

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

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# Fake news is widespread in media too

INSIGHT MEDIA OPINION

SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 01 NOV 2018

Are brands really dead? Does data actually bring more accountability? We need to call time on claims that have little basis in fact.

Fake news is everywhere, swaying politics, election results, public opinion. And fake news permeates our business too.

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You only need to attend a conference or browse your Twitter feed to come across media business fake news.

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For example: “Brands are dead.”

At a recent panel (under Chatham House Rule), a panellist said that brands were dead. Dead? Really? No Marmite in your cupboard, then? No Heinz ketchup on your chips? No Land Rover in your drive?

As the recent Thinkbox research [\*From Brand to Bland: What Happens When You Take Away People's Favourite Brands?\*](#) shows, brands are as crucial to real people as ever. The crafty people at Thinkbox took away the branding from people's favourite products and gave the items back to them. The respondents were all extremely disappointed with their unbranded products, saying that the flavour had gone or the product wasn't as good. And they were unanimous in their disbelief when the researchers owned up. Brands dead? I don't think so.

The latest overriding example of fake news, however, is this one: “Data will bring more accountability.”

The promise of more data in media was clear. There would be more accountability, more certainty, less assumption. As Eeon Pritchard points out in the new Account Planning Group book [\*Eat Your Greens: Fact-Based Thinking to Improve Your Brand's Health\*](#), the promises in digital media have fallen long short of expectations. Pritchard writes: “Social media marketing, content marketing, QR codes (remember them), VR/AR, chatbots, programmatic deliver and adtech have all arrived, been heralded as ‘the next big thing’, then gradually landed in a ditch of disappointment”. He concludes: “A decent rule of thumb would be to demand that the more extraordinary the claim of any tech platform or gizmo, the stronger the evidence must be to support that claim.”

As MediaCom's chief digital and data officer, Ben Rickard likes to state: “People say that data is the new oil. I would agree; it is exactly like oil. If it is unrefined, it is just a slippery mess.”

We were promised that viewing figures for video online would be more accurate than just

Barb could deliver with its panel of thousands. How could information from millions of data points be less accurate? Easily – if you compare the definition of a view by [Barb](#) (at least 30 seconds) with that of a view on social media, which might be for just three seconds. How did we get to this?

Here's another example: "Media context means nothing." After all, if an advertiser can reach an individual via accurate behavioural targeting, just after they have searched for a particular product, would it matter where the ad ran? It would matter quite a lot, as it turns out. A credible, safe environment means so much more than perhaps many people really understood as these technologies were developed.

Media people, it's time for a reset. Time for truth to overcome fake news. Time to call time on claims that have little basis in fact. Change is inevitable; nonsense claims are not.

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