that NGOs working in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean have been subject to press and online criticism and sometimes fake news stories deliberately aimed to undermine their activities. A number of accusations have circulated online with this aim:

*Private rescue organisations create a so-called pull effect through their presence off the Libyan coast. They therefore encourage the migrants to escape in great numbers.*

*The sea rescuers cooperate directly or indirectly with the traffickers. The traffickers inform them of the times each rubber boat is sent off and where it is heading.*

*The NGOs basically function like taxis. They pick up the passengers (migrants) directly off the Libyan coast and take them to the European mainland.*

*The rescuers impede the reconnaissance work and search actions of Frontex and others during their searches for traffickers, escape routes and accomplices.<sup>22</sup>*

Some of these accusations have gained traction in mainstream media and have helped to create a climate of mistrust towards the NGO sector. Sean Ryan, Director of Media at Save the Children, explains how the charity became a victim of fake news:

*In the Mediterranean our search and rescue operations have been falsely accused of colluding with traffickers. It started as a report in the Italian media and then Defend Europe, the far right group, hired their own boat to try and stop what we were doing. Breitbart released a video which purported to prove our collusion with traffickers but showed nothing of the kind. We had to fight this propaganda without many resources. We just had to keep repeating that we only worked with the Italian coastguard.*

MSF, operating in the same area, suffered a similar attack, but what particularly concerns and frustrates their Head of Press, Gemma Gillie, is the potential effect of these stories which delegitimises MSF and criminalises the vulnerable which in turn facilitates anti-immigration policies. Losing money is one thing, but losing empathy is something else again.

NGOs operating in conflict zones are particularly vulnerable to fake news stories on social media. Patrick Worrall, Senior FactCheck producer for Channel 4 News, was one of several interviewees who mentioned the vicious online campaigns against the White Helmets in Syria: *there's no doubt that they*

*have built up a huge database of evidence of what's been going on and it can't be an accident that the Syrian regime would want to undermine them.* Snopes has investigated some of these fake news stories and found them to be unproven:

*The group has come under suspicion from those who support Assad. The Russian-funded television station, RT, regularly posts stories casting doubt on the motives of the group. The rumours reappeared in April 2017, blaming the White Helmets directly for a deadly gas attack in Syria. Whatever their motives may be, we found no credible evidence that the White Helmets are linked to terrorist organizations.<sup>23</sup>*

In March 2017, Save the Children accused the Saudi-led coalition of blocking shipments of the charity's medical aid supplies at Yemen's main port of Hodeida. The delays prevented 51 healthcare facilities supported by Save the Children from functioning fully. Sean Ryan explains that although the charity has been working in the country since 1963, the Saudi-led coalition responded to their concerns with the false claim that the charity was not even in the country. The claim came from Major General Ahmad Asiri, an adviser to the Saudi Defence Minister's office. He stated: *I will say to you clearly Save the Children does not have any action on the ground and they did not request to go to Yemen.* Save immediately refuted the claim and provided the media with pictures of its operations on the ground in Sanaa, a part of the country controlled by the Houthis.

Individuals working in the aid sector can also be the targets of fake news stories and online abuse. Girish Menon, Chief Executive of ActionAid, gave an interview to Sky News in the early part of 2017. In it he expressed the charity's concerns about the planned state visit of President Trump in the light of his views towards women and marginalised communities.

*At midnight I got a message from my son to say something had popped up on LinkedIn about me being an ISIS agent. I was tired and laughed it off at that stage, but the next morning I had received many messages as had the Chair of ActionAid. We discovered that the message originated from a fake news site hosted in the US.*

LinkedIn removed the post, but the reputational risk for ActionAid was very clear:

*In the heat of the moment, there's no analysis of what's fake or not. If it had been picked up by other media circles, what would we do? There are only so many times you can issue a rebuttal. Reputations are so brittle, what would our supporters think and of course*

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**‘In the Mediterranean our search and rescue operations have been falsely accused of colluding with traffickers. We had to fight this propaganda without any resources. We just had to keep repeating that we only worked with the Italian coastguard.’**

