

Fake News - An old problem with a simple solution

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A lesson from the past

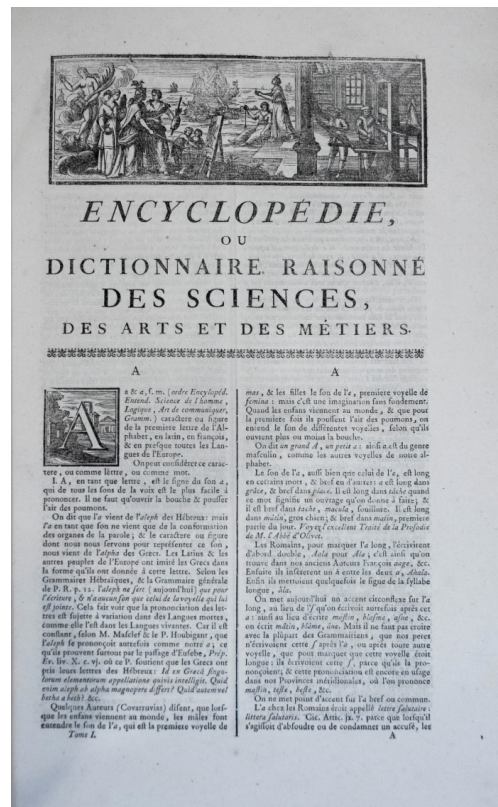
"The realm of the sciences and the arts is far removed from the vulgar world; it is a realm in which discoveries are made every day, but many fanciful tales are told about them. It was important to verify the true ones, to forestall those that are false, to establish the points of departure, and thus to facilitate the search for what remains to be discovered."

These are some of the words with which in 1751 Denis Diderot, editor along with Jean-Baptiste d'Alambert of the famous encyclopaedia known as a *Encyclopedie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers*, introduced their work (Diderot, 1751).

Rereading today, more than 250 years on, these words can but make us think of that sea of knowledge that is the web and the problem of Fake News. Nothing new. Times change, tools change but the problems stay the same.

Diderot further confirms this when he states, "much has been written on the sciences... But how few present true principles! How many others drown them in a superabundance of words or lose them in studied obscurity!"

Who better than Diderot, engaged in the immense work of creating a universal encyclopaedia of knowledge, has been able to touch and face the problem of Fake News?



A worthy deed it is to prevent the ignorance of the masses and curb those characters who in search of fame improvise, with the gift of the gab, the gurus who, with who knows what knowledge, spread false news to pursue a career.

Diderot met several of these types: ... and those men who are eager for reputation and devoid of genius, and who brazenly publish old systems as if they were new ideas, will soon be unmasked.

Equally important, however, is working on another phenomenon that Diderot constantly highlights when he says: how many there are whose authority apparently may not be gainsaid, but in which an error placed beside a truth either discredits the truth or brings credit to itself by this proximity! It would doubtless have been preferable to write less and write better.

And here, the people of sanctioned 'authority' are precisely the people of sanctioned authority. Let us not balk at thinking of names hitherto considered untouchable.

None of this, however, had frightened and demotivated Diderot from pursuing his great work.

With patience and constancy, he realized his project: "We took the trouble of going into their shops, of questioning them, of writing at their dictation, of developing their thoughts and of drawing therefrom the terms peculiar to their professions, of setting up tables of these terms and of working out definitions for them, of conversing with those from whom we obtained memoranda, and (an almost indispensable precaution) of correcting through long and frequent conversations with others what some of them imperfectly, obscurely, and sometimes unreliably had explained".

AAA sought Diderot for the 21st century.

References

Diderot Denis 1751 *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* - Paris, T. I.



Fig. 1: Denis Diderot, by Louis-Michel van Loo, 1767.