The issue of fake news seems to be hitting the headlines again over recent weeks, with accusations that this trend is being used to influence public opinion prior to or immediately following significant events.

Of course, manipulating the truth for gain – or propaganda as it is otherwise known – is certainly not new. It is known, for example, that the Roman emperor Augustus used a very youthful image of himself on coins and other images, continuing to promote this until well into his old age.

Propaganda took on a new level from the early years of the 20th Century. Around 100 years ago the British government used this form of media in motivating public opinion against Germany; in turn the Nazi party used racial stereotyping against Jews prior to and during the Second World War.

In the past year the term fake news has taken on a new dimension; it was recently named word of the year by the dictionary publisher Collins. Seemingly, activists are using social media to generate and drive public opinion for and on behalf of those they wish to support, or to discredit those they seek to oppose. A social webpage is quickly set up, an audience bought in, then fake news posted. If the headline is strong enough, it has the potential to go viral.

Even over the past week, for example, it has come to light that following the recent mass shootings in Las Vagas and in Texas in the USA, fake news was used to suggest that the gunmen were of a particular religious belief and associated with extremist organisations; manipulating the situation as a means to drive prejudice.

Media giants have been challenged to crack down on the circulation of fake news having failed to accept any responsibility for its spread.

Detractors have sought to discredit the Church from its earliest days. When seeking to undermine news of Jesus's disappearance from the tomb, the priests and elders spread a rumour that his disciples had spirited his body away (see Matthew 28:12-15). The Jews also stirred up people against the Paul in an attempt to stop his teaching (Acts 13:50), and later accused Paul of taking a gentile into the temple (see Acts 24:1-13). Early critics sought to suggest that many foundational aspects of the church's beliefs were based on fake news. Paul is quite specific in contradicting an early rumour that Jesus hadn't risen from the dead, confirming in his letter to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 15:6) that Jesus had been seen alive by more than 500 believers at once, of whom a great number remained alive at the time of his writing.

In the early history of The Salvation Army there were those who accused the Founder, William Booth, of seeking personal gain and benefit from Salvation Army funds and donations. Sadly, even in recent months those with an issue or an agenda against The Salvation Army and the work we do have made accusations or insinuations, often without cause or justification, which have gone viral and caused great distress.

Of course, the greatest means to counter the possibility of fake news is to ensure that what we say and the way in which we serve is authentic and genuine. In other words, there should be no duplicity. Peter wrote in his first letter (1 Peter 1:7), 'That the proven genuineness of your faith …. may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed' (NIV).

I rather like the acronym THINK – is something True, Helpful, Inspiring, Necessary, and Kind? If it isn't, then it's likely to be fake. We might not be able to prevent fake news, but we can all ensure that our words, our actions and our service mirror these attributes. If we do, then we are more likely to create good news rather than give cause for the generation of fake news.

Commissioner Silvia joins me in challenging us all to THINK before we act!

May God bless you each sincerely.

AC