**Sean Ryan, Save the Children**

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*ActionAid works in many countries that have an ISIS footprint.*

Writing anonymously as a “Secret Aid Worker” for the Guardian’s Development Network, one communications officer from a large NGO claims that he/she became the subject of abuse on his/her Twitter account while working in a highly politicised conflict:

*As I covered the crisis I started to receive lots of anonymised abuse through my personal Twitter account: from people who thought I was too partisan, or, conversely, that I wasn’t going far enough. I was accused of smearing and of whitewashing, of being both too naive and too cynical. I was targeted by one apparent activist network, which simply sent me pictures of children who had been horribly killed or injured in the conflict.<sup>24</sup>*

Even moderating abusive online feedback can be very upsetting. A year ago ActionAid ran a campaign supporting women and children refugees on Lesbos. Adverts posted on Facebook provoked a lot of abuse and the staff who were moderating the comments were appalled at the vile and racist comments. As Sally O’Connell, ActionAid’s Head of Digital, explains:

*Moderating can be really stressful. We generally just keep a watching eye as part of our regular social media monitoring – unless something is flagged as potentially controversial like the Lesbos campaign. Then we make sure that there’s a rota so that no one staff member moderates for long periods.*

Cases like these highlight the need for NGOs to raise awareness amongst all their staff of the risks involved in communications, particularly online, and to support them when things go wrong. But there are also risks for aid beneficiaries who are encouraged to speak out. The Guardian’s “Secret Aid Worker” expressed concern about this growing trend:

*From a communications perspective I can see the attraction: our job is to amplify the voice of those affected, not to speak for them. In a world where Syrian refugees arrive off boats clutching smartphones, what better way to tell their story than to give access directly to them? And yet, once this access is given it cannot be controlled or revoked - with potentially very damaging results. CNN International recently hosted a public Facebook Q&A with a Syrian refugee named Milad. But instead of understanding or queries about the larger issues, Milad was mainly bombarded with questions about why Middle Eastern refugees can’t keep to their own region, accusations he was a coward for abandoning his family and proclamations he should have joined a militant group to fight for freedom in Syria.*

## **FAKE NEWS DISSEMINATED BYNGOS**

An even bigger reputational risk can be posed by misinformation spread by NGOs themselves, whether intentionally in a bid to increase support, or unintentionally through a failure to check sources and data. Without rigorous attention to detail, campaign headlines can too easily mislead the public. This is illustrated by a tendency to exaggerate or conflate numbers, for example, of refugees and internally displaced persons, in order to create a greater sense of crisis. Phil Harding has noticed that *descriptions can become more attention-grabbing – biggest famine ever etc – and that can devalue the information being offered.*

The Poynter International Fact Checking Network has highlighted the dangers of imperfect data collection by NGOs. In 2015 the International Organization for Migration estimated that the number of deaths in the Mediterranean could reach 30,000. This projection was subsequently proved to be greatly inflated and by the end of 2015, the IOM announced that 3,770 migrants had died. Poynter also claims that the use of unconfirmed, anonymous sources is common amongst NGOs, and data collection methods are seldom provided in detail. This makes it difficult for journalists and others to ascertain the quality of the information produced: *good intentions don’t guarantee accuracy. Erroneous data can also empower those who seek to discredit anything an organization produces, undermining the credibility of both the NGO or nonprofit and the news organization.<sup>25</sup>*

Channel 5’s Daniel Pearl emphasises the importance of accuracy if NGOs are to be trusted by the mainstream media outlets they work with:

*If Amnesty, for example, were to bring us material, then it comes with a certain authority because of the source. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t challenge it and there are simple ways of checking stuff through Google etc. But if a charity puts something out that isn’t accurate, the reputational damage is huge, as it would be for Channel 4. There are no shortcuts and we can’t put stuff out that we are not sure is true.*

Richard Grange believes that there is now more emphasis on accuracy: *in the past charities were just assumed to be doing good and were generally left alone by the media. They could put out statistics without fear they would necessarily be rigorously tested. That has fundamentally changed. NGOs face constant and detailed media scrutiny and can suffer real damage when they make mistakes. My experience has been that there is an ever-greater focus on getting facts right – which can only be a good thing.*

