

Here is the full transcript of journalist Ali Velshi's talk: **[How Fake News Grows in a Post-Fact World @ TEDxQueensU conference.](#)**

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### **Ali Velshi - Journalist**

So December 26 2016, my family, my wife, my kids, my in-laws and I are getting ready to go to dinner. And my phone starts going off with breaking news alerts.

I only get my breaking news from reliable sources. I've been a journalist for 24, 25 years. I only get it from sources that rigorously check their information.



December 25, 2016 The New York Times NYTimes.com »

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**Breaking News Alert**

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**BREAKING NEWS**

**George Michael, an icon of pop music who infused social commentary with a dance-club beat, has died. He was 53.**

Sunday, December 25, 2016 6:47 PM EST

So when I look up and I see this tweet that George Michael has died, I tell my family. My kids look up from their phones like some of you, too young,

to understand the George Michael sang every last hopeful song at my high school dances.

My wife does what she often does. She started relating those things that George Michael is known for, sort of an impromptu obituary. My mother-in-law didn't seem to have a reaction. She was standing over by the side working on her computer sitting -working on her computer.

Moments later, she pipes up that it's a hoax. He's not dead. So my first thought is did the New York Times and CNN both get tricked? I mean, George Michael was pretty young, it was believable that maybe he didn't die. So I quickly walked over to her. I'm looking over her shoulder and the article she's reading is from a website I've never seen before and it's dated the next day.

So I said I think what you're looking at is a hoax. My wife is an analyst, she pokes up, pipes up and says actually maybe it's published in Australia where it's already tomorrow so the fact that it's the next day isn't relevant.

So now this whole thing is thrown into confusion and we spend a little bit of time trying to figure out whether the New York Times and The Wall Street Journal have tricked us. But the fact is that he was dead unfortunately and it sort of points to a bigger problem. And that is that fake news shows confusion that obscures basic facts that prevents necessary debate.

While you're wasting your time figuring out whether the news is actually true or not, you're not having the necessary debates whether it's about whether George Michael was a great artist or not, the fact is this is what it does.

And in this troubled world in which we are in, even basic facts are now up for debate. Now everything that's not news isn't fake news. I'm talking

about a very specific subset of things. So for instance, we've got something called **native advertising**. You may be familiar with this. It's advertising, it's a story that's paid for by an advertiser placed in a prominent place — in this case, it's the Atlantic magazine.

And unless you can actually see that little thing that says *sponsored content* you may not be aware that this isn't really a news story written by a journalist. So while that's not terrific, I don't raise it to the level of fake news, because there's some signposts there that it is actually fake.

And then there's this satire. You probably enjoy satire. I enjoy satire. It's funny, it's opinionated, it's not always accurate though. The good news though is that it has some basis in accuracy. If you get all of your news from satire that's a bit of a problem. But if you use it for some of your news I don't think it rises to the level of fake news.

The other thing that's not fake news is a mistake, inadvertently spreading incorrect information, a bad source something like that. If CNN had tweeted that George Michael had died and George Michael hadn't died it would have been corrected very quickly. There would have been an apology and you would have moved on. So if the intent is not to deceive, I don't think that counts as fake news either.

Let me give you another example. Some years ago, 2012, I tweeted out based on information from CNN where I worked at the time relating to a shooting that had happened outside the Empire State Building in New York. And this is what I tweeted. Breaking: law enforcement source tells CNN there appears to be no terrorism connection to the Empire State Building shooting. Except look at that tweet a little more carefully. I forgot the word no. I learned the hard way about the meaning of the word *no* that day.

That tweet went out and it said exactly what it says there: breaking: law

enforcement source tells CNN there appears to be terrorism connection to the Empire State Building. You can imagine the effect that had. That tweet spread like wildfire. It went out there. I deleted it which is not something you're supposed to do but in that particular case when I knowingly spread — inadvertently spread false information I thought deleting it would be the best thing to do. I apologized, I responded to everybody who forwarded that tweet and everybody who responded to it. I said sorry to my boss. I had a big talking too and I learned the meaning of the word *no*.

But what nobody accused me of was lying or of spreading fake news, they understood that this whole problem was about my fat fingers. It wasn't about my credibility.

The real problem is that there is fake news and it's spread by a wolf in journalist's clothing. And this wolf would have you believe that the real news is actually fake, and that's the real problem that we're facing today.

