



Fake News: the failures of big tech and education



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According to the education secretary Damian Hinds, ‘teachers need to better prepare pupils of the risks of “fake news” and disinformation online’. In an increasingly network-driven society, it appears to be the case that pupils are not only part of the digital era, however that they are also part of the sub discipline of social media, and the risks of misinformation has become heightened.



Essentially, social media involves turning web and mobile based communications into social dialogue. The benefits of social media have been aptly discussed in the literature, and include: breaking down traditional hierarchies in terms of global geography, networking, social learning, creative expression, improved confidence, and advancing employability skills (Lewis 2017). These benefits have accelerated the debate on the relationship that educational institutes can have with the “tech” giants.

Drawing on anecdotal evidence, pupils arrive at school and instantly recall last night’s social media activities. Social networking sites (SNS) hold the potential to drive our main form of communication, dictating our own social networking norms. SNS are some of the most popular internet services in the world, and in 2018, Alexa ranked YouTube #2, Facebook #3, Twitter #12, and Instagram #13 as the most popular sites in the world. Facebook has over 1 billion users from around the world (Lee, Yen & Hsiao 2014), although recent figures suggest this number could be as high as 2 billion.

Further advancements in technology have created avenues for people to access SNS at any time and in any place. In professional contexts, industries such as retail, are using social media to reach clients/customers. SNS offer a wide range of communication strategies to reach the desired prospects (Kacker & Perrigot 2016). Dealing with customer queries, promoting offers, and sharing information are new methods which have contributed to an increasingly modern and measurable customer relationship that companies seek.

In contrast, the education sector has seen some pushback when social media has been incorporated into classrooms. Despite the ubiquity of social media in education, few schools are taking advantage of how children are enthused, and perhaps most prominently, how to become safe online and use social media relatively risk free. The spread of half-truths, and propaganda online now invites educational intervention from schools. Schools have intervened previously by promoting a greater awareness on different values, beliefs and opinions, as with the Citizenship agenda.

The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) spokesperson Gwenn O’Keeffe, cautioned parents around the dangers of social networking even after the legal age of 13 years. ‘It’s not a good idea. Since logic and sophistication reasoning is not taught until high school, younger children may not realise one of their posts is inappropriate’. It’s like giving the keys of a car to a 17-year-old and saying ‘you are now old enough to drive, go drive’, without any educational provision on road safety. Within schools, there is an abundance of information available to children on the risks of smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, however, an absence when it comes to safety online. This is surely a professional development need?

Broadening social connections has now become an insufficient argument when the exposed risks include: cyberbullying, sexting, ‘Facebook depression’, and developing an addiction to emotional connections. There is now a body of evidence that highlights the importance of teaching the benefits and risks of working online, and in particular social media (Gonzales 2017; Junco et al. 2012; Tess 2013; Landson 2015). Almost all industries, including corporations, non-profits, and government organisations share the need for their employees to have social media expertise (Freberg & Mae Kim 2017). It is also possible that the absence of social media in the classroom could have a detrimental impact on the future workforce.

Damien Hinds proposes that the tech giants (Facebook and Google) make it easier for people to work out the trusted sources online. Additionally, he has committed to introducing new content to schools that address Computing curricula in Key Stage 3 and 4, ‘Children won’t just learn about what a spoofer or a sock-puppet are, or how clickbait headlines try to lure you in. They’ll learn about how so-called confirmation bias helps stories spread, and discuss why someone might want to bend the truth in the first place’. Moreover, Gonzales (2017) goes into more detail by recommending that schools cover topics such as digital footprints and the permanency of online content.

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