



How to build community.

How to fight fake news

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Speakers

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Episode 11: How to fight fake news

Jake Lloyd 0:15

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Hello, I'm Jake Lloyd and welcome to *How to build community*, a podcast and a radio show brought to you by Tearfund's *Footsteps* magazine and Arukah Network. Fake news seems to be everywhere at the moment, wherever in the world you are listening to this, I'm sure you can think of an example that you've heard or seen recently. Well, in this episode, I'm going to explore how we can all go about fighting fake news wherever we find it.

Shaydany Urbani 0:55

So if you can meet people and understand what are the root concerns that is driving, sharing that misinformation, then you can probably have a more productive conversation.

Jake Lloyd 1:06

That was the voice of Shaydany Urbani, who is an expert in helping people and organisations to spot fake news and to fight it. And in this episode, she's been telling me why it's the responsibility of all of us to challenge people who spread fake news. She's been telling me how you can prepare yourself to have these conversations and she and I have been hearing some really interesting case studies about fighting fake news in different parts of the world. But let's get straight into our conversation today. And I want to first let my guides on this subject introduce herself.

Shaydany Urbani 1:47

My name is Shaydany Urbani, and I am Partnerships and Programmes Manager for First Draft, based in New York City. Our mission is essentially to equip people and organisations with the tools and knowledge to fight harmful and misleading information.

Jake Lloyd 2:07

Now, you might sometimes see a message on WhatsApp or hear somebody say something that you think might be fake. And if you're anything like me, then sometimes you might decide not to challenge that person. Maybe you think you don't have the time or the energy, or perhaps you don't want to risk damaging your relationship with them. Well, my first question to Shaydany was this. Why is it important to challenge fake news when we hear it?

Shaydany Urbani 2:38

You know, I think part of the reason has to do with the way that people get information nowadays. So, you know, it used to be a lot of people got their news from newspapers or at least that there was a more limited variety of sources where people were getting their information. Now, people are getting their news from social media. They're getting their news from their friends, from things that they see in posts. You know, the Internet is a lot more democratised in a sense now, and I think in ways that we expected it to be, but also in ways that we didn't expect it to be. And one of the one of the effects of that has been that everyone has a role to play. Now, when it comes to making sure people have accurate information. Right. And it's really common for people to get their news from a WhatsApp group they're in. It's really common for people to learn about the pandemic or vaccines from things that they saw shared on Facebook. And, you know, when it comes to social media, one of the big problems with social media is that the feeds and the information that you see there are structured such that people are seeing information that's getting the most engagement. And sometimes that's good. Sometimes that gives you information you're interested in. But sometimes it means that the content you're seeing is really just the content that are listening, eliciting strong reactions. And this is how misinformation functions most misinformation has its power from being content that really plays on your emotions. So all of this is to say is that nowadays, with the way that people get information, everyone has a role to play in making sure that they're calling out bad information, making

sure that the information that they're putting out in the world is not going to be harmful to someone else.

Jake Lloyd 4:42

Everyone then has a role to play in challenging fake news. And so I asked How we can best prepare ourselves to challenge people who are sharing it.

Shaydany Urbani 4:52

I think there are two there are two sides to yourself. One is to make sure that you have accurate information. Right. And so that means a couple of things. That means, you know, on any given topic, taking a minute to check yourself. So if you see a piece of information that elicits a strong emotional reaction. Stop and think about that and think about why you're having that reaction. Also, check your sources. One of the best ways to verify information is just by simply going to the source where the information comes from. So if that is a statistic, what is the organisation or the government body that put out that statistic? If you saw it in a news article, think, where did this journalist get this information and go to that source. The closer you can get to finding the original source, the more you're going to understand the context of that information and get closer to seeing the information as it was originally put out in the world and not in some other kind of misleading context. And this is what journalists do as well. Right. So it's kind of just doing the work, being able to do that work of a journalist on your own. The other thing people can do to equip themselves, I think, is to come into conversations with the intent, to understand the other person, to understand what misinform mission they're seeing and why they're sharing it. Often what happens is that people approach these conversations in an adversarial way. Right. And can be some sort of dismissive of the person who is sharing misinformation. Usually people share misinformation, not maliciously. They're sharing it because they believe in it. They're sharing this information because there's something about it that they're concerned about. So if you can meet people at their level and understand what are the root concerns that is driving, sharing that misinformation, then you can probably have a more productive conversation.

