

▶ **FEATURE**

FACTS?

by *Yehudis Gold*

AT THE

SPEED ▶▶

OF LIE

***SOPHISTRY, CHICANERY, HYPERBOLE, ILLITERACY,
AND SOCIAL MEDIA'S UNCOMFORTABLE
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TRUTH***

FICTION

FACTS?

“A few years ago, someone circulated a story on social media about a *Chassidische* shul where I *daven*,” says Moshe K*. “The claim was that a man was called up for an *aliyah*, and because he was Litvish, someone in the *minyán* began yelling, ‘You haven’t gone to the *mikveh*, you can’t have an *aliyah* here.’ The story spread quickly and soon everyone was talking and whispering about this poor man that had been embarrassed in public.”

Moshe describes how he got a number of phone calls from acquaintances wanting to know how his shul allowed such a thing to happen.

“I called the son of the Rav to ask him about it,” he continues. “The young man said to me, ‘Which *minyán* did you *daven* at this past Thursday, the day when the incident happened?’ I answered him that I had been at the 8 o’clock *minyán*. ‘Exactly,’ he told me. ‘And did you see anyone yell at anybody?’ I was shocked. I had actually been at the *minyán* in question but hadn’t realized it because nothing had happened! A Litvishe man had indeed joined our *minyán*, something that occurs on a frequent basis, and he had indeed been honored with an *aliyah*. But that was the only part of the story that was true. ... No one had told him a negative word!”

Speaking about it now, years later, Moshe is still visibly affected. “We’ll never know why someone made up that story, but the damage was done. The shul was besmirched. And the majority of people who saw the post never learned the truth.”

Incidents like these happen all too frequently.

“My favorite example of this happened a few years ago,” a TAG volunteer tells *Hamodia*. “There was a big controversy at the time regarding the *kashrus* of fruit juices of a certain company. A well-recognized *posek* was attending a *bris* in Lakewood, and some *yungeleit* decided to see once and for all what he holds about this *she’eilah*.”

Instead of simply asking the Rav for his *psak*, they strategically placed a bottle of this company’s juice right in front of him, and a bottle of juice from another company further down the table.

“To their great joy, the Rav asked someone to pass him the further bottle, and pictures and texts flew around town confirming that indeed, this *posek* holds that that company is not kosher.”

Posting the picture with blurbs about the “news” on WhatsApp groups, the story spread fast beyond the borders of Lakewood.

As for the drink itself, no *psak* was given.

“As the Rav was leaving the *bris*, someone approached him to comment on his ‘*psak*’ and he had no idea what the man was talking about. When asked point-blank, ‘Why did the Rav ask specifically for the further bottle to be passed?’ he answered, ‘Because the further bottle was grapefruit juice,’ and it seems his doctor told him it is healthy for him.”

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Another story in a similar vein involved a *chumrah* practiced by some to have both sides of the *tefillin* straps black (according to *halachah*, *tefillin* straps need only be black on the outer side). A company that produced straps that were black on both sides had someone bring a sample to Rav Elyashiv a few years back.

“Rav Elyashiv confirmed that indeed these straps were *mehudar*,” he describes. “The person showing Rav Elyashiv the straps went on to offer them to the *Gadol* for free. However, Rav Elyashiv declined, stating that if he switched his own *tefillin* straps to these new ones then people would spread the ‘*psak*’ that one has a *chiyuv* to switch to this kind, which was not true.”

Despite his refusal, an individual in the room snapped a picture of Rav Elyashiv inspecting the straps and sent it out along with a misleading caption — “Rav Elyashiv buying new straps which are black on both sides, for his own *tefillin*.”

Sure, stories like these are hardly new. They’ve been around before things like social media and even digital devices have been around, but the advent of newer technologies means information, or misinformation, like this, can spread faster and more efficiently than ever before.

And soon large swaths of society are throwing out their favorite drink because one *posek*’s doctor told him to have lots of grapefruit.

The proliferation of misinformation is hardly limited to the niched circles of Rabbinic “rulings.” It’s really everywhere and a cause for concern for everyone as society is oversaturated with content, much of it of dubious credibility.

▶▶ Taking the Mis- and Dis- Out of Information

False information has become so prevalent, it’s already been divided into classes and become the subject of extensive research and evaluation.

