

**Address by Dr Margaret van Heekeren**  
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**at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops’**  
**Social Justice Statement 2019–2020**

***Making it Real:***  
***Genuine human encounter in our digital world***

**Isabell Menton Theatre, Mary MacKillop Place, North Sydney, 3 September 2019**

Good morning. I would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners and elders of the land on which we meet.

I note that there are a number of school students here and would just like to let you know that if you thought you were off school for a morning, that I will be beginning with a history lesson. History is incredibly important as it provides the context for our present.

A week after Easter, 85 years ago in 1934, the then Pope, Pius XI, gave an historic audience to all foreign press correspondents in Rome – about 73 journalists, responsible for providing news from the Vatican to more than 5,000 newspapers around the world. Described as an ‘innovation’ by the London Times, the papal audience can also be regarded as a political move. As historical research reveals, the Vatican had, by this time, long been the subject of fake news, much of it shared on wire services around the globe. Throughout the early 1900s fake stories included a proposal to edit the Bible, the false report of a petition by French priests calling for their vow of celibacy to be dispensed and even an invented interview with Pope Pius X.

I came across these and other reports about fake news and the Vatican a couple of years ago whilst researching the history of fake news and have always planned to look into them further – but haven’t had time as yet. However, today seemed rather an opportune moment to share.

As the anecdotes reveal, fake news and disinformation is not a recent invention. Historical research identifies many serious instances, including a brief Wall Street crash due to the faked report of a wire cable-laying ship and, one of the most serious, if not the most serious, fake report of last century, the World War One report that German army was running a corpse utilisation factory, boiling down the bodies of dead German soldiers to extract fats for making fertiliser, lubricant and soap (Neander and Marlin 2010). Due to the similarity of the corpse factory story to early reports of atrocities in Nazi Germany, these true accounts were dismissed as the latest propaganda version of the First World War fallacy, delaying the international response and, according to some scholars, costing Jewish lives (Neander and Marlin 2010; Laqueur 1980).

In the post-World War One period fake news was considered so disruptive that the newly formed League of Nations considered corrective action was part of the ‘moral disarmament’ needed to prevent further conflict (Tworek 2010).

Today the disinformation environment is of similar gravity, as the Social Justice statement identifies. But whilst social media is often given as the cause, the cyclical nature of fake news outbreaks throughout history suggests is not the technology *per se* that is the primary culprit. A more significant factor is the broader socio-political environment, as it appears disinformation escalates at times of social and political instability.

There is, however, a contemporary advantage in the fight against fake news and it is due to the very same fragmented media environment that has allowed an increase in fake news inventors and channels. Studies have found that fake news often remains ghettoed in the echo chambers of particular social media sites. Whilst still accessed by large numbers of people, their reach is far more limited than in the pre-internet era when fake stories could only, and were, published in the mainstream press. Now, the first people often learn of a fake story is when a mainstream media outlet reports on the latest preposterous tale doing the rounds of social media. Similarly, the increased availability of media access and channels allows greater participation in verification.

Furthermore, reputable news outlets, whether originating as legacy media or newer online start-ups, have responded to fake news and a deficit of public trust by reaffirming their position as news media of accuracy and record (Beckett, 2018), effectively, ‘swamping fake news with the truth’ (Alemanno, 2018). Social media companies too are investing heavily in such processes, whilst governments, for example in Germany, France, Malaysia and Singapore are taking a legislative response. Fact-checking has become an industry in itself with the number of fact-checking sites tripling in recent years (Stencel and Griffin, 2018).

Yet, even though the opportunities for correcting and limiting fake news are far greater than ever before, there remains a catch. Scholars suggest the very acknowledgment and discussion of the existence of fake news is damaging (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Even in correcting fake news reports mainstream media acts as an amplifier, with an enduring effect on public confidence and belief. (Thorson 2016). This results in a climate of distrust and suspicion that clouds even the most honest facts and intent.

As the statement urges, the challenge, therefore, is the restoration of confidence in information. As has been noted there are a range of choices that media users can make.

At the 1934 audience, Pope Pius XI told the gathered journalists: ‘to report the thoughts and facts of the world is a great mission’. Today that mission is shared by all and the onus is on all users of media to ensure sites accessed and information shared is factual and honest.

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