

# How social media's 'toxic wave' became the new enemy of trusted journalism, debate hears

By Paul Charman

Trust in the media is being undermined by “a toxic tidal wave of dangerous nonsense” on social media, a forum of editors was told.

The “infodemic” of unsourced news was in danger of exacerbating a divided society along class lines, it was said.

Those were key takeaways from a virtual debate of UK editors, organised by the London Press Club and supported by the Society of Editors and Stationers' Company.

Doug Wills, the Press Club's chair, said the debate had been prompted by a Reuters Institute report that trust in the media had “eroded worldwide”, with fewer than four out of 10 saying they had any faith in the news, with a 12 percent drop in trust in UK media.

Panellist **Jamie Angus**, the BBC's Director of World Service, said “a toxic tidal wave of dangerous nonsense” on social media directly affected global health and economic wellbeing of every single person on the planet.

“Much of this is either entirely malicious or actively state-sponsored - and that's our new competition”, he said. He called for the industry “to come together and work out what we can do to defend the existence of the public square”, which in America had “fallen apart.”

Covid had seen UK audiences “running back to quality news providers to quite an unprecedented degree”, with web traffic hitting “unheard of heights”.

Angus prefaced his remarks by saying that asking about media trust in “mature, robust markets” may be “a luxury” when “entire digital services in Myanmar, China and Kashmir were being switched off by overarching states”.

**Kim Sengupta**, The Independent's defence and diplomatic editor, observed that trust was “not purely a western issue”. Recently returned from Iran, he said it was “striking the sheer scale in the rise of social media with an utter disbelief in anything said by officials and established media”. Covid had led “a huge spread in disinformation”.

**Alison Phillips**, editor of the Mirror, was concerned that people accessing news on social media were often unaware of “the context” of the output. “Mirror readers know our biases, where we stand, but on social media there is no backstory of why these stories are being said.” There was a need “to prise apart” the difference between somebody in their grandmother's bedroom in Kansas masquerading as news and news from established sources.

What worried her most was that “we are already a very divided society and I fear that this ‘infodemic’ is only really going to exacerbate that. We could end up with a situation where those people with good incomes and a good education will get good quality news and those people with lower-paid and insecure work will get less good work.”

She had met people who genuinely thought having the vaccine meant that they would be “tracked by Bill Gates.

“There are vast numbers of people out there exchanging views largely on WhatsApp groups. While there’s a lot of attention on Facebook, the WhatsApp groups are far more dangerous because they are made up of people they know, people ‘like me’. That should be the role of the established news brands. They have to become ‘like people like me’, and therefore far more likely to trust us.”

**Polly Curtis**, managing director of PA Media and formerly editor-in-chief of HuffPost, said a major challenge over the last decade had come from social media because it was “so fast”. More organisations were announcing developments via the new “unestablished media platforms”. But lack of trust was not a factor exclusively faced by journalists. “Everyone has a trust deficit going on at the moment”, she said, citing the Edelman Trust Barometer pointing to a lack of trust in governments and business.

The debate, attended by nearly 200, was chaired by columnist, broadcaster and The Economist’s senior editor Anne McElvoy.

Concluding the virtual event, Doug Wills observed the debate had highlighted that “one good thing to come out of Covid is that it has led to a refocusing on the traditional media”.

He praised the 600-year-old Stationers & Newspaper Makers Company <https://www.stationers.org/> – which partnered the debate - for “embracing all things print and digital right up to the present moment”.

Paul Charman is a former Evening Standard journalist who then went on to be head of the College of Communications journalism faculty for many years until he retired.