But another “Secret Aid Worker” writing for the Guardian’s

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Development Network, describes him/herself as a “disenchanted communications officer:”

*In the past with another big aid organisation, I was asked to make up quotes to “enhance” beneficiary case studies. When I refused, the programme officer acted surprised and told me: “It’s fine, I know what that person would say.”<sup>26</sup>*

Another form of misinformation sometimes disseminated by NGOs is defined by First Draft News as “false contexts” – the incorrect pairing of image and event. Fergus Bell, Media Consultant and Sam Dubberley, Manager of Amnesty International’s Digital Verification Corps, agree that NGOs have used videos in the past to illustrate reports without verifying them, which can undermine the report and erode trust. As Dubberley explains, this is easily done on social media if sources and authenticity are not fully checked:

*The Turkish Deputy Prime Minister created a controversy when he tweeted photos purporting to relate to recent violence against the Rohingya, although they actually originated from elsewhere. Aung San Suu Kyi immediately condemned the photos as false news; the narrative shifted and the story was discredited.*

An earlier example from the 2015 earthquake in Nepal demonstrates how images taken out of context can do damage to NGOs even if, as in this case, they do not originate from an NGO. The photograph of a boy hugging his younger sister was widely shared on Facebook and Twitter, as a means to highlight the plight of people in Nepal. It went viral but the photographer made it clear the picture was taken during a trip to Vietnam in 2007.<sup>27</sup> Peter Gilheany, director at communications agency Forster, says that

*Charitable giving requires trust, so many of the people who gave as a result of the power of this image are likely to feel duped or cheated if they find out it wasn’t authentic and possibly treat future charity appeals with more suspicion, resulting in fewer donations.*

## **FAKE NEWS IN THE FIELD**

Confusion, misinformation, partial truths and outright fake news have always been part of working in countries with no free press. According to Internews, a charity that works to support access to trusted information, that’s 87% of the world.<sup>28</sup> The problem has recently been illustrated by the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. Misleading images were widely circulated during the outbreak of violence and accusations of fake news on both sides of the conflict made it difficult to gather accurate information. But, as Samantha Stanley of Hong Kong University explains, the use of social media platforms has once again amplified this problem:

*Before internet access, groups like the Buddhist nationalist Ma Ba Tha — the Association to Protect Race and Religion — distributed leaflets and videos on DVDs to spread false information about the country’s Muslim communities in an effort to dehumanize and frame the community in increasingly negative terms. They still use these more traditional formats, but they also took to Facebook. Facebook is the go-to source for news and information in Myanmar.<sup>29</sup>*

Jonathan Head, the BBC’s South East Asia correspondent, highlights the difficulties of establishing hard facts in Myanmar.<sup>30</sup> When the Rohingya crisis first hit the headlines, he wrote of the *frenzied social media war* and described how he was *bombarded with gruesome images, purporting to show victims of massacres, most of which are difficult to verify. One image I was sent supposedly showing Rohingya militants training with rifles, turned out to be a photograph of Bangladeshi volunteers fighting in the 1971 independence war.* In contrast the methods used by a UN Human Rights Commission team, when it investigated alleged human rights violations against the Rohingya, demonstrate the importance of authentication and transparency. The team did not use any photographs or video unless taken by themselves, and their report provided full details of their methodology.

Fake news also flourishes in other parts of Asia. The Indonesian Anti-Hoax Community, a civil society group, was established in January 2017 by people concerned about fake news reports circulating online during an election campaign in January.<sup>31</sup> Jeanne Bourgault, President and CEO of Internews describes the situation in the Philippines: *hate speech is, to us, one of the worst things out there that’s happening. Facebook itself, an amazingly powerful technology, is actually fuelling this in a number of countries. In the Philippines, Facebook is called “hate book.”<sup>32</sup>* Sam Dubberley does not believe it is possible to fight fake news in countries where it is endemic, *but as an NGO, you should be able to evaluate and understand it.* And as Sean Ryan warns, *it would be dangerous to jump to conclusions because if you had to retract a story or apologise to a government, it would put you in a weak position.*

