
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Fake News: Fact and Fiction

Where does 'news' come from?

Hugo

Hello I'm Hugo.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Hugo

Welcome to Fake News: Fact and Fiction from BBC Learning English. In this series we're looking at the fake news phenomenon, what it is, where it comes from and how we can fight it.

Sam

Yes, and we're also looking at the language and vocabulary around fake News, so words and expressions that you might hear or want to use when discussing this hot topic.

Hugo

And in the programme today how social media has changed the fake news landscape.

Sam

And I'll be giving you some news about news.

Hugo

We'll also try to understand what fake news is and what it isn't. Now, Sam, last time you talked about the word fake what have you got for us today?

Sam

Yeah, so today I'm talking about the word news so where do you think that word comes from, Hugo?

Hugo

It may be an acronym like the first letters from north, east, west and south like the points of the compass?

Sam

Very good. That's a good guess, and you're not alone in thinking that, but let's find out if you're right. Here's something I recorded earlier.

Sam

News, news, news, news is all around me. Wherever you get yours from, where does the word itself come from? Is it an acronym for north, east, west and south? Nope. Does it stand for notable events, weather and sports? Nope again. Does it simply mean things that are new? Yes.

It comes from the late 1300s from the French word nouvelle. News is simply new information about something that has happened. It's unusual in English because the word new is an adjective, but news is not an adjective, it's a noun, an uncountable noun, and even though it has an S, it's singular. So news is good or bad.

We have several expressions in English using the word news, for example, 'no news is good news', which basically means if you haven't heard anything, there are no problems. 'That's news to me' - I didn't know that. 'Breaking news' - new news, something very important that has recently happened, and 'if you break the news' you are the person who passes the news on. But, if you do break the news, make sure it's not fake news.

Hugo

That's really interesting, and a lot of that was news to me.

Sam

Ah, very good, Hugo, I see what you did there. And what about you, Sam, where do you get your news from?

Sam

Honestly, truly, I mostly get it from the BBC News app.

Hugo

That goes without saying - obviously - yeah I also get my news from the BBC but

I find it really important to get you know news from different sources because you can always get different voices and different takes on what is happening. So we know about the word fake and the word news - put them together and you'll get fake news but what does it actually mean? Here's the BBC's Media Editor Amol Rajan.

Amol Rajan

Fake news is lies and propaganda told for a political or commercial purpose which deploys digital technology, social media, new networks to go viral to reach around the world and influence millions of people very very quickly.

Hugo

So, fake news is information that isn't true and the reason might be political or commercial, to change opinion or make money.

Sam

Yes, so I'd like to talk about one of the words that Amol used - the word propaganda. So, this comes up a lot when talking about this topic, and let's just check that we know what it means before we move forward. So, propaganda is a noun and it describes information which is put out for political reasons to get support for a political party or a political cause and it's designed to promote a particular agenda, so to persuade people to think a particular way or make people support a particular policy. Propaganda isn't always completely fake, but it's often very one-sided and unbalanced and may mix lies and the truth. So I guess that's one of the challenges of being a journalist, Hugo, is making sure that you can actually determine what is true and what isn't.

Hugo

Yeah it's a big challenge and it's not made easier by social media. Amol mentioned that digital technologies and social media are tools used to spread fake news, but what is the problem here? Let's get more about that, so earlier we put some questions to today's expert guest.

Samantha Bradshaw

Hi my name is Samantha Bradshaw. I'm a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute and I study how disinformation affects democracy.

Fake news has been around for as long as we've had the printing press, so there's nothing necessarily new about fake news. The ways in which digital technologies can enhance the spread and the precision of these kinds of stories is something

that is new. So, fake news on social media can spread much more quickly and to many more people because the flow of information is very free compared to in the past where we had journalists, editors, TV channels controlling the flow of information and what would or would not get published. Today anybody with a keyboard can essentially be a publisher.

Sam

Lots of interesting stuff there. Yes so the first thing I noticed is that she used the word 'disinformation' and that is often used to describe kinds of fake news or false information that is deliberately published and spread. She also made the point that fake news, as we know, is not new but it's always been around but with social media and the digital world it's allowed to spread further and faster and without it being controlled by traditional broadcasters and publishers.

So, now I know there's a problem there obviously but doesn't this also mean that there's now a bit more of a democracy of information? Isn't it a good thing that we don't only have these traditional sources, particularly if those sources are government run or run by one particularly powerful individual?

Hugo

That's a very good point because if you remember what happened during the Arab Spring in the Middle East or even protests in Iran and in many other countries around the world social media gave people a very important tool to express themselves, and, well basically journalists got to know what was happening because of that.

Sam

Because they weren't allowed in the country in some cases.

Hugo

Absolutely. The difference here is that maybe those people who are publishing these you know this kind of information they don't go through all the checks that we working for mainstream media or traditional news organisations have to go through - which is we interview people, we check the facts, we recheck the facts to make sure that everything is accurate. Of course we make mistakes but when we do we acknowledge them and correct them.

Sam

Yeah and also Samantha said anyone can be a publisher so there's lots of people

out there sharing stories putting stories out onto social media but they may not have the knowledge or the resources to check whether those are real stories. And therefore some of the stuff out there might be inaccurate; it hasn't been checked by anyone.

Hugo

Yeah there's a famous saying which goes: A lie can get halfway around the world before the truth has got its pants on. Well I think these days a lie can get all the way around the world before the truth has even woken up, and what makes it even more challenging is when people have been told not to trust mainstream media.

Sam

Hmm is this what you mean? Let's have a look.

US President Donald Trump

It's totally fake news - fake news - fake news - you are fake news - it was fake news. Thank you.

Hugo

Yes, the American President gets a lot of criticism from mainstream media. He says there has been an unfair attack on him. He uses the phrase 'fake news' when talking about news that he doesn't like, that he doesn't find convenient. And when one of the most powerful politicians in the world accuses the mainstream media of being fake news, that's a problem. Here's Amol again.

Amol Rajan

A lot of politicians or people in the public eye have started to use the words fake news or the phrase fake news to basically describe news that they don't like. If you're a politician who wants to close down debate then you might use the phrase fake news because you don't want people to ask you questions about something uncomfortable, so it's really important that we're clear about what fake news does and doesn't mean.

Sam

So it seems that the most famous user of the phrase fake news perhaps the person who's made it as famous as saying as it is actually uses it to mean something completely different from the rest of us.

Hugo

Indeed. Well, to be clear, when we're talking about fake news we mean false information, information that is not true or not correct but which is published and shared particularly on social media. Well, it's about time we wrapped up this programme - Sam remind us of some of today's key vocabulary.

Sam

Absolutely, of course. So we learned that the word news comes from the French word nouvelle and although it has an S at the end it is not plural it's an uncountable noun, so it's always singular. We can say 'that's news to me' if we find something out that we didn't know before. 'No news is good news' is an expression which means that the lack of news probably means everything's fine everything's OK because if something bad had happened we probably would have been told. 'Breaking news' is new news, so something important, and 'to break the news' is to be the person who gives the information to someone. Propaganda is political information which could be false or very one-sided information and then we also had disinformation which is a term for false news, false stories that are spread deliberately. Mainstream media refers to traditional and established news broadcasters and publishers just like the BBC for example.

Hugo

Thank you, Sam, and thank you for watching. Do join us again next time for Fake News: Fact and Fiction. Goodbye. Goodbye.