THE AGE OF CYNICISM

How false news navigates naivety

By Mike Burnard

With billions of users, social media networks like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter have become the most powerful influencers and mind-shapers in global media. If social networks were countries, they would represent five of the top 10 most populous nations in the world.

In an age where anybody with a smartphone has the ability to be a ‘news reporter’ and everybody with an opinion is an ‘expert’, the powerful platform of social media has combined three generational character traits in a process of potentially destroying responsible journalism. It combined:

- a generation of unreserved CYNICISM
- a generation of unlimited INFORMATION
- a generation of uncensored NAIVETY

A GENERATION OF UNRESERVED CYNICISM

Teal Swan once said, “Cynicism is the life jacket that prevents you from drowning in disappointment.” Through countless encounters with leaders that fail, authorities that are corrupt and powers that abuse, this generation has fallen into an understandable spiral of deep cynicism. We have become so engaged in naming and shaming leaders and movements that facts have become an unnecessary commodity (and sometimes even an obstacle) in exposing the failures and faults of the famous. “Never let the facts spoil a good story” is often the ironic remark when a story seems too good to be true but also too good to ignore.

Social media has become a great source of edification as well as an incredible source of false information. At INcontext, we recently noticed the Facebook post of a ‘friend’ with a graphic picture of hundreds of charred and burned bodies lying on the ground in what seems to be a compound in Africa. The post explained that these were the bodies of Christians who were attacked and burnt to death by Muslims in Nigeria. The motivation
seemed noble enough as it encouraged readers to pray for the Persecuted Church in Nigeria, and the story seemed viable.

In reality, however, the picture has little to do with persecution, Christians or Islam. The picture was taken after a fuel-tanker exploded in the DRC and hundreds of people were tragically burnt to death.


We immediately posted a comment on the Facebook page, encouraging the author to correct the facts and not link the tragedy to Islam nor to the Persecuted Church. Within seconds, the INcontext comment was removed and we were banned from making any further comments. The only remark sent back to us was the following: “You cannot stop us from reporting persecution!” Indeed. Why let the facts spoil a good story?

This incident illustrates the seriousness of how, in an ‘age of cynicism’, it is far easier (and sadly more acceptable) to report negative sensational news than it is to seek the truth.

Mohammed Fairouz, a well-known 30-year-old composer, recently wrote the following: “The age of anxiety has given way to the age of cynicism. Among my generation, cynicism is no longer a bad word: it’s being celebrated, and often it’s mistaken for intelligence.”

Far harsher in his remarks on cynicism was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian martyr during World War II. Writing from a Nazi prison, he described the cynic as follows: “One who wears a halo as ‘a zealot for truth’ but [who] ends up destroying reality. He desecrates the mystery, breaks trust, betrays the community in which he lives, and smiles arrogantly over the havoc he has wrought and over the human weakness that ‘can’t bear the truth.’ … Cynics feed on hatred against the real — against the world created and loved by God.” (Works, 16:604–605)

Mark Meynell, author of “A Wilderness of Mirrors: Trusting Again in a Cynical World”, said the following in an interview with Tony Reinke, senior writer at desiringGod.org: “Cynicism is corrosive, and perhaps contagious. When suspicion hardens into a cynicism we cannot trust again. It is a fixed attitude — jaundiced and bitter perhaps — but devastatingly understandable in our world… Cynicism breeds a self-sufficiency that comes horribly close to the introverted autonomy that is the very definition of sin. Not only that, it can invert what is valuable, good, and beautiful in God’s world, and call it the opposite. So we have to take real care here. Cynicism that results from the abuse of power can easily become a cynicism that itself abuses power. Victims so easily become culprits if and when they manage to seize the helm.”

### A GENERATION OF UNLIMITED INFORMATION

When an **AGE OF CYNICISM** combines with an unlimited **ACCESS TO INFORMATION**, there is always the danger that unverified information, selectively used by those who seek to feed negativity, could become a lethal power in shaping and changing perceptions.

Consider the following:

- The world has **2.4 billion** Internet users.
- **294 billion** emails are sent every day.
- Every day we are bombarded with the equivalent of **174 newspapers**.
- Google processes over **40,000 search queries** every second on average. Every query has to travel on average **1,500 miles** to a data centre and back to return the answer to the user. A single Google query uses **1,000 computers in 0.2 seconds** to retrieve an answer.
- 16% to 20% of queries that get asked every day have never been asked before.