## **FAKE NEWS: HOW TO FIGHT IT**

### **Regulation**

To date social media platforms have avoided the type of regulation that controls mainstream media by insisting on their role as intermediaries rather than publishers or news organisations. As a consequence, Western governments have more generally relied upon self-regulation. However, as the problem of fake news has become more urgent in the light of claims about Russian involvement in the US election, for example, there are signs that the big social media platforms are being obliged to take

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# ‘One image I was sent supposedly showing Rohingya militants training with rifles, turned out to be a photograph of Bangladeshi volunteers fighting in the 1971 independence war.’

Jonathan Head, BBC reporter

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action. In its submission to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Inquiry into Fake News, Facebook described the ways in which it is disrupting and downgrading hoax news, enhancing the relevancy and quality of its News Feed and supporting sustainable journalism and news literacy.<sup>33</sup> One such initiative involves the ability to flag up items that are fake.

In its submission to the same inquiry Google highlighted the projects it is supporting to combat fake news and promote good journalism including the Google News Lab, a team dedicated to collaborating with and training journalists all around the world. It also recently introduced fact check labels that allow publishers to highlight fact-checked content. The problem is the lack of any consensus within the digital industry on what self-regulation implies and it remains to be seen how effective these measures will be. Fergus Bell believes that this is essentially a short-term problem about distribution and that social media platforms like Facebook will have to solve it. Guardian writer John Naughton, on the other hand, has no faith in either Google or Facebook doing anything to undermine their business models which are in effect a license to print money: *summing up: the companies have no incentive to change their ways.*<sup>34</sup>

However, one country has already taken action. In an attempt to discourage hate speech, criminal material and fake news on social media, in June 2017 the German parliament passed a bill permitting fines of up to €50m for persistently failing to remove illegal content.

## Fact checking

In 2016 The Reuters Institute produced a report on the proliferation of fact checking organisations. It found that over the past decade *independent fact-checkers have emerged in more than 50 countries spanning every continent. More than 90% were established since 2010; about 50 launched in the past two years alone.*<sup>35</sup> To date, the two most important types of fact checking organisations are those based in the newsrooms of existing mainstream media, and independents, such as Full Fact in the UK and First Draft and Snopes in the US. The growth of fact checkers has spiralled since the spread of fake news online, but two of the longest established services in the UK, the BBC’s Reality Check and Channel 4’s FactCheck, started before this became a major issue. They tend to focus on domestic stories, but they also cover international issues, for example: Does Myanmar have most women in science? Are protesters right on South Africa farm murders? (both BBC) Is the UK lagging behind on stopping the ivory trade? What would war look like for North Korea? (both Channel 4) There may be opportunities for NGOs to expand the international coverage of these fact checkers by working together with broadcasters like the BBC and Channel 4. Fact checking organisations have also been set up to cover the

developing world, for example Africa Check, which has offices in South Africa, Senegal, Kenya and Nigeria as well as in the UK.

Whilst the authors of the Reuters report accept the laudable aims of these outlets, they highlight the controversy that political fact-checking attracts: *even simple factual questions can leave surprising room for disagreement, and fact-checkers often come under attack from critics who disagree with their verdicts.* Jamie Angus, Deputy Director, BBC World Service Group, acknowledges that some fact checking organisations are very good but thinks that *fact checking is in overdrive at the moment. Even Russia Today introduced its own fake news check earlier this year.*

At the moment there is little evidence to determine how successful fact checking is in debunking fake news stories. Whilst it might help to dispel misinformation and inhibit some from creating and spreading fake news, false stories and misrepresentations continue to find large audiences online – possibly because individuals tend to be swayed as much by emotion as by fact. BuzzFeed’s Craig Silverman raises doubts about the efficacy of these services based on how people respond to information:

*When people create the false stuff they know that it needs to appeal to emotion. They know that maybe if it can have a sense of urgency, if it can be tied to things people care about, that’s probably going to do well. Whereas when you come in as the debunker, what you’re doing is actively going against information that people are probably already willing to believe and that gets them emotionally. And to tell somebody “I’m sorry that thing you saw and shared is not true” is you coming in, in a very negative way unfortunately.*<sup>36</sup>

