

Facing a fact-free diet

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Facts are the bedrock of science and news information. Declining belief in their value surrenders the stage to Flat Earthers, anti-vaxxers, says a despairing Professor Brian J Ford.



Facts no longer matter – it's what you feel that counts. Young minds (old ones, too) are being marinated in an online swamp of confusion, dishonesty, opportunism and profiteering. We are being threatened by digital automation masquerading as artificial intelligence (as I've said before, AI has no more intelligence than a bucket of soap) but it's social media that's the real threat to our scientific society.

Online influencers and bloggers tell me that there's one reason above all why they adore social media – there's no editor standing in your way. You can say whatever you like. So long as it's nothing to do with sexuality, religion, or ethnicity, the coast is clear. You think it? Post it.

We accept influencers as part of the modern fabric of everyday life. They're something that would have been unacceptable – indeed, probably unlawful – a decade ago. Back then, if you wanted to promote a paid-for proposition, it would likely be in a newspaper advertisement or a television commercial. In print it would be headed Advertiser's Announcement and on TV it would pop up in a clearly identifiable advertising break.

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Now the novel notions, or the product of the month, emerge online from influencers, who are remunerated with wads of cash or luxury holidays to dubious destinations like North Korea or Dubai in return for beguiling their docile followers into forking out money to do the same. The Taliban will give you a riotous time in Afghanistan, if you can convince them you'll positively promote their politics back home.

Social media spells the end of the scientific society we knew. A single ridiculous notion, or a wild and deranged individual, can go viral (nobody can ever discover why – it's like that fluttering butterfly's wing and the typhoon) and everybody knows of it within days.

Vaccines? Don't touch 'em. Measles vaccines exist only to make a profit for the drug cartels. Tens of millions of young parents have been taken in by this, so beautiful little babies are once again being maimed by this dreadful disease. Thanks to the MMR vaccine, the US was declared measles-free in the year 2000. Britain followed in 2016. Thanks to those anti-vaxxers, the disease has re-emerged – a triumph for social media – and we have lost our status.

See those contrails from high-flying jet aircraft, weaving across the sky like skeins of silk? Millions of people are convinced they're chemtrails – clouds of poison released to control the people beneath. You can point out the facts; that nobody has ever seen anyone pouring such weird chemicals into aircraft, or that – even if they did – they'd poison the perpetrators as well as the population, adding that any such spray would come to ground hundreds, or likely thousands, of miles distant ... no matter. It's powerful forces intent on controlling the world, in spite of anything you claim. It says so on social media, so it must be right.

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The sheer ignorance of so many social media devotees is extraordinary. We used to joke about the Flat Earth Society, which closed down in 1971 after space travel had finally convinced even the most ardent sceptic that the earth was, without doubt, a spheroidal planet. Since then, the unchaperoned machinations of the Internet have brought every crank out of the shadows and into the glittering foreground. Thousands of posts on social media now insist that the earth is flat (it must be, since the horizon is a straight line) and does not rotate (it can't, or a helicopter flying straight up and down would land somewhere else).

The controversy over global warming has hundreds of thousands of people convinced that the climate isn't changing at all. Political statements, claims about health treatments, basic data (like the widespread claim that the British are 100% literate, when the former Prime Minister conceded it was only 80%), basic information of all sorts – social media promotes so many groundless claims that we no longer know what is fact, and what is fiction.

The result is that organisations like BBC News now have a department to verify reality, something unthinkable a decade ago. It seems so promising, until you reflect that few people under 35 have the least interest in BBC News. The Today programme each morning has an audience of 4 million listeners with an average age around 60. Cristiano Ronaldo's online audience on Instagram alone is over 853 million, mostly in their twenties.

Online graphs and tables, data and official reports, conclusions, facts and figures – the sources on which people have come to rely – are likely fake. State something wrong, or stupid, and hundreds of millions will believe you within the hour. Nothing will happen to redress it. Facts are extinct. Reality has gone. Post a comment which someone feels demeans them, however, and you could end up in court.

Social media represents the greatest threat to our future. Would I really endorse the idea of chaperones in purveying news? Do I support editorial control? The idea seems dreadful – but when editors ran the news, you could be certain that – whatever bias they showed, one way or another – articles wouldn't get published if they were obvious, clear-cut, unmistakable nonsense.

Not any more: now people can post the most bizarre and unsupportable drivel and hundreds of millions can know all about it by the weekend. I owe my reputation as a writer to the efforts of my editors. The fundamental point of having an editor is to discourage people from publishing rubbish. Abandon the editor, and you free the charismatic campaigner to claim whatever they want.

That's why we can expect a fact-free future. Through untrammelled social media, it is the biggest threat we face.

Pic: Jenny Ueberberg