

# ENTREVISTA A FERGUS BELL<sup>1</sup>

POR AMANDA FRANCO<sup>2</sup>

*Amanda Franco (AF): Fergus, before we start, I would like to thank you for accepting to give us this interview for the next number of Revista Sinergias ("Synergy Journal"). We know that you have a tight schedule! Could you please present yourself, and talk a little about your training and work background as a journalist?*

Fergus Bell (FB): I have been a journalist for 15 years. I studied broadcast journalism at the University of Leeds, before working in various radio stations across the UK. I worked at CNN and ITN before joining the Associated Press in 2006. Based in the TV operations centre in London, I worked my way up on the production desk, eventually ending up as an output producer. In about 2010, I started to take an interest in social media and the role that it would have in news. I attended a number of marketing conferences where people were talking about how you could find people on social media – and then the Arab Spring happened. I was able to put that into use for the Associated Press. For the last four years, I have worked for myself. I set up a consultancy (*Dig Deeper Media*) and I provide training on social newsgathering, verification and digital newsgathering for newsrooms around the world. Two years ago, I also founded an initiative

called *Pop-Up Newsroom*, which seeks to form large-scale collaborations to solve journalistic challenges. I very much see myself at the intersection of editorial and technology within the news industry.

*AF: I had the opportunity to hear your conference "How can we fix trust in the media for the future?" at a Congress (V Congresso Literacia, Media e Cidadania – Tecnologia, Desinformação e Ética) in Aveiro – Portugal. Could you please describe briefly the work you have ignited in Mexico and India, before the presidential elections?*

FB: In 2018, through my work with *Pop-Up Newsroom*, we collaborated with *Animal Politico* and *AJ+ Español* in Mexico to form *Verificado*. This project was designed to tackle the issue of misinformation during the Mexican presidential elections with a specific focus on the use of WhatsApp and the misinformation and disinformation that was spreading across it. That work proved to be pretty groundbreaking and allowed us to form a direct relationship with WhatsApp. Initially the work that we did involved individual messages with Mexican voters who had questions about the veracity of content, and we had to come up with a way to make that conversation individual, personal and trustworthy. The only way that we could do this was one-to-one messaging with WhatsApp. Fact checks were done by *Animal Politico*, and new types of content – for this purpose – were created by *AJ+ Español*. Essentially, we tackle the problem where the problem exists using content that could work side-by-side to disprove or debunk information, videos, text and audio that

<sup>1</sup> A journalist for 15 years, Fergus Bell studied broadcast journalism at the University of Leeds, before working in several radio stations in the UK. He worked at CNN and at ITN, and joined the Associated Press in 2006. Four years ago, Fergus became a freelancer; he set up *Dig Deeper Media*, and he provides training on social newsgathering, verification and digital newsgathering for

newsrooms around the world. Two years ago, he founded *Pop-Up Newsroom*, which seeks to form large-scale collaborations to solve journalistic challenges.

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people were coming across. That initiative was very successful and generated the impact that we only dreamed we could have in that scenario.

The work in Mexico led to us being able to contribute and play an architectural role in India. The Checkpoint project in India took what we did with WhatsApp to the next stage and allowed a level of automation that we could not have done in Mexico, because the technology did not exist yet. Individuals in India were able to directly ask a question of the *Checkpoint* team using WhatsApp and get a response as quickly as possible. The types of things that they would ask of us were whether a video or image was real or whether a fact contained in a meme was true. The team in India was able to process that fact check or identify through research whether that image was real and give it a status within a database. When that final stage was complete, the person who asked the initial question would receive a response. Anyone else who had the same question in the future would also automatically get a response straight away. This allowed citizens and voters in India to receive information in as close to real-time as possible, and although the project could have gone a lot further and been a lot bigger it has really changed the way that we can work in this space in the future.

*AF: What made you get involved in the kind of work you are doing now? Why do you think it is important?*

FB: The thing that got me really involved in this work is the desire to see change happening quickly in the fight against misinformation, but also to make sure that academic work, expertise and knowledge gained feeds directly into an actionable plan that has impact. There has been a lot of work to understand the problem but connecting what we now know about the problem into a solution is very hard. One of the only ways to achieve this is to

create agile projects that have a constantly updated approach to design and allow the solutions to be constantly iterated. It is important to work in this way because those people who are bad actors are working faster than we can at the moment and post-analysis is only going to get us so far and not allow us to keep on top of the latest developments by those who wish to mess with the system.

*AF: In a time when the expression "fake news" seems to be very popular, what do you believe is the real danger of disinformation for democratic societies?*

FB: The biggest danger here is that misinformation and disinformation change the way that our society operates – whether that is through the outcome of an election or through the instigation of violence or through general distrust of society. All of these are very real but ultimately preventable if enough attention is given to collaborative solutions and big thinking in this space. We need to test things out in real-time environments. Access to correct information and truth is not competitive and we have to rise above competition when we are trying to solve this. That might mean people – or industries – who have never worked together changing that approach.

*AF: What do you think that can be done, in the context of Education for Development/ Education for Global Citizenship, to help citizens detect and protect themselves against the perils of disinformation?*

FB: Within the context of Education for Development and Education for Global Citizenship, we have to help citizens protect themselves against these perils by arming them in the best possible way. The way we arm them is not to spoon-feed them ways of doing things – we have to work in a way that fits in with their consumption of news. We

also have to give them the tools that they need to be able to continually apply skepticism, weariness and critical thinking to new types of content and platforms where misinformation and disinformation may appear in the future. If we just give out textbooks to read that explains the problem, they will never gain the necessary skills that they have to acquire to be able to continue to tackle this through their lives. This is ultimately about helping people develop those critical thinking skills.

*AF: From your experience in Mexico and India, what kind of actions/initiatives are needed to help educate and empower citizens so they participate actively in their communities?*

FB: Involving communities rather than preaching to – or speaking at them – is the way that we can empower citizens to actively participate. We have an opportunity to involve citizens at a scale that we have not previously seen before, and by doing this in a way that is engaging, high-level and mutually respectful we can get a better sense of what is out there, because we have access to more eyes and ears. Typically, media have spoken at citizens in a one-to-many setting, but it is now time to create an equal transaction between citizens and media.

*AF: Please give us a list of five things we should do on a daily basis, as citizens, to protect our communities from disinformation and strengthen democracy?*

1. Apply the same rules that newsrooms do to sources. Always confirm something with two separate sources before you believe it.

2. Actively look at sources of news content outside of social media streams or from sources that do not obviously confirm your bias or political views.

3. If someone shares something with you (either digitally or verbally) and you cannot obviously determine its veracity, ask the question: “What makes you believe that this is true?”

4. Apply critical thinking to information that you come across, but do not look at the world in a way that assumes absolutely everything is false or manipulated.

5. Understand that this is a changing landscape and it is important to keep checking the latest developments in technology and the latest moves by bad actors.

*AF: Fergus, thank you so much for granting us this interview! Thank you for sharing with our readers such important input on how we can all become better citizens, by being aware that misinformation and disinformation are real phenomena with a social impact, and that we can – and should – become better equipped to identify and debunk both.*

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