There are two broad categories. Information that is distorted deliberately is referred to as “disinformation,” while that which is distorted inadvertently is called “misinformation,” and there seems to be a “menagerie” of both online, says Alexander Halavais, associate professor of Data & Society at Arizona State University.

Disinformation, or its more popular title, “fake news,” is when information is deliberately warped online, oftentimes for commercial profit, says Vian Bakir, Professor of Journalism & Political Communication at the School of History, Law and Social Sciences, Bangor University, U.K. “Examples include fake news sites with deceptive, outrageous content, that make money via behavioral advertising.”

Professor Halavais notes that there is a long tradition in disinformation, “creating a narrative that is intentionally misleading — though often containing elements of truth or evidence,” he says, which, for many in Jewish circles, may bring to mind historic examples of blood libels and well poisonings, replete with “evidence,” testimony and more, to breathe life into the fabrication.

Although we like to believe we’ve moved past the more bizarre of conspiracy theories as a society, the internet is in fact rife with them, ranging from claims that Sandy Hook shootings didn’t happen to those suggesting 9/11 was an inside job.

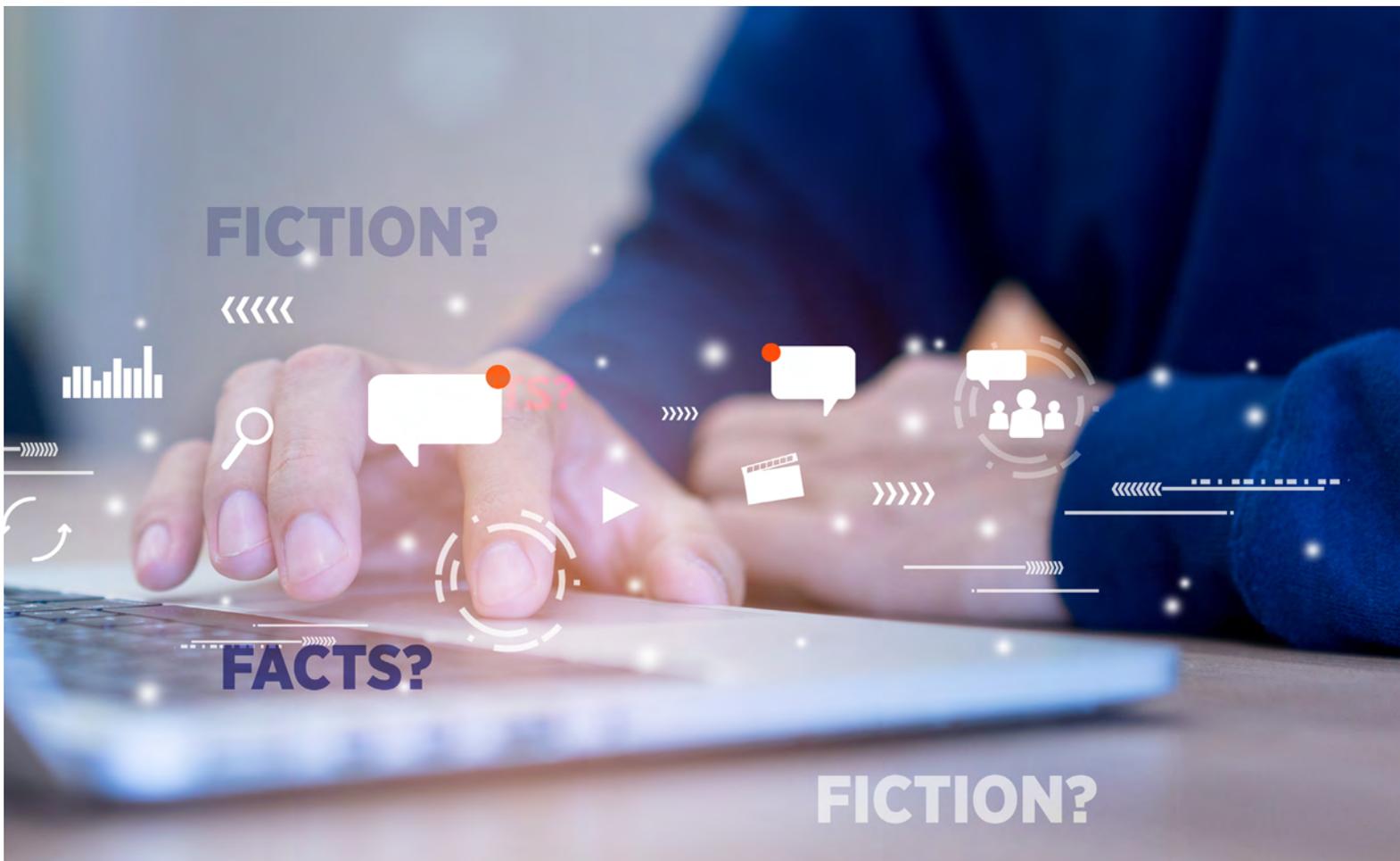
“For example, there is an item that suggests that COVID-19 is



