

Challenges posed by fake news

THERE WAS A DAY when the only 'fake news' we encountered was on April 1. That has all changed with the arrival of U.S. President Donald Trump's daily tweets and his frequent references to the 'fake news media.'

Well, as the old saying goes, it takes one to know one.

After all, when it comes to fake news, who could outdo Mr. Trump's declaration that five million votes in the 2016 presidential election were cast illegally, or his assertion that he had proof that while in office former president Barack Obama had ordered Mr. Trump's phones wiretapped?

We'll probably never know the extent to which fake news played a role in Mr. Trump's electoral college victory. (Note we refer to it that way because in reality challenger Hillary Clinton polled three million more votes, following in Al Gore's footsteps as a candidate who lost the election despite winning the popular vote.)

It's likely no coincidence that the issue of fake news has arisen in the age of the Internet and the related emergence of social media. As we see it, one of the most important steps taken by Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russia's involvement in the 2016 U.S. election, has been his request that Facebook provide information on the purchase of advertising space by Russian agencies in the months leading up to the election.

Is it possible that those purchases led to the publication not only of anti-Clinton ads but also anti-Clinton fake news? And could it be that those publications zeroed in on key 'swing states' that could give Mr. Trump the presidency?

(One example we've heard of is an unfounded report that Ms. Clinton got rich by tapping into the Clinton Foundation, a charity established after her husband left office.)

No one knows whether the Russian meddling actually produced the surprise Trump victory, and today Ms. Clinton thinks the killer punch was delivered by former FBI director James Comey when he announced a fresh investigation into her use of a private email server while she was secretary of state.

But one thing we don't think has been disclosed is just how it came to be that the email probe was renewed on the eve of the election, with the follow-up announcement that nothing new had been found coming too late to affect the vote. Is it just possible that Mr. Comey or some other senior FBI official was the victim of a fake news tip?

Probably the saddest aspect of the current controversy is that it comes at a time when daily newspapers are suffering huge losses of advertising to the Internet and a variety of other competitors. Dailies like the Toronto Star which once ran full sections of classified advertising and food ads today have virtually none of either and find themselves having to rely on a few retailers who refuse to join the trend to the Web, flyers, billboards and TV commercials.

This huge loss of revenue, combined with declining readership, has forced even the best North American dailies to reduce their editorial staffs and in many cases abandon the costly exercise of investigative reporting.

In such circumstances, it's surely distressing to see the president of the United States accuse the 'mainstream media,' and the New York Times and Washington Post in particular, of being sources of fake news.

The reality is that those two newspapers and other news sources such as CNN and the Associated Press are getting 'leaks' from whistle-blowers in the White House and Congress and hopefully doing their best to confirm the authenticity of those disclosures (no small task even at the best of times).

All things considered, our advice is to practise skepticism concerning anything you see on the Internet that cannot be confirmed by a reasonably reliable source.