On December 4, I tweeted this out and notice in the bottom it was retweeted 11,000 times. I tweeted breaking news: the US Army Corps of Engineers halts the Dakota access pipeline work telling the Standing Rock reservation that the current route for the pipeline will be denied. This is a very controversial issue. I had this news earlier than most people did which is why it spread so many times because people wanted to distribute this information.

But one of the first responses I got to this tweet was what's your source. Now come on I'm not a journalism student. I'm a veteran journalist in my 24th year of this business. If I spread breaking news that is false or wrong, I am going to at the very least get disciplined and I could actually get fired.

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But increasingly I am getting pushed back on social media from people who accuse me of purveying fake news. If you google my — if you put in my name on my handle and fake news — *hashtag fake news* you'll see things show up and when you accuse legitimate journalists of being purveyors of fake news of lying, it's a little bit like asking somebody when he stopped beating his wife. Some of the damage is done in the accusation alone.

And when you de-legitimize journalism and when you de-legitimize facts and when you do that, you create a vacuum in one of the most important checks in civil, economic and political discourse, because who then is going to be there to hold power to account? Is the crowd going to do it? I get paid to do it. Others get paid to read information. This is one of the major dangers of accusing real news providers of fake news.

Let's talk about a crowd. That's a crowd of 17 different US intelligence agencies, all of which concluded that Russia had hacked the U.S. presidential election with the aim towards supporting Donald Trump. But the president — the newly elected president of the United States didn't believe it. And 80% of his followers didn't believe it either.

But of the rumor that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex slave ring out of the basement of this suburban DC pizza parlor, 50% of his supporters believed that it could have been true, including one who went there armed and fired three bullets. He didn't kill anyone, he didn't injure anybody, he didn't even hit anybody. And he seemed honestly surprised that not only was there no child sex slave ring but there wasn't even a basement.

Many of Donald Trump's followers believed this new claim he's made that millions of people voted illegally in this election except that there's no evidence, there's no proof, there's no nothing. It's just out there.

Approximately half of Donald Trump supporters, according to the latest

poll, believed that Barack Obama is a Kenyan born Muslim. Now the irony of all of this is that I actually am a Kenyan born Muslim and he wasn't at any of the meetings. So this is part of the problem that that there's stuff out there that just doesn't work. It would be bad enough if the President of the United States wasn't going out of his way to actually promote some of this stuff. I thought we were going into this election we would be covering really important things like how to rebuild America's crumbling infrastructure and how to increase wages for workers in America.

But instead we are debating discussing and reporting on absolute nonsense and part of that is because people don't really think that we're doing the right thing that we in journalism are doing what we're supposed to be doing. This is fed by a concept, the traditional media which is what I'm referring to the places I've worked, the CNN's, the CTV's, the Al Jazeera, the MSNBCs and NBCs, the traditional media perpetrates this elite consensus that questions some assumptions more than it questions other assumptions that somehow what we do is removed from the reality of people's lives, that we do our work in an ivory tower while news actually happens where people live.

People in my industry say that their goal is to hold power to account and yet on the Friday of inauguration I was watching newscasters on national news dressed to attend the inaugural balls of the President of the United States. The same thing happens on the night of the White House Correspondents Dinner where we cover the fact that we're all at these events. Why do journalists try so hard to get themselves invited into the corridors of power and when we're there why are we there not representing the people but rather there as invited guests eating the catered food?

I get it. Traditional journalism is flawed. I get it. We have some things to fix but I'm worried that what we're doing and what fake news is helping us do is throw the baby out with the bathwater and that's dangerous, because

we are uniquely equipped and resourced to hold power to account even if you don't believe we do it all the time.

On the first Sunday after the inauguration on Meet the Press I don't know if how many of you ever watch Meet the Press but it's on NBC, my colleague Chuck Todd hosts it and Kellyanne Conway went up, you may have seen this clip. She went up there and told Chuck that there are alternative facts. We'd never really heard that term before and Chuck very quickly responded that alternative facts are not facts.

But part of the problem is that when the President of the United States is encouraging his supporters to believe that the media is not just out of touch or somewhat ineffective but it's actually lying, it causes the problem and that's just one in a range of problems that are caused by this fake news phenomenon. At its lowest level it's a time suck, it confuses you, it causes you to spend your time trying to discern between fake news and real news and I think over time it can blunt your ability to actually do so.

