

# Social media, fake news and global health


DR Andrew Harmer

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Fake news

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2016, cluster of fake news sites in Veles, Macedonia – headlines such as "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President" pulled in huge numbers on Facebook

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# Alternative facts

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## Post-truth

The point is not to determine the truth by a process of rational evaluation, assessment and conclusion. You choose your own reality as if from a buffet. You also select your own falsehood, no less arbitrarily...All that matters is that the stories *feel* true; that they resonate”

Matthew D’Ancona 2017

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## Why do we fall for it?

- *Confirmation* bias - this can be so strong that contradictory evidence can *reinforce* that pre-existing belief
- *Conformation* bias – we like to fit in and virtue signal to show our conformity
- Echo chambers
- We find anecdotes more convincing than statistics
- Social media is perfectly structured to capitalise on each of these traits

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## Social media, populism and politics



**Nigel Farage** ✓  
@Nigel\_Farage

The World Health Organisation is just another club of 'clever people' who want to bully and tell us what to do. Ignore.

[twitter.com/who/status/928...](https://twitter.com/who/status/928...)

9:07 PM - Nov 9, 2017

4,032 replies 801 retweets 2,043 likes



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## The political effect?

“What do we believe? This is the crucial democratic question. Without informed choice, democracy is meaningless. This is why dictators and billionaires invest so heavily in fake news. Our only defense is constant vigilance, rigor and skepticism.

(George Monbiot, Guardian Nov 15<sup>th</sup> 2017.)

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## What can you do?

- Burst your bubble
- Engage your critical thinking (Kahneman calls it system 2 thinking); slow down; much less likely to share nonsense!
- Treat narratives you believe as skeptically as ones you don't
- Don't succumb to conspiratorial thinking

James Ball 2017, *Post-Truth: How bullshit conquered the world*. Biteback Pub.