Jake Lloyd 7:10

I was then interested to know from Shaydany and what she thinks causes people to believe in fake news. Are there any patterns?

Shaydany Urbani 7:20

You know, we get this question a lot and it's a difficult one to answer. Not necessarily. I mean, one thing that I think is a general pattern is there can be a lack of trust in the sources of information, I guess is one way to put it. Lack of trust in news organisations that are local to people or politicians or medical institutions is one thing we think about a lot now with the pandemic. And I don't really have a judgment about that. It's not necessarily wrong to be sceptical of elite sources of information. And I think, you know, thinking that it's wrong to have that lack of trust isn't really an attitude that helps us put more accurate information out there. I think that the one thing that is really important for people of all kinds to do, whether you are in the

media, whether you work at a community organisation, or whether you're just someone who talks about controversial topics with your family members or your friends is to understand what are the reasons for mistrust in the information that we have out there and how can we address those? Right. So that's one pattern I think about a lot. But, you know, people often have very different reasons for sharing the misinformation that they do. And that's why I think it's important to do that in good faith, exercise of understanding what those are and meeting people where they are when it comes to the pandemic. So to talk about a topic that is on everyone's mind slightly so we did well the pandemic and vaccines. So at first draft, we did some research about conversations about vaccines online, looking at how people were talking about them. And we looked at these conversations in English, French and Spanish and on different social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. And we did find patterns in why people seem to be sharing misinformation. We tried to categorise different conversations according to like different narratives that they fell into. So, for example, one thing that we found was that one concern that people have across the board in different languages is the effects of politics and economics on the vaccine. Right. So people are essentially concerned about the corrupt, the corrupting influence of politics, the corrupting influence of profit of pharmaceutical companies. This is something that we see across the board in lots of different languages. And so that's a pattern. So this is a concern that we see widely that is driving misinformation. And people are also concerned about safety. They're concerned about their own bodies and assessing risk. So I'd say it's not an easy question to answer, because it depends on the topic that we're discussing. But certainly when it comes to like the pandemic and vaccines, there are patterns that we can pick out.

Jake Lloyd 10:35

This seems like a good point to pause my interview with Shaydany. She mentioned trust there and how a belief in fake news often comes from a lack of trust in media or politics or health care. I want to share with you now a short case study about fake this and trust. Kalsang Soreng is a health worker in Uttarakhand in northern India. She has a medical background and her job with a charity is to equip people in remote, rural communities with basic healthcare skills. I was speaking to Kalsang recently and she told me how she really enjoys her work and she's been doing it for 11 years. But what was really interesting to me is that it took her a long time to build up a relationship with people locally. At first, she said, no one would open the door to her. But after a number of years, people do. They appreciate and value and respect her and her expertise and that trusted relationship which she's built up over a number of years, has been really helpful over the course of the pandemic. And here's why. I asked her if she'd heard people spreading fake news during the pandemic.

Kalsang Soreng 11:54

People were they were spreading like anything. My goodness. It was strange for me, you know, lack of knowledge on it. This happens. So I think I took one or two classes of group classes and then they understood what it really meant.

Jake Lloyd 12:13

So the people who were believing the fake news, you felt that they listened to you when you challenged them.

Kalsang Soreng 12:20

Yeah. In fact, if they have any problem, they call me. Okay. And I'm ready for 24/7.

Jake Lloyd 12:29

But you need to get some sleep as well sometimes, don't you?

Kalsang Soreng 12:33

Yeah, I sleep. But when they need help, it's my speed and it wakes me up.

