https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-news-exactly-has-really-had-influence/

**Thought for the Week: 14th May**

***In the News***

**Fake news: What exactly is it – and how can you spot it?**

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["Fake news"](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/fake-news/)was not a term many people used 18 months ago, but it is now seen as one of the greatest threats to democracy, free debate and the Western order.

As well as being a favourite term of [Donald Trump](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/donald-trump/), it was also named 2017's [word of the year](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/02/cuffing-season-corbynmania-named-words-year-collins-dictionary/), raising tensions between nations, and may lead to regulation of social media.

And yet, nobody can agree on what it is, how much of a problem it is, and what to do about it. Here's everything you need to know.

The origins of fake news

Governments and powerful individuals have used information as a weapon for millennia, to boost their support and quash dissidence.

Octavian famously used a campaign of disinformation to aid his victory over Marc Anthony in the final war of the Roman Republic. In its aftermath, he changed his name to Augustus, and dispatched a flattering and youthful image of himself throughout the Empire, maintaining its use in his old age.

In the 20th century, new forms of mass communication allowed propaganda's scale and persuasive power to grow, particularly during wartime and in fascist regimes.

This sort of propaganda was largely funded and controlled by governments, but the blatant bias it carried waned as the ideological struggles became less apparent. Added to that, as populations became more used to mass communication, they could more easily see through it.

How did the internet and social media change things?

Before the internet, it was much more expensive to distribute information, building up trust took years…

But the rise of social media has broken down many of the boundaries that prevented fake news from spreading in democracies. In particular it has allowed anyone to create and disseminate information, especially those that have proven most adept at "gaming" how social networks operate.

Facebook and Twitter allowed people to exchange information on a much greater scale than ever before, while publishing platforms like WordPress allowed anyone to create a dynamic website with ease. In short, the barriers to creating fake news have been undone…

However, hoaxes and falsehoods have been associated with the internet since its early days, but it is only in the last two years that organised, systematic misinformation campaigns, often linked to governments, have emerged, and their effect on democracy and society scrutinised…

Critics of Facebook and Twitter say the sites are purpose built for spreading misinformation, with the reach of a story dependent on its ability to go viral - something that often depends on sensationalism and emotional reactions more than truth itself…

Headlines such as "Pope backs Trump", "Hillary sold weapons to ISIS", "FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead" went viral on Facebook in the run up to the election, garnering thousands of shares.

Has it had an influence?

It is hard to tell. Facebook's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg initially said the idea that misinformation on Facebook influenced the election was a "crazy idea", but has backtracked, [saying he regrets the comments](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/01/mark-zuckerberg-apologises-way-facebook-has-used-divide-people/).

The sheer scale of Facebook and Twitter - 2bn and 330m users respectively - and the hours spent on them each week suggest many eyeballs have come into contact with fake news stories or misinformation campaigns.

There is less evidence of fake news taking off in the UK during the Brexit vote or this year's general election, although there is evidence that bots have been used in both.

How do you spot it?

