

Fact check: What would a world without credible news mean for brands?

By [Ross Sergeant](#)

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My very first experience of the media world was selling advertising for our university newspaper. We got regular advertisers to continue their holdings, brought on board new advertisers which paid for us to increase the pagination and, in one honest mistake, I sold the back page on a full-year contract not quite knowing that the back page is conventionally for 'sports'.



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At the time I was a regular newspaper reader myself and, although a finance degree doesn't exactly call for a lot of essay-writing, I had a fair grasp of the creative writing talents that a journalist might need. What I hadn't yet realised was the degree to which the young student journalists went to make sure that the news they reported was factually correct, objective, provided a proper context and was sufficiently in-depth.

While we were setting the physical material (which arrived by the post) in to place we watched the editorial team debating for hours, with as much fascination as finances majors can stare at journalism majors, on whether the news was balanced, objective, whether it had sufficient verified sources and checking every single fact covered. Once this was all done, the editors and sub-editors checked each and every piece over and over again. The attention to detail was inspiring.

Today, we live in a world once only imagined in science fiction. Conversations, pictures and video flow around the globe almost instantly from anyone wishing to share to anyone willing to receive. News of tragedy can tear through billions of hearts and lovable kittens can spread millions of smiles – all faster than the speed of sound.

According to an International Center for Media & the Public Agenda study, students today are not just unwilling, but functionally unable to be without their media links to the world. Starved of news for 24 hours, those in the study reported severe stress, saying one, "Although I started the day feeling good, I noticed my mood started to change around noon. I started to feel isolated and lonely."

But it is a somewhat different world to the dystopian future predicted in great novels such as *1984* by George Orwell. It's not quite the one where a single news source controlled by an autocratic power is the only supplier of news to the people. Recent local efforts to obtain this imagined dreadful future seem somewhat ignorant in the face of digital adoption. In fact, our reality is precisely the opposite.

In South Africa, over half (51%) of city-dwelling LSM 10 consumers are heavy Internet users (more than five hours per day) and 46% say they often post online (Target Group Index). 60% of Americans say they get their news from social media and 66% of American Facebook users say they are most likely to get their news on Facebook (Pew Research).

But if we're increasingly getting our news instantly and more and more of it through user-generated content, how much of it is true? Do we actually believe all the things we read? Following conversations on Twitter during a developing story might make one think the majority of us actually do believe whatever is shared – regardless of the source.



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The American Press Institute found that only 12% of Facebook users had a great deal of trust in the news they read on that platform. Twitter did slightly better with LinkedIn the highest at only 23%. 66% of those who got their news through Facebook cited the source of the news (rather than the person posting it or how many comments or likes it received) as the most important factor in trusting the news they gained through social media.

Whilst this is an encouraging level of scepticism it still leaves a tremendous gap of people who do believe whatever they read, regardless of whoever posted it and regardless of the original source.

Globally, mainstream media is under increasing pressure to keep the commercial engine going. The broadcast television news model – once a major revenue contributor of stations – is crumbling in favour of bite-sized digital formats which draw less income. Newspapers, particularly, are struggling to monetise their move from the increasingly-redundant printed format to digital. Unsuccessful paywalls and the prevalence of ad blocking aren't helping. In the past five years, global newspaper revenues (including printed circulation sales and print advertising as well as digital subscriptions and advertising) have declined 4.3% overall (World Press Trends Survey June 2016).

We may be destined for world with fewer and fewer credible news sources. Not only does this have the dangerous effect of the spread of shallow, inaccurate information, but it would have a marked effect on brands too. Consumers hold brands accountable for the content they distribute and the content with which they associate themselves. 39% of UK social media users say they would lose trust in a brand if they found out the content the brand claimed to be real (or associated with) wasn't genuine (Censuswide 2016).

Since the dawn of modern advertising, brands and content providers have existed in a symbiotic relationship. The content lends credibility to the brands and the brands provide the finances to keep the content going.

As we move through exciting times of redundancy of old formats, creation of new commercial models one key relationship remains true – people deserve credible news and brands need consumers to believe the news is credible.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ross Sergeant is MD of media consulting firm Limelight Consulting. He has 17 years' marketing experience having occupied senior media roles in advertisers in South Africa, Ireland and the United Kingdom as well as major media agency and advertising agency groups in South Africa.

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