Information is now literally available at our fingertips with the push of a button.
A GENERATION OF UNCENCORED NAIVETY

Sadly, the combination of CYNICISM and access to unlimited INFORMATION has created a generation that is quite NAÏVE and willing to believe anything as long as it confirms a specific conviction, whether it be true or not. The challenge is no longer obtaining information. The challenge now lies in verifying, processing, analysing and interpreting the information. In this regard, there are seven types of ‘news’ that feed the heart of the cynic and should be avoided by every truth-seeking believer:

(Definitions taken from Wikipedia)

1. Fake News

Def: Fake news websites deliberately publish false news—propaganda and disinformation claiming to be real news—often using social media to drive web traffic and amplify their effect. Unlike news satire, fake news websites seek to mislead rather than entertain readers, often for financial, spiritual or political gain.

Some fake news websites use website ‘spoofing’, structured to make visitors believe they are visiting trusted sources like CNN, BBC and others. The New York Times defined fake news on the internet as fictitious articles deliberately fabricated to deceive readers, generally with the goal of profiting through ‘clickbait’.

At INcontext International, the most visited page on the website relates to the fake news of churches being attacked and burnt by Buddhists in Olisabang, India: http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/01/churches-burned-down-and-christians-targeted-in-india/

Research found that the province of Olisabang does not exist in India, and even though there are frequent reports of persecution in India, it is mainly by Hindu radicals and not by Buddhists.

Even though the news is fabricated and false, it has spread (and continues to spread) like wildfire within the Christian community. More than 150,000 visits to this page alone on the INcontext website confirmed the reality that news needs to be researched and that Christians should be careful about forwarding prayer requests without verifying them first.

Other FAKE NEWS on the website:
- ISIS FIGHTER CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY: http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/23/isis-fighter-converts-to-christianity/

2. Satires

Def: Satire is a genre of literature (and sometimes graphic and performing arts) in which vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government or society itself into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be humorous, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society. A feature of satire is strong irony or sarcasm — “in satire, irony is militant”.

It is especially important to note that “satirical news sites imitate legitimate news sites but contain fake news stories for the purposes of parody” (OED). This often creates the impression of truth, since it contains elements of truth but is false in its content.

At INcontext International, we are often asked to investigate news reports that seem to be true but are found to be satirical. The most visited page on the website relating to satirical news is the report (‘authenticated’ with
a photograph), of two mermaids that were found in the swimming pool of South African president Jacob Zuma (http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/23/mermaid-at-mr-zumas-homestead/). The report referred to “experts” declaring that this is not a strange phenomenon in the field of demonic activities.

Upon further investigation, it was found that the photograph of the two mermaids were actually of props from the movie Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides that was released in 2011. They are on display in the Jack Pierce Memorial Museum of the Cinema Makeup School in Los Angeles. The pictures have been circulating the globe as ‘proof’ of mermaids’ existence in Bulgaria, Pakistan and India, as well as South Africa. Sadly, as ridiculous as this sounds, this satire was believed by many and posted on social media as a fact.

Other SATIRICAL NEWS on the website:
- SOUTH AFRICA’S DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH PERMITS POLYGAMY: http://www.incontextinternational.org/2017/05/22/south-africas-dutch-reformed-church-permits-polygamy-fact-or-fiction/

3. Hoaxes

Whereas fake news exists to intentionally distort news for personal gain and satires exist to ridicule or shame individuals or powers, hoaxes exist purely as a practical joke. Hoaxes can be communicated in almost any manner: in person, via word of mouth, via words printed on paper, and so on. As the technology of communication has advanced, the speed at which hoaxes spread has also advanced.

Sadly, many hoaxes spread by Christians on social media point to a gullibility in the Christian community and a lack of discernment between the news and the noise.

At INcontext International, the most visited page on the website related to hoaxes is the supposed incident of a ‘fallen angel’ discovered in London (once again validated by a picture): http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/23/fallen-angel-in-london/

Sadly, this story has been shared on social media as ‘truth’ and forwarded on WhatsApp as a legitimate news item.

Other HOAXES on the website:
- ARABIC SCRIPT ON OBAMA’S RING: http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/01/arabic-script-on-obamas-ring/

4. Scams

Def: A scam is an attempt to defraud a person or group after first gaining their confidence, used in the classical sense of trust. Scams exploit characteristics of the human psyche, such as gullibility, compassion, vanity and greed.