Jake Lloyd 12:41

So that's Kalsang, one of the many wonderful members of a Arukah Network in Uttarakhand, northern India. And I don't know about you, but the one thing I took from that interview is that it's not necessarily enough to be armed with good information in order to challenge fake news, you might also need to have a good, trusting relationship with people in order for them to listen to you, especially if you're challenging them about something they believe in. And so back to Shaydany. And I asked her if this story reflects her experience.

Shaydany Urbani 13:19

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it really comes down to that point you made about building trust. There was an interesting piece of data put out, I believe, by the Kaiser Family Foundation looking at who people trusted with information about COVID and like Hispanic and Latino families in the United States. And it measured people's responses to different kinds of groups. And one of the things that I found was that people had the most trust in their local doctor, as opposed to people who might have lots of expertise but were more, you know, more distant, more removed, closer to politics, for example. Right. So people tend to have a lot of trust in their local doctor and, you know, I can't really speculate about the reasons for it, but I wouldn't be surprised if it had to do with that relationship of trust. You know, we do at first draft a lot of monitoring, of misinformation, trying to track different narratives, misleading information, whether it's about the pandemic, about politics, where they come from, how they spread. And one thing that we pay a lot of attention to is this concept of influencers. What I mean by influencers is we pay attention to people who will share something and tons of people will share it. And we think about who those people are for different communities in the US, religious figures have a huge influence. You know, some of the people on

social media who get the highest engagement are people who are like preachers, for example. Right. And so that's that's really powerful, right? That an example of a figure of trust for a lot of people.

Jake Lloyd 15:21

On that note, let's hear another case study now. In 2014, Sierra Leone experienced a terrible Ebola outbreak. Ebola is much more deadly than coronavirus, but like coronavirus spreads when people are in close proximity to each other. When the outbreak happened, the government and NGOs worked hard to spread health messages about social distancing and also about not touching or being near dead bodies. But these messages had limited success, and the outbreak continued to get worse. Now, during the outbreak, a man called out Adbein Smith, who's connected with Arukah Network. He worked for an NGO that had the idea of rather than trying to spread health messages through the government or through NGOs, instead would do it through the country's religious leaders. Their feeling was that the religious leaders had more authority. People trusted them more. And so people would listen. Another country is almost 50% Muslim and 50% Christian. And so here he explains how his organisation and others worked with these Muslim and Christian leaders.

Adbein Smith 16:39

People were still in the habit of burying their dead. And with Ebola, you should not touch a dead person. But because this was a tradition in Sierra Leone and somebody that we need to like the Muslims, they need to make sure they're the best you. Within 24 hours, they need to take you to the grave. So people were practising this. Even when we are seeing it on radio, you are still practising it. And they kept on spreading the disease. And I remember in McKinney there was a particular community there, somebody that died and there was the dead body and it proves that all of them were infected, eventually dead in their homes, and they got them infected and vomiting and all that. The whole village suffered and we had lots of children who were left without parents. So we contacted them, we trained them and we encouraged them to be using verses in the Bible and the Quran to go to their Friday sermons and preach and talk about this. So we encouraged them to find verses that talk about prevention in both the Quran and in the Bible. They also discourage, we encourage them to discourage congressional prayers. You know, in the Muslims, they would stand like this shoulder to shoulder, to pray. So we discouraged that. We told them to the having distance of one person space and the next person. And they followed that. And we noticed the reduction started slowly.

Jake Lloyd 18:06

So that was Adbein Smith from Sierra Leone there, and lots of people worked together to bring an end to the outbreak. But when these faith leaders got involved, it was a significant turning point. And you can hear the full conversation without being on this podcast if you scroll all the way back to the third episode of the *How to build community* show from back in 2017. But let's get back to my chat with Shaydany, because finally I wanted to ask her to tell me a bit more about how to have conversations with someone who's sharing fake news. Here's what she told me.

