



Prediction is difficult



Even at the best of times, it is human nature to want to predict and decode the future. During times of uncertainty we are even more eager to predict what is to come.

At the start of 2022, some believe (read predict) that the pandemic will move into a new phase and will become endemic, perhaps allowing for some normalcy to return to travelling, attending events, professionally and personally. Others, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) caution us that it is too early to know whether the worst is over and that it is still statistically possible for another delta-type variant to emerge and put pressure on health systems globally. Of course, both views are possible, and represent a high-road and a low-road scenario. For most of us, the dream of 'normal', even if it is not exactly as it was before, is what we hope for in 2022. We yearn for a time before we all became overnight online virologists, vaccine experts, and followers of @riditweets for COVID-19 trends (@riditweets is the Twitter account of Dr Ridhwaan Suliman, applied mathematician). Dr Suliman showed us that maths can be useful to understand what is happening around us – I take that as a win for STEM, but we still would rather get to a point where we don't have to know how many 7-day average cases were reported in our area.

Our days are filled with a continuous barrage of information via all portals, and during the past two years of the pandemic, we sought out information to help us cope, and make decision related to our health and wellbeing, because what is happening to us on a global scale is unprecedented. Never before was there a global pandemic during the era of digital and social media. And as we know, fake news, misinformation, and 'lies travel halfway around the world while the truth is (still) putting on its shoes'. This popular quote is often attributed to the American author Mark Twain, perhaps because he was so outspoken on many things, but there is actually no evidence that he said it first. Ha! you say, fake news at its finest! Indeed. Because Mark Twain is attributed to having said this, it has more impact, so it perpetuates and becomes lore. However, this does not devalue the idea or the words but supports my next premise well. A good quote can be a thing of beauty and can inspire us, remind us of core principles, or just make us smile. My love of quotes increasingly changed into a 'who actually said it' hobby. The quest for the original story, and the ability to reference and cite as accurately as possible is in my opinion part of the learning journey.

The fact that the 'lies travel' quote is popularly attributed to Mark Twain illustrates really well the challenge we have in our daily lives. It has become almost a fulltime task to evaluate the veracity of information. The burden of truth is indeed a heavy one. While we cannot track the origin of the quote, the story does not end here. There are some who believe the Mark Twain attributed version can be traced to an adaptation of the writings of Johnathan Swift. Swift was an Anglo-Irish satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer, poet, and Anglican cleric and in 1710 he wrote in *The Art of Political Lying*:

'Besides, as the vilest Writer has his Readers, so the greatest Liar has his Believers; and it often happens, that if a Lie be believ'd only for an Hour, it has done its Work, and there is no farther occasion for it. Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it; so that when Men come to be undeceiv'd, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect.'

Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after. Even before the term 'fake news' had been coined, Swift observed that lies are believed very quickly. Once fake news is believed, and even if it only for a short time, the damage has been done. A lie travels halfway around the world before the truth puts on its shoes. By the time the limping truth catches up, it is too late. The lie has become lore.

'Prediction is difficult – particularly when it involves the future.' (Yet another common Mark Twain misquote, which is actually attributed to the Danish parliament, and a story for another day). But as hard as predicting the future might be, I predict that the lines between lore and reality will remain blurred for the foreseeable future. It is incumbent on us as the receivers of information to dig a bit deeper into the sources, to understand the backstory and the context, and to validate the data. And even with the best of intentions, remember: 'We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are.' Not Mark Twain. I leave this one for you all to Google the origin.

I.J. Geldenhuys
President, SAIMM