Patrick Worrall, Senior Producer, Channel 4 FactCheck, accepts that current literature on the impact of fact checking is inconclusive and that there is a constituency of people they will never reach because they are so partisan. But he believes that there are many people who are undecided and open to suggestion: *the content FactCheck produced around the EU reached its biggest audience with 10 million views for one of our videos. People were genuinely hungry for non-partisan information during the referendum.*

## Verification

Good journalism has always involved checking sources and verifying evidence and the same rules apply to NGOs. Daniel Pearl warns against using social media as an information gathering service and assuming that if something gets traction or is tweeted or retweeted by someone you trust, it has been verified. With the advent of eyewitness, user-generated content which took off during the Arab Spring, specific techniques are sometimes

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required to authenticate material. Fergus Bell, a consultant in the field and founder member of the First Draft Coalition, has advised media companies and NGOs on the verification process. Much of the early material was not purposefully untruthful and was only expected to be shared within limited social media networks. But new digital technology, the growth of the social media platforms and the widespread use of bots and algorithms, has created a much bigger problem, *servicing people stuff that's "interesting" above all else, rather than timely and factual.*

In 2016 Sam Dubberley was brought in as a consultant by Amnesty to set up their Digital Verification Corps. Its aim was to ensure that all content in their research was authentic and to engage volunteer university students by teaching them the verification skills to do this:

*As a journalist, I was always taught two sources – suddenly with social media, we seem to have lost that and some people are too quick to fire away. NGOs with half a day's training on social media see awful photos and retweet. There's nothing more dangerous. Some basic training will avoid 90% of these mistakes. And it's not difficult. It may take time to find the exact location where something took place, but you just have to learn not to retweet.*

One important tool of verification is the ability to conduct reverse image searches. This is done by right clicking on an image and selecting "search for image." This will reveal all the other places on the internet where it has appeared. At the end of November 2017 the BBC reported on the attack on al-Rawda mosque in Egypt's North Sinai province, which killed at least 235 people.<sup>37</sup> It also demonstrated how the images that appeared on the Al-Araby news site to illustrate this attack, were false. By conducting a reverse image search, it became evident that one photograph actually showed the aftermath of a bomb attack in another Egyptian town in 2015. Checking the surroundings seen in the photograph also helped to identify its true location.

Verification can change official narratives. Amnesty has successfully used verified eyewitness video in Syria to challenge Russian claims that their air strikes had not harmed civilians and again in Burundi to expose the mass graves of people killed by the security forces in 2015.

### Rumour tracking

Rumours can spread very quickly on social media and can be devastating to development work. Misinformation during humanitarian crises and natural disasters has to be addressed

and corrected quickly. There are also well-known examples in health interventions, such as vaccination programmes, where rumours can adversely affect uptake. In an interview for the Eurasia Partnership Foundation in April 2016, Marjorie Rouse, Internews Senior Vice President of Programmes, spoke about their work with aid agencies to track potentially harmful rumours which frequently circulate in crisis situations and catch them *early before they cycle and spin through social media and get picked up by mainstream media.*<sup>38</sup> Material is sent to central clearing houses for verification and the correct information is then fed back through local radio, posters, text messaging and NGOs. They used this system in Liberia during the Ebola crisis when rumours of people being refused admission to hospitals caused riots.

### Media literacy

A few of the interviewees for this report emphasised the need to educate young people in media literacy. Sam Dubberley believes this should be on the school curriculum and Daniel Pearl thinks it is more important than regulation:

*I gave a talk to pupils at my daughter's school a few weeks ago and when asked, they all said their primary source of news was their phones. No one is teaching kids media literacy. It's more important than regulation. Learning to distinguish between what's news, what's opinion and what's bias. At the moment, everything is rolled into one.*

In its submission to the Inquiry into Fake News, Internews pointed to evidence from a media literacy programme in Ukraine.<sup>32</sup> The programme had been introduced in high schools and universities in 2009 against a backdrop of dramatically declining trust in mainstream media. Research in 2015 showed that participants were far more able to identify fake news and propaganda and had developed their own individual fact checking skills.

