

# Joseph Kahn: 'We're not talking about news, we're talking about fraud'



*The upheaval in business, economics, politics and culture caused by the digital revolution has become a lot more clear now. One single event did more than most to bring that message home: last year's surprising election results in the US. The repercussions were global. The news industry, in particular, was jolted when it became evident how widely political propaganda disguised as "news" was served to unsuspecting users of social media. "We're not talking about news, we're talking about fraud", says Joseph Kahn, managing editor of The New York Times. The "impersonation" of news challenges traditional journalism organisations to help the public separate real from false information and understand the value provided by high-quality news gathering and reporting. Kahn believes the general public may not realise what is involved in the journalistic process — interviewing, researching, fact checking and editing, not to mention the travel logistics many stories require. In an interview with LSE Business Review's managing editor, **Helena Vieira**, he explains why he prefers the term "fraudulent news" to "fake news", and discusses the challenge news organisations are facing to adjust their business models in an era when advertising dollars are increasingly being directed to the big tech platforms. The interview took place on 8 November during Web Summit, in Lisbon.*

## **Today marks the first anniversary of last year's election results in the US. What has the media learned since then about fake news and the power of social media to change things?**

We certainly learned a great deal about how influential fraudulent news was on social media platforms during the election. I prefer to call it fraudulent news because I think fake news has been misunderstood widely as just a kind of news. But really we're not talking about news, we're talking about fraud. These items were created and designed for political purposes or to make money. They don't resemble news or news gathering: they're the impersonation of news. And it's true that this kind of content, much of it optimised to perform well on the algorithms of Facebook, Google or Twitter, had a much larger impact on people's thinking in the run-up to the election than we had known at the time.

Most of the platforms have been fairly slow in examining that question. As things have progressed, they have come out and let us know that it was hundreds of thousands of fake accounts. Many millions of impressions of fraudulent news circulating on their platforms, that had obviously a very large effect. But I don't think that this question is a challenge for the real news media to understand and to write about. It's not reflective of anything it did. The fraudulent news is not created by the news media. It is created by people who are trying to skew the identity of the news media.

**But it does challenge the news media. It's also a sort of competition for the attention of the public that you're trying to reach.**

Everything is competition for the attention of the public that we're trying to reach. Entertainment, sports, people's social life, dating apps, everything. The fraudulent content successfully impersonates a piece of journalism, and people get excited about it and share it, like "The Pope endorses Donald Trump for president". No basis in fact, no reporting involved in it, no scrutiny. It's a fraudulent headline in a fraudulent piece of content that is designed to be viral. It did have a big impact on the election. But it's difficult to say, "what are you going to do about it, because it's competition for real journalism?"

The tech platforms have to figure it out; users have to get a lot smarter about the sources of the information that they trust. We also should get better at promoting our own journalism and making the value that we add clearer to the users. But I do want to push back at the notion that there's this spectrum of content from the fake to the real, and it's all part of the news gathering process. It's not. Fraudulent content is not news gathering at all. It's like political campaign literature. So you can make the case that political campaign literature competes for people's attention. But there isn't that much the news media can do about it except do a better job of promoting actual journalism about the campaign, as opposed to propaganda that you get from the campaign itself.

**You said maybe the traditional media should do a better job of explaining what they do and the value of news gathering and fact checking. How do you do that? Do you have to explain it in every story that you write?**

There are many ways to do it and I think we're getting better at it. There was a realisation which wasn't exclusively a reaction to the election, but has been forming in the last couple of years (maybe accelerated by the election) that there's a lot of value caught up in the news gathering process. What journalists do is hard and also interesting, the whole process that you go through: interviewing people, running into obstacles, second-guessing yourself, finding out new information, going into a story with a certain assumption about how it's going to turn out and then having that assumption challenged, sometimes changed completely, turned over on its head, the human element of interacting with people, the boots on the ground, that element of going some place and knocking on doors, and taking risks in order to gather information.

In the old newspaper days, all those parts of the news gathering process were sort of forgotten about or assumed. At the end of the process we produced an article, which was written in a kind of authoritative tone of voice: "Here's what you need to know about the situation". *The New York Times* and many other publications had a very careful editing process. Usually the identity and experience of the reporter, plus the material that we decided was not accurate, just didn't appear in the article.

We now believe that a lot of that news gathering process as it evolves is something that is really part of the story and we have to find more ways of telling readers about that. Audio is a good way to engage more directly and to have more of a conversation about a story involving the reporter, involving a source, involving a host who can ask questions about what we know and how we know it, and "what surprised you?" Video can be a good way of telling a story in a different way. But also text, even in the course of writing a story for digital platforms, or for print, you have an opportunity as a journalist to open up a little bit about what you did, why you did it, why you went to a place, what your frustrations were in trying to understand this particular story, what your relationship was with the source, and how that evolved over the course of doing it. So, we're doing more and more like that, which I'm broadly referring to as more transparency about what we do and embracing the narrative of journalism as part of the end product, rather than everything that you leave on a cutting room floor.