At INcontext International, the most visited pages on the website related to scams focused on the attempts to prove that refugees are violent and intent on ‘Islamising’ Europe. One video released in November 2015
supposedly showed Muslim refugees committing various acts of violence. One of the most popular versions of the video appeared on the website BuzzPo (which describes itself as “Fun, facts, logic and a dose of snark”), under the title “This Is The Most Disturbing Muslim ‘Refugee’ Video You Will Ever See”. 

While this was not a scam for financial profit, it had a clear political agenda with false information to ‘defraud’ the movement of refugees and create fear and distrust.

5. Conspiracy Theories
Def: A conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy without warrant, generally one involving an illegal or harmful act carried out by government or other powerful actors. Conspiracy theories often produce hypotheses that contradict the prevailing understanding of history, common sense or simple facts.

According to the political scientist Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories rely on the view that the universe is governed by design, and embody three principles: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. Another common feature is that conspiracy theories evolve to incorporate whatever evidence exists against them, so that they become, as Barkun writes, a closed system that is unfalsifiable, and therefore “a matter of faith rather than proof”.

At Incontext International, the most visited pages on the website related to conspiracy theories are the ‘Five Blood Moons’ (http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/01/blood-moons-prophecy-revelation-or-speculation/) and lately the theory that US president Donald Trump is a freemason (http://www.incontextinternational.org/2017/02/01/donald-trump-a-freemason/).

Many conspiracy theories in Christian circles revolve around the Illuminati, the New World Order, the Pope, former president Barack Obama and lately President Trump.

Other CONSPIRACY THEORIES on the website:
• THE POPE TO IMPLEMENT THE NEW WORLD ORDER: http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/23/pope-to-implement-new-world-order/

6. Old News

Another challenge with news is determining not only the factual content but also the actual content. News without a date and location often has the ability to appear over and over again.

At Incontext International, the most visited page on the website relating to ‘old news’ is the prayer request from Queragosh in Iraq and the pending attack by the Islamic State (ISIS). This was an actual event that happened and needed urgent prayer at the time, but Queragosh has since been liberated and danger averted. Sadly, the news report still features on social media every now and then, and well-meaning Christians still pray fervently for a crisis that happened more than three years ago: http://www.incontextinternational.org/2016/10/23/urgent-call-for-prayer-for-queragosh/

Other OLD NEWS on the website:
7. ‘Spin’ Reports

Def: A less obvious method of reporting in public relations and politics, and an intentional form of propaganda, is achieved through providing a biased interpretation of an event or campaigning to persuade public opinion in favour or against some organisation or public figure. These reporters are referred to as ‘spin doctors’. ‘Spin’ often implies the use of disingenuous, deceptive, and highly manipulative tactics, often drawing the attention away from the real issues by creating deceptive or misleading messages to reduce any negative impact it might have.

The recent reports of Bell Pottinger, a UK-based PR company and the controversial Gupta family’s spin doctors, is a case in point. In an interview with BBC News, experts in various fields accused the company of strategically using racial tension in South Africa as a platform to divert the attention away from the anti-Zuma campaigns.

A SPIN REPORT on the website:

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Mark Meynell, in his interview, added the following: “Cynicism is the god of the thinking person. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon battled the gods of money, sex, and power, but the one that came the nearest to owning his soul was cynicism... Cynicism is the temple to which we finally come after stopovers at the houses of all the other gods. It is the temple at the end of ‘temple row’.”

These are piercing words describing a destructive force that negatively affects the soul. Cynicism possesses the inherent qualities of draining hope from the souls of individuals and especially destroying the hope of communities. And, with the rise of cynicism today, you would think the Church would say a lot about it. This hasn’t happened.

Scripture is uncompromisingly clear to those who seek to communicate Truth. As Christians, our words should be “full of grace and seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6) and characterised by four components, solid foundations and secure guidelines:

Isaiah 52:7 “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news”:
1. Proclaiming peace, News that will RECONCILE
2. Bringing good tidings, News that gives HOPE
3. Proclaiming salvation News that focuses on REDEMPTION
4. Saying to Zion, "Your God reigns” News that proclaims the SOVEREIGNTY of God

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www.incontextinternational.org
mike@incontextministries.org