In the UK Ofcom's most recent survey found that 28% of 8-11s and 27% of 12-15s assume that if Google lists a website then they can trust it and only 24% of 8-11s and 38% of 12-15s correctly identified sponsored links on Google as advertising.<sup>1</sup> In 2017 Oxfam and Christian Aid jointly published a teaching resource for 11-14 year-olds that aims to introduce the concepts of aid and development, and provide guidance on the critical evaluation of media stories. Students are taught to distinguish between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity in the media and to develop an understanding of fake news.<sup>39</sup>

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# ‘NGOs could be more open about their own verification methods. Transparency is important.’

Daniel Pearl, Channel 5 commissioner

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## HOW SHOULD NGOS MEET THE CHALLENGE OF FAKE NEWS IN THE FUTURE?

### Rebuilding trust

In 2017 a report from CharityComms looked at how charities might be communicating with their audiences in 5 years’ time.<sup>40</sup> It found that building trust would be a prime concern and that more charities would be *providing peer review, video explainers or quality marks*. Nic Newman argues that in a fragmented market, it is important to be clear about your messaging because otherwise *you will be quickly exposed and that undermines trust. Stick to two or three core values, don’t try to complicate*. But he also thinks that companies like Google and Facebook will want high quality material because at the moment, their platforms risk being compromised by low quality and misleading content:

*So for a media organisation this could mean flagging up when something is an original investigation, first-hand reporting, journalistic experience etc. If these cues are picked up then the stories will come up higher on the Google lists. For NGOs it could be how long they’ve been working in a particular country.*

Trust expert Rachel Botsman believes that there are new rules for organisations in any sector if they are to retain trust in the digital age. Openness, accountability and inclusivity will be key and for charities, making use of the *distributed trust* of their donors will help to earn a more widespread trust.<sup>7</sup>

### Transparency

Whilst it is essential that NGOs ensure that any information provided or shared by them is accurate, it is equally important that they are transparent about their sources and methods of authentication. Being prepared to share their methodology is another way of building trust with the media and several interviewees emphasised this. Fergus Bell believes that in the future NGOs will need to be *much more open about how they verify their material and not find it offensive if journalists want to verify it independently. They should show their working like you would in a maths exam – all of the background etc so that journalists can verify material more quickly*. Daniel Pearl at Channel 5 accepts that for security reasons, this is not always possible, but agrees that *NGOs could be more open about their own verification methods. Transparency is important*. Nic Newman argues that *transparency is one of the answers to low trust. People will pick up on those cues. If you can do more about what you do, why you do it and show your workings, it will help to reach the middle ground*.

This transparency extends to NGOs accepting when they get something wrong and admitting when they don’t know something as much as when they do. A willingness to take this approach has the additional benefit of setting realistic expectations. Sam Dubberley encourages people to be honest about this when he’s working for Amnesty International and citing Myanmar as an example, Phil Harding argues that both the media and NGOs need to be much more transparent about their methods and sources of information: *that’s one of the ways that trust will be regained*. Sean Ryan believes that it’s the responsibility of NGOs to gather the evidence to justify any claims they make:

*Under Kevin Watkins, our CEO, the onus has been on data-based learning. He found a great store of data in our country offices which was not really being used. The team now taps into that data and if we are talking about a growing threat of famine in Somalia, we will provide the stats on malnutrition. This bolsters the top line and makes us more credible. This kind of evidence gathering is more pressing than ever as trust levels decline. The onus is on us to make sure our statements bear scrutiny because the level of scrutiny now is unprecedented. Rightly so.*

Consultant Will Tucker argues that whilst transparency is important it is insufficient to convince some key audiences:

*Evidence doesn’t persuade if a person is already critical. NGOs need to dump that approach. Instead they need to engage with different channels – they should be looking at popular culture: music, comedy shows, drama scripts, panel shows. Then they are in a conversation that is more human-centred. NGOs shouldn’t let their arguments be framed by news and current affairs exclusively. The Culture Group [social change collaboration] puts it like this: “Culture is where most people are most of the time; politics is where some of the people are some of the time.” NGOs need to circumvent the “my facts are more accurate than your facts” argument.*

