Fake news, false news, pseudo-news, hoax news, misinformation, yellow journalism – call it what you like – the world is full of it. The Covid pandemic seems to have added fuel to the fire as people stay at home and scroll through social media. Wikipedia defines fake news as a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media.

Fake news has been around for as long as we can remember. During the first century BC, Octavian ran a campaign of misinformation against his rival Mark Antony, portraying him as a drunkard, a womaniser and a mere puppet of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra VII. During the 18th century Benjamin Franklin wrote fake news about murderous Indians working with King George III in an effort to sway public opinion in favour of the American Revolution. Fake news in the form of propaganda was rife before and during the First and Second World Wars in the 1900s.

In the 21st century, the impact of fake news as well as the usage of the term became widespread. The opening of the Internet meant easy access to information for all. The Internet has grown immensely, allowing it to be a host for plenty of unwanted, untruthful and misleading information, fabricated by anyone and making it difficult for people to know what is true and what not. In 2017, the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, claimed that fake news was one of the most significant new disturbing Internet trends that must first be resolved if the Internet is to be capable of truly serving humanity.

Fake news has the tendency to become viral. On Twitter, false tweets are more likely to be retweeted than truthful tweets. The tendency for humans to spread false information has to do with human behaviour. According to research, humans are attracted to events and information that are surprising and new, and, as a result, cause ‘brain arousal’. They don’t stop to verify the information. Massive online communities thus form around a piece of false news without any prior fact checking or verification of the veracity of the information – a deliberate lie is picked up by dozens of blogs, retransmitted by hundreds of websites, cross-posted over thousands of social media accounts and read by hundreds of thousands of people.

The term, fake news, has also been used to refer to satirical news, whose purpose is not to mislead but rather to inform viewers and share humorous commentary about real news and the mainstream media. This is achieved by using exaggeration and introducing non-factual elements that are intended to amuse or make a point rather than deceive. Fake news on the other hand, is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity or person, and or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership. The relevance of fake news has increased in post-truth politics. American president Donald Trump popularised the term but used it erroneously to describe any negative press coverage of himself regardless of its truthfulness.

According to Claire Wardle of First Draft News, a project to fight mis- and disinformation online, seven types of fake news can be identified:

1. Satire or parody (no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool)
2. False connection (headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content)
3. Misleading content (misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual)
4. False context (genuine content is shared with false contextual information)
5. Impostor content (genuine sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources)
6. Manipulated content (genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, as with a ‘doctored’ photo)
7. Fabricated content (new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm)

In order to spot fake news, and not perpetuate its spread, go through the following eight steps:

1. Consider the source (to understand its mission and purpose)
2. Read beyond the headline (to understand the whole story)
3. Check the authors (to see if they are real and credible)
4. Assess the supporting sources (to ensure they support the claims)
5. Check the date of publication (to see if the story is relevant and up to date)
6. Ask if it is a joke (to determine if it is meant to be satire)
7. Review your own biases (to see if they are affecting your judgment)
8. Ask experts (to get confirmation from independent people with knowledge)

Only share if you’re sure! 😊

Dr Linda Visser
MBChB, MMed(Ophth), FCOphth(SA)
President: Ophthalmological Society of South Africa