I'll give you an example. A BuzzFeed study said that in 2016, of the top 20 fake news stories on Facebook they had 8.7 million shares, comments, reactions. Of the top 20 real news stories by major news organizations they had 1.7 million fewer. So fake news is crowding out real news. It means that journalists like me instead of following other stories and giving you new journalism and telling you stories about new things we're busy debunking myths. And that's part of the problem that we've got.

And it's about money initially. It started to be about money and advertising and let me tell you how it used to work in the world of money and advertising.

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In the old days, a newspaper ad department person would meet with a real

person at an advertising agency who was working on behalf of an advertiser or a company that wanted to be associated — one of their brand associated with the news outlets brand. But none of this happens anymore.

Now algorithms determine the ads you see on the internet based on your surfing habits or your shopping habits and based on the cookies that are on the sites that you use. So you get information based on where you surf. And if you start consuming fake news you'll actually end up with more of it.

Let me explain to you how these people make money. Let's say that you saw a story show up somewhere in your feed that Justin Bieber is moving to Kingston, doesn't really matter whether you like Justin Bieber or you don't, if he's moving to Kingston you're going to you're going to check the story, you're going to click on the story. And they count on the fact that you do.

So you're going to go to this absolutely made-up story but there'll be an ad near it. And as a result the advertiser pays the owner of that website a certain amount of money, a fraction of a cent and they do this lots of times.

Then let's say this purveyor of fake news takes that story and changes Kingston to one of any of 100 different towns around the country so now everybody's clicking on this story and that they change the name of Justin Bieber to one of a hundred different other celebrities. This is how it happens. Everybody clicks on these things. This is how they end up making money and it's dangerous.

And what if it's not actually about making money, it's really not harmful that you read a story about Justin Bieber moving to Kingston, if Justin Bieber's not actually moving to Kingston. Again it's a time suck but doesn't really matter.

But what if it's about religion or it's about ideology or it's there to influence politics that's the danger. So my first piece of advice to you is that if you wish to avoid the purveyors of fake news who live in dark alleys stay out of the dark alleys. Trust and support traditional journalism which is devoted to research and fact-checking and in-depth investigation of issues, the very journalism that is under attack right now.

It's under attack because it doesn't do everything you wanted it to do but it's still there and you should actually try and rely on it. You want a fact check and fact-checking is becoming easier and easier now because these fact-checking sites abound.

But how do you actually fight this kind of nonsense? How do you fight the journalism that's out there? Well you start by supporting these journalistic organizations and you start by using these fact-checking sites. If the New York Times and CNN tell you they both take checking deaths out very seriously and they both do it independently. If they tell you George Michael's dead, George Michael is probably actually dead. If Donald Trump says his inauguration crowds were bigger than Barack Obama's inauguration crowds, check the methodology that he's citing and check the methodology of those who are saying otherwise. It's actually relatively easy to do, sometimes it's just your eyeballs that you need.

But the fact is there are fact-checking sites out there and remember that fake news purveyors count on the fact that you are abjectly lazy and you are much more likely to repost salacious news than to actually check the veracity of real news. Check it. It's not hard to do. You can get out there and find out what's going on.

I'm not saying that you have to trust everything that mainstream media tells you but I would give it more weight than I would give to an unverified source.

The other thing you should do is don't spread fake news. Fake news grows exponentially because you share it, either because it validates your beliefs or because you don't know it's fake news. So check it, don't spread it, hold those of your friends who do spread it to account. Make sure they don't do that. There's some salacious fantastic stuff on the internet and as much as you'd like to believe it if it turns out not to be true it's on you.

And in a world where your reputation is determined on social media in many cases, if you become known as someone who like your crazy uncle who forwards these email strings that make no sense people will stop trusting you. They just won't trust the information, it becomes the boy who cried wolf.

Look, journalism is a serious business. You have to understand how to consume it. You have to cross-reference it but you have to trust certain things. Everywhere I have worked has had a methodology for checking otherwise uncorroborated information. It varies from organization to organization but typically you need two independent sources who can tell you the same thing or at least one source that is very highly placed. And if you don't do that, if you don't do it that way you could get fired. Is the source that you're reading as rigorous as that?

Look journalism is getting better. Crowdsourcing is out there. Facebook is using member reporting as well as algorithms to try and weed out fake news. Wikipedia is getting better by the day and the hunger is out there for good quality journalism.

Remember what journalism is meant to do. It has two purposes. The first one is to bear witness to simply be there to say that something is happening.

But the second one is more important. It's to hold power to account and together let's not go down a road where we end up in a world where not



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only are we not speaking truth to power but we're not even able to discern the truth.

Thank you.

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