### Branding

Attribution is a problem for any organisation seeking to distribute news and information online. Aggregated news feeds can make it extremely difficult to ascertain the original source of any individual story. The BBC’s Jamie Angus sees huge benefits in terms of the reach of social media, but believes there is also a major disadvantage for news producers:

*If you were to go out on the street and ask people if they were interested in international news, perhaps six out of ten would say*

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*yes, but if you can reach them via social media, you can attract some of the other four. But the downside is you surrender control. It's difficult to differentiate between brands online. On Apple News Feed you can't tell what you're consuming.*

This problem also affects NGOs, as like media organisations they want the additional audience that aggregation can provide. But it then becomes essential to make sure their material is well branded. Nic Newman warns that Reuters have done research that shows that only about 50% of people remember where something comes from when they are on social media. He points to The Guardian which uses additional branding burnt into the pictures and video images so that in effect it doubles its branding. When Channel 4 News decided to start using Facebook a few years ago, they recognised that everything has to be in line with the Channel 4 brand. Daniel Pearl says the same applies to NGOs:

*NGOs, like media organisations online, have to decide who they are. This is our brand, this is what we stand for and we're not going to do anything else just to get a few more viewers or donors etc. Then you can package your material in an identifiable way – and NGOs are good at this these days – so that people recognise it.*

### **Attracting attention**

In a less trusting and more questioning society, NGOs no longer have the right to attention and they now have to attract it in a very noisy online environment. Digital technology brings challenges but also opportunities. The same kind of algorithms used by social media platforms will allow charities to target niche groups within their community. But the challenge will be to produce the creative content to offer them. Nic Newman sees it as the *classic struggle. Consistency and core values with modernised tone and format.*

Mobile technology offers further challenges and opportunities. As more and more young people in particular consume information on the move, finding the right format to keep their attention becomes even more essential. In January 2017 Oxfam launched the My Oxfam app, the first of its kind for a charity. Its aim was to give supporters control over their regular donations and to increase trust, by showing where the money goes through weekly updates.<sup>41</sup> Available for iOS and Android, it *goes behind the scenes at Oxfam with 'selfie' style videos from staff on the ground and stories about the people Oxfam is supporting. It aims to give a new level of intimacy and transparency to everyday philanthropy – via videos, quick-view galleries and bite-size news.*

The commercial success of social media platforms depends on maintaining the engagement of online users for as long as possible. This has led to the development of click bait which Sally O'Connell, from ActionAid, compares to *empty calories – it doesn't really lead to engagement and we have to pay for it. So although there's a fine line between click bait and engaging content, it's not in our interest to go down that route.* Video has been shown to work well on social media, but mobile technology requires these videos to be short and other techniques are increasingly being used as well, for example, GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) for simple images, animation and graphics. Sally O'Connell explains how this technology is being used at ActionAid:

*Increasingly we are doing short 10 second videos and GIFs. We used these around the Sierra Leone mudslide. We lay graphics over images to make animated GIFs that tell a story. We got a lot of engagement and sharing through this. It's what's visually engaging more than anything else.*

Digital technology also now allows NGOs to show people the work they are doing in the field. Save the Children has reported live on Facebook from a search and rescue boat. They have recently launched a campaign against pneumonia – the biggest killer of children under five. Sean Ryan describes their approach: *we did some filming in South Sudan with a little girl who had been brought into our clinic in a very poor state. Then we edited it down to ten seconds – a highly shareable commodity which can get the message to a large audience. Our creative team produced a video for the launch using words that flashed on and off to illustrate the speed at which someone with pneumonia breathes. We've used animated graphics to show the death toll now and what it will be in 2030 by dragging a cursor to the right.* But he emphasises that there does not always have to be a high tech solution: *sometimes raw footage on an iPhone can give a sense of immediacy and be very powerful. Short clips on an iPhone cost nothing to produce or share.*

The volume of information and number of stories now available to the media means that NGOs have to compete much harder for attention. Sean Ryan finds it difficult to interest the media in anything that has been seen before and believes that original storytelling will become ever more valuable: *even Guardian Development turned down an op ed from Somalia, but said they would accept a DAB video [a 30-40 seconds treatment of a serious issue] instead.*

Social media thrives on emotionally-driven narratives and NGOs have traditionally appealed to people's emotions in highlighting

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# ‘It’s better to let our supporters respond because it’s more valuable than us defending ourselves, which often shuts down the conversation.’

