

Social media a correct source of information?

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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Every truth has two sides; it is as well to look at both, before we commit ourselves to either. - Aesop

Just recently, we've seen the absurdity of taking what we read on social media as factual. Well, some of us have seen it - not so much others such as our State Security Agency (SSA), which is currently probing spy claims against Thuli Madonsela, Julius Malema, Lindiwe Mazibuko and Joseph Matunjwa.

SSA apparently said their information was gleaned from that mine of serious journalism, www.africaintelligenceleaks.wordpress.com and yes, I do know how to spell 'intelligence', they don't! If you open this site, you'll be greeted with their opening story headed '*The CIA has already his instigator at home*'. Now anyone with half a brain should be able to work out that with such excellent grammar in the headline, this could be a dodgy read. Not so the SSA.

The story goes on as follows:

In recent times, we have witnessed a sequence of subversive social outbursts that have no other reason but to increase the opposition of the people - mainly young - to the government, exploit the readiness and penetration reached in communications and to create a leader to head the increasing revolts meant to depose the government. The tactics are the same. In South Africa, this plan is already in progress.

In fact the whole website is built around CIA conspiracy theories, which to many of us are ludicrous, but to others, the mere fact these words are on the internet is enough to make them factual.

So perhaps the point is: how much do we question what we read and hear these days, on and offline? Do we ever bother to get to the origin of the story and check out the original source?

In the 'old days' when I learned journalism (me and Charles Dickens - I know...) we were taught that you had to have three independent sources to verify a story before it could go to print - and even then, it didn't always make it. Today the mere sniff of a good story has news organisations tripping over each other to publish.

Of course it goes without saying that some publications will latch on to a story their owners see as matching their editorial policy whilst others do the opposite. As the saying goes, 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'.

What we need perhaps is a lie detector for social media to analyse whether an online posting is true as well as identifying

whether social media accounts are created specifically to spread false information (as in anti-CIA).

Such a detector was suggested in the UK after the London riots in 2011. They wanted to classify online rumours into four categories:

- Speculation - whether interest rates could rise
- Controversy - such as whether Zuma should pay back the money
- Misinformation - whether something untrue is spread unwittingly
- Disinformation - where false information is spread with malicious intent (as in spy accusations)

Having said this, social media is often a vital source of information for news organisations, but digging up the true story is often the issue.

Here are a few pointers to help you check out a story's credibility:

- Are there any other stories posted on this topic? If so, are they from a credible source?
- Check out Snopes to see if this falls under 'urban legend'.
- Is the copy full of grammar and spelling mistakes?
- Is there a hint of a rant there?
- Do they give real names as sources?

- Do they use a byline? If they do, check it out.

Twitter

- Is this a new account?
- What other stories have they 'broken'...?
- Is there a real person to trace a story back to - with a photograph?
- How many followers do they have?
- Who are their followers?
- Do they fall into a particular category?
- Do they interact with other Twitter accounts?

- Google whatever names you get from the account and see what comes up - see if they've been reported for spam.

ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.mediamentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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