

Are Fake News, Counter-Hashtag Movements, and Advertisers Segregating Society?

Fake news isn't just a term bandied about by Donald Trump - it's entered the vocabulary of many households, albeit for different reasons and with wide ranging consequences. I tackled this issue at the MarkPlus Marketing conference in Jakarta at the end of last year, where I said "Reality [television] just got Really Real".

This month, I interviewed Elizabeth Filippouli, Founder & CEO of the Global Thinkers & Global Thinkers Forum, to find out more about her views on this topic and her forthcoming event at the House of Lords in London, titled: Trust in an era of 'Alternative' Facts - is confidence in Governance and the Media retrievable?

Elizabeth has worked as a reporter, news presenter, talk show host, interviewer, television and radio producer, newspaper and magazine journalist - and has met with and interviewed amongst others: Ted Turner, Deepak Chopra, Christiane Amanpour, Queen Rania, Susan Sarandon, Lord Sebastian Coe, and the Emir of Qatar.

She's a passionate advocate of championing different perspectives, pushing fresh thinking, and getting people to open up - and she believes that building relationships built on trust is a critical first step towards making these things happen.

They all sound like a good things to do, healthy components of a flourishing society, and even common sense - but anyone checking the news headlines can see that currently within communities and globally we're struggling.

Are these teething problems because we are getting more insular, due to the online friend groups and feeds that we sign up to; or is it just that more so than ever before we're connected and drowning in



Prof. Wilson speaking in Jakarta to 5,000 marketers

information?

I wanted to dig deeper to get her expert opinion on this worrying trend - where what we read on social media doesn't necessarily match what's reported in the mainstream, and to find out what impact this has on society?

JW: *Are media platforms creating a rod for their own backs and damaging society - as advertisers now suggest products, forums, communities, and stories which match our previous browsing history - and is this polarizing thought?*

EF: "Today's news cycle is infested with misinformation, fake news and the distortion of data. This phenomenon means the bridges of integrity and trust between the public-media-governance are crumbling.

The Edelman Trust Barometer illustrates that for the first time since the Great Recession, half of the countries surveyed have fallen into the 'distruster' category - their overall level of trust is below 50%. Do we realise how scary that is?

From biased statistics to falsified storylines, from Brexit to the US election: they have generated consternation about



Elizabeth Filippouli [credit: E.Filippouli]



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Elizabeth Filippouli reporting in a leper prison in Egypt [credit: E.Filippouli]

transparency within the public-media-government nexus. All of these are pointing towards a crisis of trust. Plus, the UK's Chilcot report last year revealed that the launch of the Iraq War in 2003 was made under false pretences. These clearly illustrate deep wounds being etched into the public's psyche that need urgent attention. Mainstream media has not been exactly innocent - they have been making their own contributions towards a polarization of views and nurturing a climate of division.

Lets look at some numbers: In 2014, the world was home to 7.2 billion gadgets – higher than the global population according to GSMA Intelligence. The growth rate is multiplying five times faster than humans. More than 30% of the global population now uses social media platforms to connect, learn, and share information, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF). The benefits for a more inter-connected and educated world are accompanied by the threat that falsified news spreads like wildfire online and can cause, for example, erratic stock movements, or mislead politicians deciding foreign policy.

This gives journalists, as well as every



member of digital society, an immediate voice on the internet, leveraging their take on a news item onto an unmonitored platform with an eternal memory. Everyone, be they in media, politics, academia and so on, can become global thought leaders and newsmakers at the click on a button. But not everyone contributes towards truth."

JW: *What's your view on the apparent divide between what's reported in the mainstream, compared with the sentiments expressed on social media, spearheaded by the rise of citizen journalism and movements like #BlackTwitter?*

EF: "I think the #blacktwitter phenomenon is raising a few questions: for example, are black people participating in a specific type of conversation more often than non-blacks? Are hashtags by African-Americans trending and becoming trendier than other topics - if so why? If that's true, what is it about the way people of colour use Twitter that makes their conversations so popular? Is it their views, their way of expression, their creativity, innovative thinking, or something else?"

Also, there seems to be an apparent positive segregation implied by these tags. Does this suggest a break between blacks and non-blacks on Twitter and if that is so, then does it mirror any existing real-life segregation in our societies?

Finally, it could be that people of colour, and I am referring to the average person not the superstars, are being invited less into mainstream media - and so these movements readdress the balance, empowering them in a way that facilitates participation in the public sphere and debates.”

JW: Tell us about your forthcoming event and why it's so important?

Bridges of trust take seconds to break and years to repair, so we must all start quickly rebuilding.

EF: “We are bringing together world-acclaimed global thinkers and speakers, to offer their unique perspectives in an effort to determine if and how we can ‘break’ this distrust cycle and increase public demand for quality media, while empowering citizens through media and information literacy.

A change of attitude is urgently required across the board – every one of us must change our attitude. We need to find effective strategies to mend these broken lines of trust and communication between the public-media-government.

Consumers must immediately become more responsible for asking where their information is coming from and shy away from sensationalistic newsfeeds with lazy agendas. With equal speed, professional



Social media response to the subsequently pulled Pepsi commercial [source: Twitter]

journalists must actively apply transparency, objectivity and accountability. We need to bolster confidence in the news cycle and eradicate manipulation by powerful institutions.

I am an optimist by nature. I believe that human beings have incredible potential for change, progress, and for getting things done. Whatever mess is, however bad, we are able to fix it. I also believe that it is good to have a ‘stoic’ approach towards life.

According to Stoics, the path to happiness

for humans is found in accepting the things that have been given in life. We must not allow ourselves to be controlled by our desire for pleasure or our fear of pain. We can find inner balance by being open and trying to understand the world around us and to do our part in nature’s plan. By working together and treating others in a fair and just manner, by embracing our universal values, we will always find hope and create a bright future.”

