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The rapid spread of misinformation online

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Every new communications technology experiences a phase when people make assumptions about its powers and problems, so it's important to remember that the spread of misinformation is not a uniquely digital issue. You only have to look at Orson Welles' 'War of the Worlds' – when it was first broadcast on the radio in 1938, people fled their homes believing the Earth was being invaded by aliens.

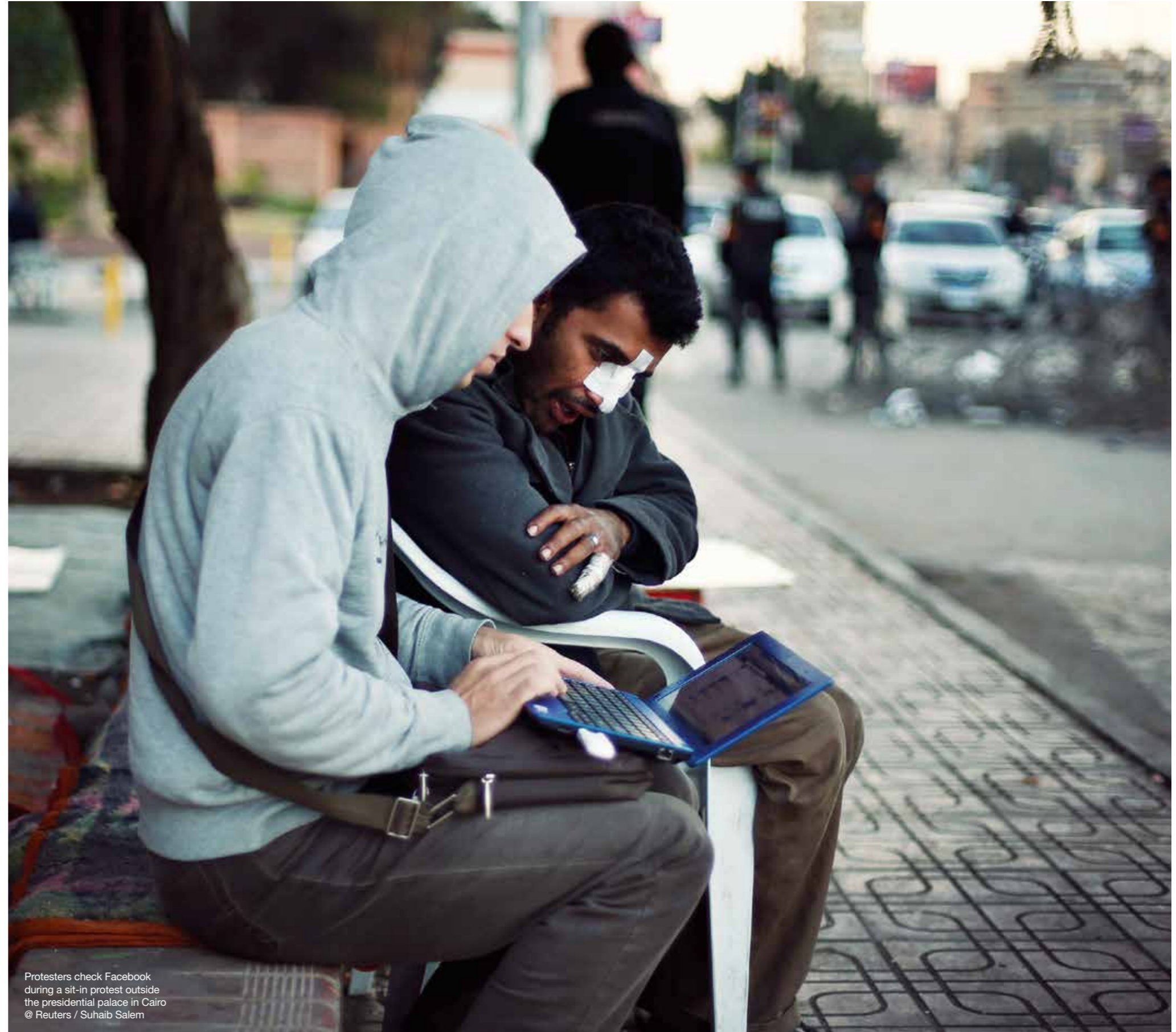
Any online information is part of a larger and more complex ecology, with many interconnected factors. It's therefore very difficult to fully map the processes involved in the rapid spread of misinformation or to identify where this information originates. Moreover, we should endeavour to look beyond the specific medium and consider the political-cultural setting in which misinformation spreads and is interpreted.

During the UK riots in the summer of 2011, for example, a rumour spread on Twitter that a children's hospital had been attacked by looters. The story fits with people's preconceptions of who the rioters were and what they might be capable of,

and it caught the public imagination. But interestingly, it was the Twitter community that swiftly debunked the rumour, killing it off well ahead of official confirmation from the hospital and media.

Misinformation of a different kind occurred in the US during the December 2012 Newtown shootings and the April 2013 Boston bombings. In the Newtown case, online and mainstream media misidentified a Facebook page as that of the shooter. After the Boston bombings, social media users engaged in online detective work, examining images taken at the scene and wrongfully claiming that a missing student was one of the bombers. But in this case, mainstream media outlets also played a part in perpetuating and validating the misinformation by publishing images of the wrong suspects.