***The New York Times* has changed a lot over the past years in reaction to the social media age. What's the best way for news media to ensure their profitability when the big platforms are the ones profiting from all the hard work that you have just described?**

The reality is that the news media that had been primarily supported by advertising are challenged to find a new business model that is anywhere near as lucrative as the one they had in the days before the tech platforms were so dominant. *The New York Times* has a mix of revenue sources. The largest one is directly from consumers, the people who pay for our journalism. We now have 2,5 million digital subscribers. That's many more than we ever had in the print days, but we still have close to 1 million print subscribers as well. Basically, the way we navigate this is to continue to build our subscription base.

We still have an advertising business, where there's a lot of innovation going on. *The New York Times* has been a leader in agency work, branded content and some of the other, more promising areas of advertising at a time when, you're right, Facebook, Google and other platforms have sucked out display advertising, and that's not a very promising source of growth for the news media. But our primary focus is on finding more and more loyal customers who are willing to pay to ensure a steady supply of higher quality journalism.

### **What percentage of your subscribers is in the 18 to 34 age bracket, the youngest bracket?**

I don't have that number off the top of my head. It's actually a significant growth area for us. During the Trump presidency a younger demographic has become much more engaged, much more willing to subscribe than our models would have predicted. And a healthy part of the growth that we've had in the past year has been from digital subscribers in that age group. We're encouraged by the trend of millennials not only engaging with good quality news but realising that if it's going to be around for them as a resource when they grow up, they need to pay for it, because otherwise the economic foundations of it are less stable.

### **Facebook got us addicted to bullshit (lolcats, silly content). How does that affect what you decide to print? Did you change the way you cover the news because of that?**

I hope not too much. It would be wrong to say that we pay no attention to what people are expressing interest in, on Facebook, Twitter, what they're searching on Google. We do watch these things very closely. They're good indicators, often advance indicators, of a topic or a particular story in which there's a lot of interest, where we think we can add some value. Just because there's silly content around the topic doesn't mean that there's no good quality content to do around the topic. We don't chase every story that is trending on Facebook, or every story that is popping up, that people are searching for on Google. There's a lot that you look at and it's either not reliable or there's no clear way *The New York Times* is going to be able to add any value to, and we just let it go.

But there's often an opportunity for journalism in that and some of the dialogue, the shared content on Facebook (...) is an indicator of what people are focused on. And maybe we've already done some journalism on that subject, and there's an opportunity to recirculate it at that moment. And other times you realise, "I don't think I've covered this sufficiently or aggressively enough". So I don't consider it negative to pay close attention to what's trending on social media or what's trending on search. I think that's a healthy part of the journalistic process.

### **The big five have become huge machines to collect private data. Do you think you're covering that story enough? Can you cover the story better and help consumers deal with this?**

I hope so... I think the influence of the big five tech companies is a constant source of coverage for us and we have a few dozen people whose jobs in terms of reporting intersect with these themes. They're very big questions for American society and not only, basically for people living everywhere in the world. And I don't think we've come close to exhausting our readers' appetite for knowing more about them. You can't overemphasise the importance of the major technology players and Silicon Valley and the impact they're having on society in any number of ways. Do I think we have enough coverage? No, because I'm constantly hungry for more. Do I think we're prioritising it? Absolutely. Many of our best people are covering all those associated issues around technology and journalistically we need to keep pressing on that.

### **Echo chambers is my last question. People only see and hear what like-minded people write and talk about. How can newspapers help counter that?**

We don't have a great deal of control over the filter bubble atmosphere that has formed on some of the social media platforms, especially on Facebook. What we can do journalistically is to make sure, and we have made sure, that we're committed to fundamentally non-partisan journalism. We don't have a political agenda and we don't want to have one. Good journalism sometimes takes you places that some of your traditional readers aren't comfortable going, because it raises fundamental questions about politicians or others they may like. And good journalism means that we're not going to shy away from tackling difficult, controversial and investigative subjects in politics, regardless of the political leanings of the people who are there or in business.

The reporting that we recently led about the media mogul Harvey Weinstein and the sexual abuse allegations that dogged him had really nothing to do with that filter bubble, or partisan divide. Harvey Weinstein is a hero to many people on the left in the United States. We're just pursuing a good story. He's a powerful man. There's clear evidence that he abused a very large number of women over many years and that his feet weren't held to the fire and he was never held accountable for that. The journalism that we did changed the situation for him. We will pursue targets like that, in a non-partisan way, regardless of people's assumption about what our motivations are. But what we're trying to communicate is that our motivations are journalistic, and there's amazing opportunity, ever-increasing opportunity as some media become more and more partisan, just to embrace journalism as the core value. And pursue good stories regardless of the partisan implications of it.



- *This Q&A is part of a series of interviews during the [Web Summit](#) conference in Lisbon, 6-9 November 2017. The conversation was edited for brevity.*
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