more prevalent in countries with higher vaccination rates, and suggests that this correlation implies that vaccinations cause COVID-19. This is wrong on multiple levels, of course, including false causation and poor data sourced from sub-Saharan Africa. But it is built from data from the JHU [Johns Hopkins University] project, and appears superficially to be credible.”

Pointing out that this kind of rumor-based conspiracy theorizing has long existed, he stresses that “social technologies have greatly accelerated the reach of these attractive fictions.”

There are a range of wonky urban myths that have made surprising inroads via social media and the internet in general. The Flat Earth theory is a pretty popular one, with proponents insisting there is a cabal of government officials promoting the spherical lie. Viewing themselves as the antidote to Magellan and Newton, they patiently contradict all evidence to the contrary. Intrigues regarding the landing on the moon being a hoax or the assassination of JFK being a CIA endeavor are quite longstanding but not quite as damaging as more relevant forms of fake news, such as ones that spread falsehoods



about groups of people, medical information, or political agendas.

Professor Bakir goes further, to call some of the distortions “information warfare.” Isolating politicians, interest groups and foreign governments as perpetrators, she says they will employ “outright lies” as well as “misleading and slanted coverage” as tactics.

Most effective is stoking race and gender tensions, as is playing into political or social fears about hot-button topics. Another trick: “preying on issues where the facts are uncertain and still unfolding, such as in the development of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

She says that an analysis in March 2020 found that over 25% of the top videos contained misleading information about the pandemic and had garnered 62 million views worldwide.

“Harmful disinformation about COVID-19 has gone particularly viral in smaller media markets internationally, where technology companies face lower incentives to take countermeasures,” she continues. “Common vaccine conspiracy theories include that a vaccine already exist[ed] and [was] either publicly available or being hidden by the government, but also that the vaccine will give you the disease. Others allege that governments will impose forced mass vaccination and nanochip implantation to establish social control.”

As for misinformation — “that which contradicts the best expert evidence available at the time” — it is inadvertently distorted but also widely propagated.

“Why people share false information online has not

been studied extensively,” says Professor Bakir. “It’s difficult to assess motivation from examining social media content alone as people often engage in highly ambiguous practices online. Studies indicate that reasons for sharing false information include a desire to ‘troll [plant antagonistic posts]’ political partisanship, to play a joke, the legitimate belief that the information is true, and because the person agreed with the false information. Studies also show that we are bad at recognizing deception due to our preexisting biases, attitudes, and heuristics, including reliance on others to make credibility assessments on our behalf.”

As a final point, Professor Halavais mentions that undistorted information is pretty difficult to get at. “To share information means to select some claims or evidence over others,” he says. “So that process is an essential part of what it is to communicate online, or anywhere else. Newspapers, for example, provide that as a valuable service: deciding what is important and what is not.”

Or as it’s often touted, “It’s impossible to know everything about everything.” Which is why we are dependent on others to fill in the gaps, provide information, and determine which slivers are worth consuming, so we can all at least know a very little something about not-quite-everything. And hopefully that something is accurate.

▶▶ Post-Truth

In 2016, Oxford dictionaries chose this as the “word

of the year,” defining it as when “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

While the term had been around for a few decades, its increased use bumped it up to the top of the stack that year (although other near-winners to make the short list were adulating, Brexiteer, alt-right and woke, to name a few).

In an era where it is not uncommon to hear statements like, “Logic and reason are tools of the patriarchy,” and, “This is my truth,” or, “Those are alternative facts,” it’s not hard to see why we may be living through an era beyond truth, one in which heightened emotion and fanatical beliefs shape worldviews.

