

2017 Text 2, QB: Write an opinion piece for publication in a national newspaper in which you give your views on the extent to which people today rely on the online world as a source of news and information, the reliability of these sources, and the impact of this development on society.

How are you reading this article? Perhaps you have picked up a broadsheet in your local corner shop, or are browsing in a newsagent. However, the majority of readers will most likely respond that they are reading these words on a screen of some kind: whether that be a phone, a tablet, or a computer. The online world has revolutionised how we interact with news and information, and I hope to explore that in this article. To what extent do we rely on the online world? How reliable are these sources, and what powers and pitfalls should we be aware of? Finally, what impact has this had on our society, and how do we move forward?

The online world is indisputably cemented into our daily lives. This touches every part of our society, and in particular it has uprooted how we interact with news and information. From newspaper apps, to social media updates, to the entire knowledge of humanity at our fingertips, we are engaging with digital information in an unprecedented manner. Gone are the days when one would spend hours trawling through a library or an archive for information, or where news could take days to travel oceans. Now, we can access constant live-streams of news, and have any question we could ever ask answered within minutes. We are increasingly reliant upon the digital world to understand the world around us. A recent study by the Pew Research Centre found that 63% of people rely purely on a digital source for their news. Traditional media is in decline, replaced by this world of information and updates that, to some extent, is bombarding us. I can scarcely remember a day where I have not opened my phone to search through the day's news, particularly in the context of COVID-19. We are reliant on our devices for case updates, news of a vaccine, or the latest regulations. Very few of us, particularly those in my generation, go more than 24 hours without engaging with some sort of digital media. As such,

there can be no doubt that we as a society, from nearly every background, depend on the online world for our news and information.

This causes us to ask a difficult question: are these sources upon which we are so reliant, reliable? There are two sides to this discussion, and although it is easy to immediately jump to the criticism of the online world, I want to present you with both.

Online news and media has had an unprecedented impact on the democratisation of how we access information. Governments and institutions can no longer control the narrative. The rise of citizen journalism, news recorded and sent by ordinary people on the ground, has allowed stories to emerge that may have never otherwise seen the light. Take, for example, the Iranian Revolution, where reports from citizens allowed the world to witness human rights abuses hidden by the government regime. Palestinians sharing their stories of civilians being killed by the IDF have forced the world to take note. Many of the stories and news reports shared online may not have made it through a traditional editorial process, or could've been censored by vested interests and lobby groups. As such, the online world provides a communication platform for accountability, for transparent news reporting, and for ordinary people to have their voices heard.

In spite of this, there are clear caveats with our dependence on the online world. The rise of misinformation has been fed by the growth of consumption of digital media. Facts and figures that may have been filtered out by the editorial eye now roam unchecked through voids of Facebook streams and Twitter posts. Few can say they haven't been witness to 'fake news' online from a variety of sources, including political campaigns. The false claim of the Brexit campaign regarding £250 million a week to the NHS, promoted online, convinced over 2,000 voters (King's College London). Clickbait headlines, where many fail to read the article in its entirety, fuel the spread of misinformation and misleading news. As such, though the online world provides a platform for democratisation, it also carries risks of manipulation and false facts spreading far and wide.

This begs the question, what impact has and will this shift in behaviour have on our society? The rise in fake news has led to high levels of media distrust, fuelled by political figures such as Donald Trump. 'Fake news' has made it difficult to know which sources to trust, and which to avoid. In turn, we are

witnessing never before seen levels of political polarisation online, translating into dysfunctional political systems off-screen. Movements such as the anti-vaxx movement are gaining traction based on manipulation of facts and clickbait headlines designed to play upon people's emotions and fears. Yet, alongside these negative impacts, we have seen an increased sense of global awareness and solidarity. We have seen people sharing stories of one another, resources and information to help those on the ground. Social movements have been able to gain traction online, gathering numbers to create genuine change. Though misinformation may be rampant, so too is genuine human goodness and the use of the online world to improve our physical one.

The impact of the online world, like so many other aspects of our increased digitalisation, is mixed. It is up to us how we move forward. Digital media is not in and of itself malevolent, its misuse lies in its creators and users. We must harness the positive opportunities presented to us by the growth in the online world. We must call for increased accountability of technology firms such as Facebook to combat the rise in false and dangerous misinformation and hate speech. We must create education for people to spot where they may be being manipulated, and how to venture the online world safely.

The future of digital media is not set in stone, it is up to you as readers, to me as a writer, and to all of us as a society to determine it. No matter how you're reading this article, take a moment to consider how the online world has impacted your interactions with news and information. Then, think about how you want to solve that, and together, we can work to create a world of democratic, reliable, and free news and information for all.