

Charities colluding with traffickers? Fake news, says report

Tuesday 20 February 2018, by [BEAUMONT Peter](#) (Date first published: 15 February 2018).

British study finds anti-migrant and pro-Trump groups spreading increasing number of false stories about aid agencies to weaken their reputation

Aid agencies and charities are increasingly the target of fake news aimed at undermining their credibility, according to by the International Broadcasting Trust.

In a week in which in the aid sector hit the headlines, the new report – Faking It – examined the reputational impact of fake news, typically on social media, amid already declining public trust in NGOs.

Although the public still trusts the sector more than politicians and the media – placing it around the same level as business – confidence in western countries has been declining amid sexual misconduct allegations, and other high profile failures of governance, as well as stories about fraud and corruption.

All this has been exacerbated by the increasing use of fake news stories – both by individuals with agendas, like anti-migrant attitudes, as well as by states such as Saudi Arabia – to undermine the work of aid organisations working in sensitive areas.

Among the cases cited in the report are false claims that Save the Children colluded with traffickers in the Mediterranean, and a wave of untrue stories targeting the Red Cross in the US in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

Spurious stories about the Red Cross included viral claims on Facebook that the charity had stolen donated items from churches in Houston – these stories were deemed “mostly false” by online factchecking organisation Snopes – and assertions that the Red Cross was charging victims of the hurricane for its services.

The report also cited Saudi government claims about Save the Children in Yemen as part of efforts to discredit the organisation. In March 2017, the charity accused the Saudi-led coalition of blocking shipments of its medical supplies. The Saudi government responded by asserting that Save the Children did not operate in Yemen, although it had in fact been working there since 1963.

The rise of fake news targeting NGOs, said the report, comes at a time when organisations remain slow to respond to the challenge, focusing instead on more mainstream outlets.

“NGOs need to monitor the information that is shared about them and, where they are the subject of fake news, they need to recognise it and fix it,” said Fergus Bell, a media consultant who works with aid organisations.

The report also cited how prominent individuals in the aid sector had become the victims of fake

news, including Girish Menon, chief executive of ActionAid, who was targeted after expressing his views about Donald Trump's attitudes towards women and marginalised communities in a television interview.

"At midnight," he recalled, "I got a message from my son to say something had popped up on LinkedIn about me being an Isis agent. I was tired and laughed it off at that stage, but the next morning I had received many messages, as had the chair of ActionAid. We discovered that the message originated from a fake news site hosted in the US."

Among the news sites the report identified as having circulated fake news about NGOs is one right-wing media organisation that is particularly well known – Breitbart.

"In the Mediterranean our search and rescue operations have been falsely accused of colluding with traffickers," said Sean Ryan, head of media at Save the Children, explaining the genesis of one strand of fake news stories as they moved around the globe.

"It started as a report in the Italian media and then Defend Europe, the far-right group, hired their own boat to try and stop what we were doing.

"Breitbart released a video which purported to prove our collusion with traffickers but showed nothing of the kind. We had to fight this propaganda without many resources. We just had to keep repeating that we only worked with the Italian coastguard."

Peter Beaumont

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/15/charities-aid-agencies-fake-news-says-report>