Shaydany Urbani 18:46

Yeah, well, I think it starts with that concept of identifying what their concerns are that drive the reason they're sharing the misinformation. And then once you understand what those concerns are, you can kind of relate to them and relay the, you know, the information that you have at the you know, based on you based on where they're coming from. Right. So for example. Okay, so I'll get I'll give you sort of a specific example. There was a great, it was a great article that was put out last year actually by Anchorage Daily News about a major funder of the anti-vaccine movement there who was making a profit selling natural health remedies. And this was really interesting because it explained a motive for why this person was funding content that was anti-vaccine because they had their own things to gain from an alternative remedy. Right. So, for example, if you're talking to someone who is concerned about the vaccine because they're worried about the influence of the corrupting influence of pharmaceutical companies and the profit they're making, you might say, okay, I understand that you have concern about, you know, how profit is changing this vaccine development. But also, did you know that this information that you're getting is also funded by someone who has their own profit to gain? So that's sort of an example of how you can meet people on their own terms. But I think in simple and simple terms, it comes down to making sure that you are armed with quality, accurate information yourself, not being dismissive about people's legitimate concerns, addressing those concerns, and then helping that person with an alternative explanation. One thing I think that happens is people see misinformation and they say, no, no, that's not true. It's just not true. It's not very helpful for the person who's receiving that. Right. Because what you've done is you've taken an explanation that they had for how the world works. You're saying that's not true and then you're not equipping them with an alternative. So that's one thing that I would say.

Jake Lloyd 21:31

That was Shaydany Urbani from the organisation First Draft, and we're almost at the end of this episode. But before we go, I want to play you one last case study now at the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. All of India went into a lockdown. At the time, I heard about a really interesting children's project in the state of Bihar, in northern India, that helped to stop the spread of fake news. It was led by the NGO World Vision. And recently I spoke with Deepak Kumar Kayak from the organisation about the projects. Now, World Vision couldn't run their normal, in-person youth projects during the lockdown in Bihar, but they still wanted to support young people and help them spend their time productively. So they basically made and shared videos in local languages to help children learn about the virus. They then held competitions via WhatsApp, in which children designed posters with health messages about the virus. And this led to children cycling around their communities to display these posters and even to paint murals on the sides of buildings that also showed these health messages. And as the children learned more about the virus and grew in confidence, they actually felt able to challenge family, friends and even neighbours if they weren't following health guidelines or if they were spreading fake news. And Deepak told me that he saw local people start to follow the health guidelines much more closely as a result of this. And when I spoke with Deepak, I wanted to know what were some of the key lessons he learned from this project? And here's what he told me.

Deepak Kumar Nayak 23:26

Very often, actually, people they neglect the children. They don't allow them to speak. They don't give space children to come up and give some ideas. But this project, you know, we have learned how children also can be very instrumental and how children are so they can be the agents of transformation in the community. So we saw a lot of neglect in itself and we did have some of the gifts and the because of, you know, our children. Once you involved them in any kind of what, we will have a number of projects to learn from the children as well. It's not about teaching them money, but we are spending a lot of things on the children. If we need some kind of change in the community, then we certainly must improve children and we should take this ideas, we the citizens, so that, you know, our development and this task in this country will happen in the light of, you know, children themselves and in the lives of community people and communities.

Jake Lloyd 24:33

That was Deepak Kumar Nayak from World Vision, reflecting on how children and young people played a key role in changing behaviour in their community during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic. And before that, you heard Shaydany Urbani from the organisation first draft in the USA, as well as stories from Kalsang Soreng, in India and at Adbein Smith in Sierra Leone, now fighting fake news is an enormous subject. I think we've only just scratched the surface here today. If you do want to learn more about fighting fake news, then you can watch a webinar that I gave to members of Arukah Network. You can find that by visiting arukahnetwork.org/tools.

If you visit learn.tearfund.org, then you can also find some useful information about COVID-19 vaccines and vaccinations in general. You can catch up on previous episodes of *How to build community* on our SoundCloud page or in your podcast player. Just search 'How to build community'. Arukah Network is spelt A-R-U-K-A-H. You can help support this show by making a small monthly donation on our Patreon page, by going to patreon.com/arukahnetwork.org. And finally, if you have some feedback on this show or suggestions for future interviewees, then you can reach me by email: jake@arukahnetwork.org

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