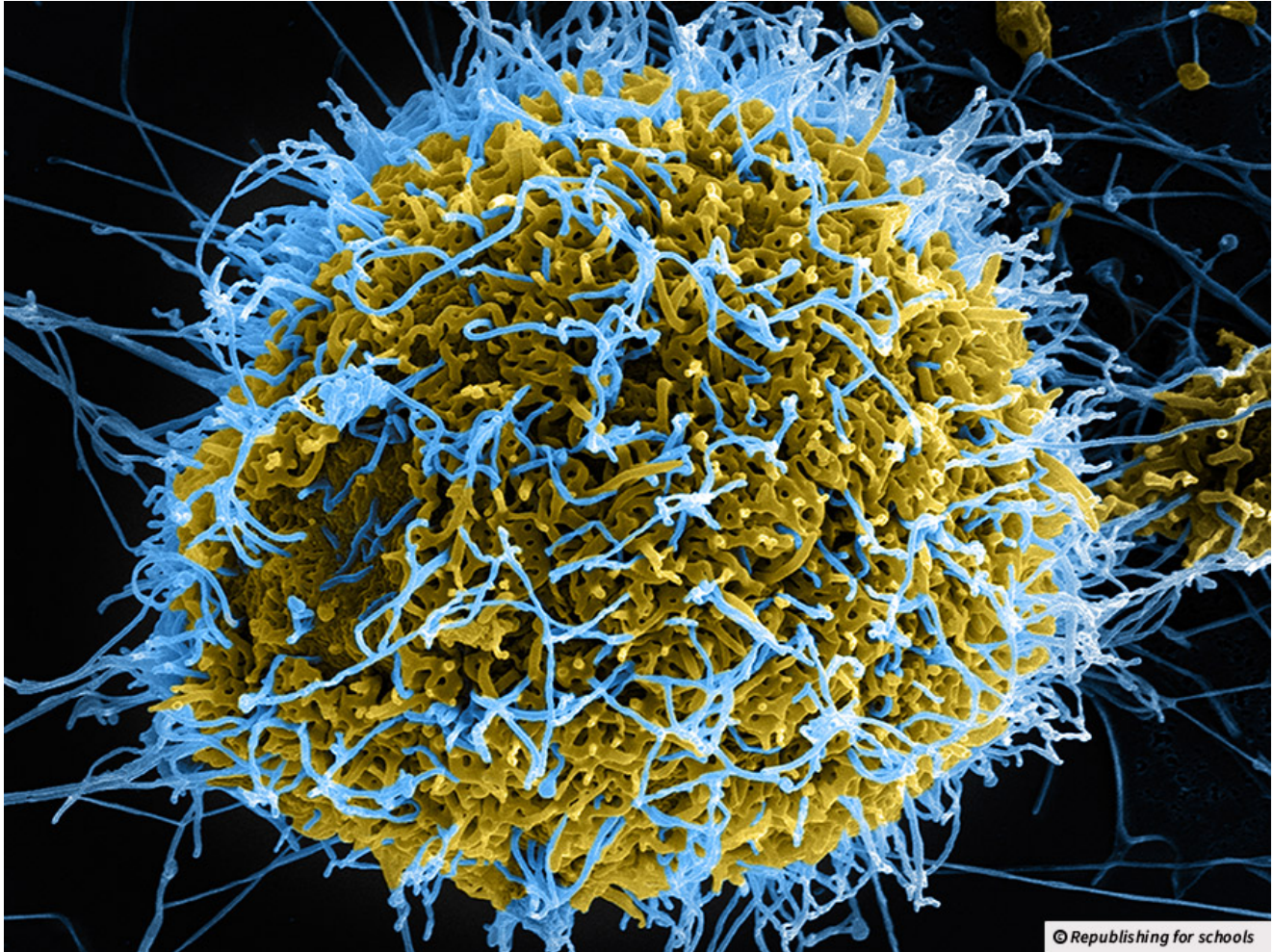


Fake news and fantasy: 2023 in misinformation

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***Ebola rollercoaster:** Rumours swarmed online of an Ebola virus outbreak at the Burning Man festival.*

Will truth survive? Fake news is easier to generate, faster to distribute and harder to disprove than ever before. Some wonder how we will get through this rapid escalation of online dishonesty.

The pope in a puffer coat. Donald Trump tackled to the ground by policemen. Joe Biden with a corn-coloured mullet.

How many of these images did you see and believe? The rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies this year has allowed fake news stories to **flourish**. All it takes is an idea, and anyone can make it into a reality.

More than 85% of people are worried about the impact of online **disinformation**, with 87% concerned that it has already harmed their country's politics.¹

What were the biggest fake news stories of this year? In January, a flurry of activists rushed to social media to claim that America will ban all gas stoves in an attempt to reduce emissions, sparking widespread controversy.

In February, images and videos shared online appeared to show a nuclear plant exploding due to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria.

In June, a submersible bound for a tour of the Titanic went missing in the North Atlantic, containing five people. A deepfake CNN article went viral claiming that the submersible had been found with its passengers mysteriously missing.

In September, party-goers in the Nevada Desert attending the annual Burning Man festival were stranded by flooding. Social media users claimed that attendees had contracted the Ebola virus.

In October, French intelligence alleged that the bedbug panic sweeping Paris had been stoked by **Kremlin propagandists** seeking to destabilise the western world.²

And this month, social media users spread the claim that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had splashed out on two multimillion-dollar luxury yachts.³

Some worry that the quality of fake news is only getting higher, whilst our **media literacy** is declining. With several vital global elections due to take place next year, some say we need to build a handbook for determining what is real.

Truth and claw

Yes: There is lots of fake news, but it is almost always quickly debunked. Right now, it is still possible to tell the difference between AI-generated fake news and real stories, provided you have a degree of media literacy.

No: It is becoming easier to generate believable fake news for free. It can come from anywhere and be distributed widely on social media within minutes. Soon it will be impossible for us to keep up with what is real and what is fake.

Or... It is not truth we need to protect, but imagination. With imagination, we can imagine new possibilities for our lives; fake news is designed to trap us in narrow-minded and prejudiced perspectives.

Will truth survive?

1. These results were taken from a global survey undertaken by [Unesco](#).
2. According to [Politico](#).
3. The claim was disproved after journalists found that the yachts in question are [still on the market](#).

Some people say

"Truth does not do so much good in the world, as the appearance of it does evil."

François de La Rochefoucauld (1613 – 1680), French moralist

"At any given moment, public opinion is a chaos of superstition, misinformation, and prejudice."

Gore Vidal (1925 – 2012), American writer and public intellectual

What do you think?

Six steps to discovery

1. Construct

What is your point of view? - Imagine that you are a newspaper editor. Will you replace your journalists with AI? Why or why not?

2. Express

What do others believe? - Get into small groups. Imagine that you are a group of advisors for the Department for Education in your country. What ideas do you have for helping schoolchildren learn the difference between real and fake news?

3. Reflect

What might happen next? - Write a fake news story to spread some kind of harmless misinformation in 2024. Think about making it believable but still compelling.

Glossary

Flourish - Grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way.

Disinformation - Artificial intelligence is already used to produce "deep fakes", visual and audio content that impersonates someone in order to deceive and spread false information.

Kremlin - A central fortress in a city, used to refer to a complex in Moscow with five palaces and four cathedrals. The Russian government is run from within this citadel.

Propagandists - A person who disseminates propaganda.

Media literacy - The ability to apply critical thinking skills to mass media.