



CONSEQUENCES: Dr Christian Jessen outside Belfast High Court during the libel case taken against him by Arlene Foster. She was awarded £125,000 in damages PICTURE: Brian Lawless/PA

Once we lose sight of truth we are doomed

SO WHO is going to put their hand in their pocket for Dr Christian Jessen, the down-on-his-luck TV doctor who says he has just £20,000 in savings and might need to declare himself bankrupt?

Jessen is facing the consequences of a tweet libelling the former DUP leader Arlene Foster. His tweet was a lie, and I'm not going to repeat it here. It's in the public domain. Foster sued him and was awarded £125,000 in damages plus costs. It was an open and shut case. Jessen was clearly in the wrong. The total bill for the doctor, who shot to fame presenting Channel Four's *Embarrassing Bodies*, is understood to be in the region of £250,000 when legal costs are taken into consideration.

Now she is out of a job, I imagine the money will come in handy, but I am sure Foster would rather not have gone through the ordeal.

Jessen, who could have limited the damage by admitting his mistake early on, has now set up a crowd funding campaign in the hope that the cost of his folly will be carried by others. At the time of writing he had secured just under \$8,000.

There will have been many who took delight in Foster's discomfiture when the attack on her broke in December 2019. She has many enemies (including members of her own party), and many more who have rightly criticised her decisions as a minister and first minister.

Some will have eagerly spread the slight: some wanting it to be true; others hoping it was true, but not caring if it was true or not.

That sadly is the world in which we now live. It was once said a lie is half way round the world before the truth has its boots on – and that was in the day when we communicated by pen and paper, and licking a stamp was the

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equivalent of hitting 'Tweet' with your cursor. Today you can take a half truth and turn it into a full-scale lie within seconds.

From the comfort of our own sofas we can pump out whatever nonsense we like: conjure up conspiracies, malign individuals we don't care for, and even start insurrections.

Faked news abounds. Millions still believe the United States presidential election was stolen by Joe Biden; and millions more fell for the lie that if you voted Brexit, the NHS would be better off by \$350 million a week – enough to cure more *Embarrassing Bodies* than Dr Jessen could shake a stethoscope at.

Journalists are criticised for falling down on the job, and there is no question about it, mistakes are made. But in the main, editors take their responsibilities very seriously.

Jessen's gossip had a profound impact on Arlene Foster and the people closest to her. At least she had a remedy, and the resources and incentive to call him to account in the courts

What you read in these columns will have been read first by an independent eye and been tested against the strictures of the law and the Independent Press Standards Organisation.

That is the case too for other newspapers and magazines. Broadcasters face even more constraints than the press.

But it is not the case for social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and others, which – so far – have successfully dodged responsibility for what they put out into the public domain. These organisations make millions on the back of tweets designed to undermine the very fabric of society.

Jessen's gossip had a profound impact on Foster and the people closest to her. At least she had a remedy, and the resources and incentive to call him to account in the courts.

But most of us are powerless in the face of the unrestrained assault on the truth by malign players – many of them sovereign states – who sow lies for political gain; or the shady extremists who prey on our fears; or the racists, homophobes, anti-Semites and Islamophobes.

Those best placed to deal with them are the platforms that profit from their content – platforms incidentally that do not invest in news, but lift it unashamedly from publications such as this.

The must be forced to live up to their responsibilities.

Most of us think we can spot a dodgy story when we see one. But it is not as easy as that. This week a study in the US demonstrated that those of us who are most confident about being able to tell the difference between fact and fiction are also the people most likely to be taken in by fake news.

If we don't face up to lies, they will destroy us.

ON THIS DAY

JUNE 3 1921

Unionist Warns Minority

MR WILLIAM Grant, MP, one of the Partitionists elected for North Belfast, delivered an interesting speech on Friday. As reported in the Tory papers, he said: 'After three weeks of an arduous campaign, they were all heartily thankful that their sacred cause had been maintained. In the most constitutional way possible their Parliament had been selected... They were going to establish the law in Ulster, and they would give fair play to all parties provided they respected the law. (Applause.)

If the Sinn Feiners and the Constitutional Nationalists were not prepared to obey the mandate of the Northern Parliament, they would be told in no uncertain voice to clear out of Ulster. The enemies of Ulster would have to understand the position, for they would be made to understand it.'

Wife's Mistake over Custom House Victim

AN AMAZING case of mistaken identity emerged at the inquiry into the burning of the Custom House in Dublin. Mrs Kelly of Gardiner Street told the remarkable story of her agreeable surprise on discovering that she had mistakenly identified one of the dead bodies of the Custom House fire as that of her husband.

She had made all the funeral arrangements, bought the mourning clothes, a coffin and a shroud for the body, which it now wears. She was going to the King George Hospital on Saturday when she got a letter from her husband from Arbour Hill Prison asking for his pipe!

Mrs Kelly deposed to having been mistaken regarding the identity of the remains of one of the deceased whom she had identified as her husband. On receiving the letter she went to Arbour Hill and asked the guard to ask the man who she heard was her husband to write down the names of their children. This he duly did. On Sunday she saw her husband alive.

Asked why she went to the hospital, she said her husband had not come home as usual and a man told her he saw him being bayoneted near the Custom House.

Heavy Police Casualties in Kerry

FIVE members of the RIC were killed yesterday. As the result of an ambush in Killorglin, County Kerry, a district inspector, a sergeant and two constables were shot dead. A third constable was shot dead in Kilworth, County Cork.

(A shipyard worker and supporter of the 1920 'Shippard Pogrom', Billy Grant went on to become post-war Health Minister, responsible for the establishment of the NHS. His narrow sectarianism ensured that the Mater Hospital, a Catholic acute teaching hospital, was excluded from the NHS, a scandal which persisted until 1972.)

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