Sally O’Connell, ActionAid

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the plight of those in the developing world. For some time, however, the aid sector has been seeking to address the criticism of so-called “poverty porn” which stereotypes the beneficiaries of aid and provokes feeling of guilt and alienation in potential donors. Will Tucker believes that if people are to be encouraged to feel that their support makes a difference, then imagery and storytelling need to appeal to a sense of hope rather than pity. Writing in the *UNA-UK Magazine*, Simon Moss, Managing Director of Campaigns at Global Citizen, points out the success stories of international aid: falling poverty rates, more children in education, clean water reaching more people and the eradication of some of the world’s major diseases.<sup>42</sup> In his view:

*When shaping public debate, it’s never been just about facts. Now more than ever, feelings come first. If we continue to sell a story of dire need, the public will conclude that development doesn’t work. Not everyone is interested in the detail of development policy, but most people care a lot about whether they feel proud of their country, and whether their efforts make a difference.*

## Challenging fake news

Deciding whether and how to respond to online allegations or fake news will depend on each situation. Phil Harding argues that substantial claims have to be challenged: *it has to be on the record and out there and you have to use the same amplification resources as those spreading the misinformation*. But he acknowledges that in some cases, NGOs have to weigh up whether they would be adding fire to the problem by responding. In Sean Ryan’s words, *if Katie Hopkins makes a provocative statement, some of the media team want to counter it, but I say why rise to the bait?*

Interviewees agreed on the importance of maintaining and engaging with their online communities so that they can help regulate less serious criticism and misinformation. Sally O’Connell believes *it’s better to let our supporters respond because it’s more valuable than us defending ourselves, which often shuts down the conversation*.

The CharityComms report speculated whether an independent fact checker like FullFact might be established within the charitable sector. ActionAid already post explainers or myth-busters on their website:

*We use a clean, objective, factual style with no editorialising. With almost every appeal we’ll now post like this. We keep an eye on what people are searching for and the search terms they use, for example, during the East Africa crisis, so that we can build responses using the same terms in the title. We’ve found we get a better response*

*like this as we’re answering a need. Then we promote these pages on Facebook so it’s a way of attracting a new audience as well.*

But Will Tucker does not believe that NGOs need to challenge fake news directly: *if you take on people on Facebook or Twitter, you are having an argument in their space and on their terms. It’s perhaps better to fight these people in cultural and regulatory ways*.

One small charity has demonstrated how it might be possible to make money out of online abuse and misinformation. In January 2016 The Independent reported that Calais Action, which delivered clothing to thousands of migrants and refugees at the French port and in Greece, had launched an initiative called TrollAid. When someone criticised the charity on Facebook or Twitter, the group replied with a rehearsed response and a link inviting everyone to donate to the charity.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

NGOs have become accustomed to addressing the criticisms and misrepresentations of some parts of the mainstream media, but the speed, reach and toxicity of the methods used to spread false information on social media are in another league. Importantly, they are also, unlike the mainstream media, largely unregulated. Such misinformation can affect NGOs at home, where their aims may be at odds with certain sectors of society. It can also affect them in the frequently highly politically charged areas where they operate, undermining trust in their activities and adding to the confusion and insecurity in conflict and disaster situations. In such a challenging media landscape, it becomes even more essential that NGOs ensure that all the information they disseminate is rigorously tested and authenticated. As concerns about fake news grow, NGOs must endeavour to maintain the trust of those donors and beneficiaries they aim to serve and build relationships with others who share these principles in the media and elsewhere in order to amplify their messages and raise their voices above the clamour of competing voices online.

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