However, Professor Halavais is not a fan of this line of thinking. “I think it is dangerous to suggest that our attitude toward truth has changed,” he says. “We have always had disinformation, and we are at a point right now where its spread is especially rife. But no, we are not any more in a post-truth era today than we were a decade or a century ago.”

He does agree that we have “a critical failure in education and information literacy that has been a slow-moving disaster for some time,” one which has opened our society up to manipulation by those who are interested in forming our attitudes.

Professor Bakir is more inclined to concur with the post-truth label.

“If post-truth is where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief, then I would say that



there is plenty of evidence to show that we are in a post-truth era.”

She asks readers to consider the emotionality of two key media forms from which citizens garner their facts: news media and social media.

“Studies find each of these to be highly emotionalized environments and hence fertile grounds for post-truth. Emotionality has always been a part of journalism despite long-standing ideals of objectivity; but it appears to be an increasing feature in the digital age. Audiences share news for emotional, as well as other, reasons, and some studies show that they want a news experience that accords with their worldview.”

As for social media, while it can sometimes support rational discourse, more studies point to the often highly negative and positive emotions they circulate across the world. “This state of affairs is enabled by the architecture of social media platforms,” she continues, “then exploited by purveyors of disinformation to spread incivility, outrage, hate speech, and conspiracy theories.”

She points to a few reasons why these platforms are particularly effective vehicles for buttressing the post-truth stratospheres.

Their anonymity enables fake accounts — which, in turn, provide purveyors of disinformation a ready platform. Their algorithms deliberately provoke and promote emotional reactions, because this is what keeps people engaged and on the social media platform. “This has been confirmed recently by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen and her leak of internal documents. Facebook’s data scientists also confirmed in 2019 that posts that sparked ‘angry’ reaction emoji along with ‘wow’ and ‘haha’ were disproportionately likely to include misinformation, toxicity and low-quality news,” she says.



▶▶ Solutions

With that bleak landscape, what can be done to reorient society's approach to information? As we collectively become more aware of the half-truths and sensationalized stories circulating around us, will we become more discerning about what we consume, allowing the issue to self-correct? And finally, is there a role for intervention, be it public or private?

"It is a very substantial problem — and it is unlikely to be fixed, though it may be ameliorated," says Professor Halavais. "And yes, I think substantial efforts at educating people about how to evaluate claims effectively is key. Government may have a role here in supporting such education. I would argue that 'information literacy' isn't an easily segmented set of skills: someone who is well educated is usually better able at 'truth finding' as part of the work of thinking about arguments and evidence in any given field."

He notes another piece of the puzzle will be rebuilding trust in institutions.

"There have been concerted efforts to undermine trust in public health officials, scientists, and researchers, often in the clothing of 'anti-elitism.' Being critical of information sources is, of course, an important part of information literacy. But trusting certain sources based on their history or processes is a vital part of becoming an informed member of the public. I think this is something that scientists and researchers and journalists need

to work on as well: we all should make sure we are worthy of that trust. But addressing anti-intellectualism and anti-education discourses head-on is an important piece of this."

Is there a place here for technical and business solutions? "Perhaps," he says. "It may be time to hold companies that have profited from the spread of disinformation responsible for that. But I suspect that this does not represent a silver bullet that will solve the broader issues of disinformation in society."

For Professor Bakir, the ultimate solution involves changing the business models of social media platforms so "they do not seek maximal user engagement at all costs, and so that they do not design algorithms that make emotional and deceptive content go viral."

She is afraid that is unlikely to happen without either a mass exodus of users or government intervention which might come at the cost of free speech.

With neither outcome likely, she says "we are left to tinker at the edges with solutions."

"Educating people in terms of how to recognize, avoid, and be skeptical of deceptive, emotive claims on social media is a good place to start — but massively difficult," she says. That's because we humans are full of biases that make us fall into step with information that appeals to us or supports our ingrained beliefs.

To end where we started, falsehoods on social media have destroyed reputations and ruined people's lives.

"*Shidduchim* are harmed," says Moshe. "Livelihoods are impacted. It's frightening to what degree. I had an acquaintance who recently went through a character assassination. The damage is indescribable. And perhaps most outrageously, it can happen in just a matter of minutes. The only real solution is to rethink the usage of social media as a source of information." ■