In another recent example, again at the intersection between social and mainstream media, hoaxes emerged during the Turkish protests that began with the response to redeveloping Taksim Square. Twitter 'provocateurs' were condemned as responsible for spreading misinformation, including a photograph of crowds at the Eurasia Marathon, which was presented as 'a march from ▶

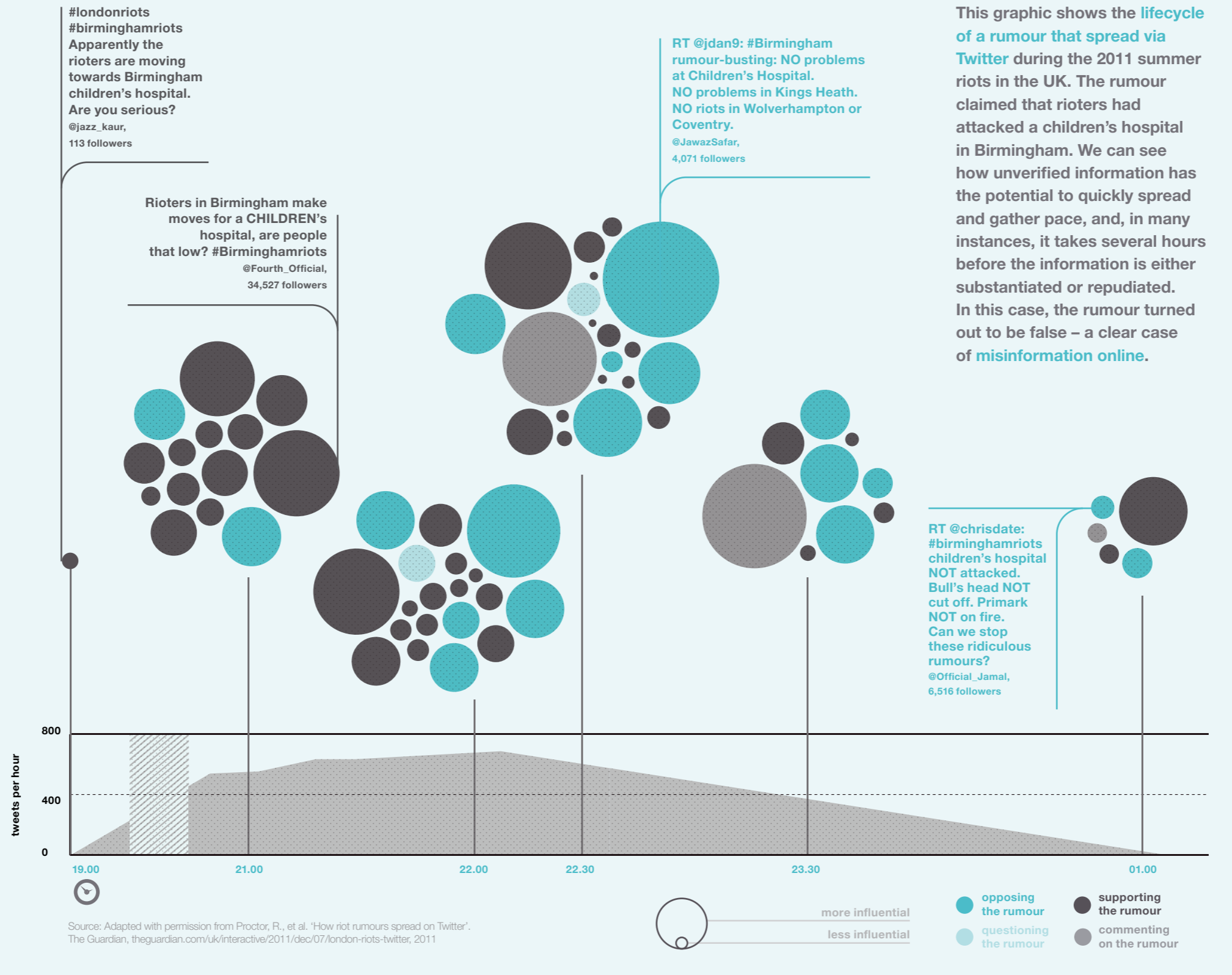


Protesters check Facebook during a sit-in protest outside the presidential palace in Cairo
© Reuters / Suhaib Salem

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Inside the data

Lifecycle of a Twitter rumour



This graphic shows the lifecycle of a rumour that spread via Twitter during the 2011 summer riots in the UK. The rumour claimed that rioters had attacked a children's hospital in Birmingham. We can see how unverified information has the potential to quickly spread and gather pace, and, in many instances, it takes several hours before the information is either substantiated or repudiated. In this case, the rumour turned out to be false – a clear case of misinformation online.



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the Bosphorus Bridge to Taksim.' But blaming Twitter ignores the context; the country's mainstream news media had been slow to respond to the protests, creating a vacuum in which misinformation easily spread, especially when referenced by foreign media outlets.

It can also be difficult to establish what 'fake' actually means. One popular image shared during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 showed soldiers standing guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery, braving the approaching storm. Unlike the pictures of the marathon on Bosphorus Bridge, the framing of the image did not place radically different meaning on its subject, but it also didn't show what people thought they were looking at. The image had been taken during an earlier storm and was undoubtedly 'real', but had no relevance to Hurricane Sandy.

It's now common practice for news organisations to source images online, so we must get better at understanding how these images can be verified. Storyful, which describes itself as "the first news agency of the social media age", is developing invaluable guidelines and techniques that can help with this essential

verification process. An appreciation of the ways in which media influence each other, as well as broader cultural and social issues, may help us understand the content of such images.

It's also imperative to highlight the volume and rapid dissemination of online misinformation. When you are dealing with social media, you are dealing with big data. It's simply not possible to read the 1 billion tweets produced every two-and-a-half days. In order to properly understand this data, we need to make use of computer-assisted processing and combine this with human evaluation to put information into context.

Finally, we should remember that every case of misinformation is unique and should be considered independently, paying attention to the complexities of the ecosystem it circulates within. In terms of interpreting misinformation, human evaluation will remain essential to put information into context, and context is ultimately what this is all about ■