



By: **Harvey Morris**

Seasonal tips for the British on how to spot fake online rage



As Britain's last-minute shoppers stagger home with their overpriced turkeys after another mindless imbroglio with the supermarket self-checkout machine, some may be silently mouthing the words of Ebenezer Scrooge: Bah! Humbug.

Are a few days of enforced jollity, they might ask themselves, really worth the fuss - let alone the expense - of what the Scrooges say has degenerated into an annually mandated consumer-fest?

Yet the very idea that Christmas is not what it used to be is an essential ingredient of the festive season in the UK, as are the annual laments that it has lost its true meaning and needs to be reclaimed.

In essence though not much has changed since Charles Dickens' day when his unrepentant Scrooge defined the season as a time for paying bills without money, a time for finding yourself a year older but not an hour richer.

Nor has much changed since the miser's merry nephew countered that the feast was the one time in the year when men and women opened their hearts to think of those less fortunate than themselves as fellow passengers on their journey through life.

"A space between peace and war"

This year, as friends and families gather and almost two million others prepare to spend Christmas Day alone, is that lingering spirit of fellowship now under threat from dark forces poised to destroy societies such as Britain's from within?

That is one conclusion to be drawn from the words of the UK's top spy, **Blaise Metreweli**, who in a speech at MI6 headquarters last week didn't exactly lift pre-holiday spirits with her stark assessment that: "We are now operating in a space between peace and war."

"Let's be in no doubt," she said. "Our world is more dangerous and contested now than it has been for decades."

"We are now operating in a space between peace and war" - Blaise Metreweli

The new overseas intelligence boss, who took over in October, went beyond the usual brief of outlining her agency's role in confronting a range of external threats to pondering on how tech-driven innovation was actually affecting individuals' brains through the spread of misinformation.

"The foundations of trust in our societies are eroding," according to Metreweli. "Information, once a unifying force, is increasingly weaponised. Falsehood spreads faster than fact, dividing communities and distorting reality."

In a world that was actively being remade, online algorithms were flattering biases and fracturing public debate. "And as trust collapses, so does our shared sense of truth - one of the greatest losses a society can suffer."

"Rage bait"

The spy chief is not alone in alerting us to the pernicious effect of misinformation and disinformation, the deliberate propagation of lies online.

Her remarks came after MPs on the **House of Commons** science and technology committee said in October that they were disappointed in the government's tepid response to their report on social media's influence in widespread anti-Muslim riots in 2024.

The committee had found that social media business models endangered the public by incentivising the spread of dangerous misinformation. It recommended multimillion-pound fines for platforms that did not set out how they would tackle the spread of harmful

content.

It also warned that AI tools had made it easier to create hateful, harmful or deceptive content.

Oxford University Press announced this month that its chosen word of the year was “rage bait”

So online safety was very much on the agenda in 2025, even before **Oxford University Press** announced this month that its chosen word of the year was “rage bait”.

Defined as online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive, OUP said rage bait was typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular web page or social media content.

Whether the perpetrator is a hostile Russian bot farm or a would-be influencer seeking to turn rage bait into cash, the impact can be equally negative.

MI6's Metreweli said wider society had a role to play in facing down the threat. “That includes work taking place in schools across the country so our children don't get duped by information manipulation.

“Let's all check sources, consider evidence, and be alive to those algorithms that trigger intense reactions, like fear.”

Christmas – another opportunity to stoke division

You don't have to be a spook or an Oxonian to spot the rage bait rot. A cursory trawl of social media will reveal how it has evolved.

Some of those handy neighbourhood forums that used to recommend a plumber or a dog-sitter are now almost exclusively dedicated to raising the alarm about lurking strangers and

looming street crime.



Among the latest fake videos was one claiming the government was introducing a £500 Christmas Decoration Tax – Keir Starmer

And what about those dubious nostalgia accounts with their doctored street scenes of a misremembered past when women were evidently happier lugging home the shopping or scrubbing the front step?

Which brings us back to Christmas, that most nostalgic time of the year and another opportunity for keyboard warriors to stoke division.

Among the latest fake videos exposed by verifiers at the **Full Fact charity** was one claiming the government was introducing a £500 Christmas Decoration Tax.

Complete with a film of Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his voice, in a possibly AI-insisted fake voiceover, the video apparently convinced some of its viewers to judge by their outraged comments.

Like much of fake output, it is crudely made and unconvincing. AI and some of those who use it to fool the public apparently still have a way to go.

The charity said it was one of a new wave of fake stories about curbs on personal freedoms and bogus taxes that had racked up millions of views on social media towards the end of the year.

Fortunately, all but the most naive will have seen through this one. After all, surely not

even Scrooge would have taxed the Christmas tree, in the words of the PM's video incarnation, at the rate of "half a thousand pounds".