
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Fake News: Fact and Fiction

The danger of fake news

Hugo

Hello this is Fake News Fact and Fiction from BBC Learning English. I'm Hugo.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Hugo

In the program today we'll hear from expert Samantha Bradshaw on the dangers of fake news.

Sam

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

Hugo

We will also hear a story about what happened when fake news was spread in a small town in Mexico. Now, Sam, how are you today?

Sam

I'm fine thanks Hugo, how are you?

Hugo

I am very well and I'm looking forward to your vocabulary slot later.

Sam

OK, I am today going to be talking about the word 'information'.

Hugo

I can hardly wait.

Sam

Yeah I think that might be fake sincerity there.

Hugo

No honestly I'm really looking forward to it.

Sam

OK, OK well we'll see if you feel the same way afterwards. Here is everything you could ever want to know about the word information, maybe not everything but as much as I could fit in.

What is information? Information is knowledge; it's facts and details about a particular subject. Grammatically, information is an uncountable noun, so we talk about 'bits of information' or 'pieces of information', but not 'informations'.

'Information' has a number of very closely related grammatical variations. The verb 'to inform' is quite formal and means 'to tell someone something' and the adjective 'informative' is used to describe information that is useful and interesting.

'Information' also appears in at least two initialisms - 'I.T.' 'information technology', and 'F.Y.I.' 'for your information'. Information comes from sources, and there are many different sources of information including TV, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, the internet, social media, teachers, friends, colleagues, even overheard conversations on the bus. In fact, wherever we turn there is information of one kind or another. And not all information is useful or appropriate, so it's definitely possible to have too much information.

In fact that's a phrase we use when someone tells us something that is very personal and makes us feel a little uncomfortable. 'You haven't changed your underpants in a week?! Oh, too much information'. 'Too much information' is another initialism - 'T.M.I.'. When thinking about fake news we should be aware that information isn't always true and not all sources of information are reliable or accurate. We need to be on the lookout for disinformation, which is false information, deliberately spread, and misinformation, which is false information that is accidentally spread. Though, to be honest, these expressions are both commonly used for the same thing - 'fake news'. I hope that wasn't T.M.I. now F.Y.I. it's back to the studio.

Hugo

Thanks, that was very informative.

Sam

Ah, Hugo, you're very good.

Hugo

I try my best. But now our theme of the day is the possible dangers of sharing fake news. To give us an overview we're going to hear from Samantha Bradshaw from Oxford University. She's a researcher in fake news and disinformation at the Oxford Internet Institute.

Samantha Bradshaw

Fake news can have real human consequences when it spreads from the online world to the offline world, particularly because of the speed at which this disinformation can spread. Often, unlike in the past where there are many checks to the information that was being put out to the public, there aren't as many checks with social media, and viral stories containing fake news or other forms of disinformation have real life consequences for people. For example, if we look at India or Mexico, disinformation and fake news have led to people actually being killed. If we look at the medical world with vaccines, a lot of the anti-vax movement narratives and the fake news about vaccinating children have caused real-life children not to get vaccinated and then die of sickness later. So there are real consequences to fake news and to these rumours that spread online.

Hugo

So, Samantha was talking a lot about consequences there.

Sam

Yes some tragic consequences in that case. So, 'consequences' are the result of things that happen, or in the case of vaccinations don't happen, and the result is usually bad.

Hugo

Yeah and she mentioned a story in Mexico when people were killed as a result of fake news and I remember that because we covered that story here at the BBC. I tracked down one of the producers who worked on the story, Reha Kansara, to find out more of the details.

Hugo

Reha, you covered a tragic story and that was because of fake news. Tell us about that.

Reha Kansara

So, this is the story about two men who were murdered for something that they didn't do. These two men, they were going back home, they stopped over by a school to take a break. They had loud music on and were resting in their car, but someone at the school got suspicious, and so they called the police.

As soon as the police arrested them, not for you know not for anything but just finding you know beer bottles, empty beer bottles in that car. People came, saw everything that was happening outside the school and started spreading fake news on Whatsapp.

The rumor that essentially spread was that they were two men who were child kidnappers who were waiting outside of school to abduct children, and that obviously caused a frenzy on social media, on Whatsapp, and that turned into something bigger when they were arrested.

Because this went from Whatsapp to Facebook, gathered on Facebook to call out on people to come outside of the police station and basically take the law into their own hands. They were dragged from the police station to a town hall, doused in petrol and then lit on fire. Lynchings are not a new thing, but what is new is the way that this whole thing was filmed on Facebook.

Hugo

It really shows the danger because it went from Whatsapp to Facebook and then it was a very small town in Mexico so in a matter of hours everybody was talking about it and what struck you the most when covering the story?

Reha Kansara

The fact that people so easily believed things without, you know, fact checking or double sourcing things. It has grave consequences and this was one of them.

Hugo

Has there been any change in terms of, I don't know, legislation in Mexico, like public perception even like public behaviour when when they said something that is not true?

Reha Kansara

There are people talking about misinformation more particularly over here disinformation. The fact that people can turn lies into actual news and this is something that Mexico is dealing with, not just with lynchings, but also with

elections and just in general fake news in the country, and so you have platforms like Lo Que Sigue that is the, you know, that has had to come about just to combat fake news in the country.

Hugo

Reha, thank you very much indeed.

Reha Kansara

Thank you.

Hugo

A terrible story, Sam.

Sam

Yeah really, really tragic.

Hugo

Yeah and we know this has happened not just in Mexico but also in other countries as well, like in India and Myanmar.

Sam

Yeah it just goes to show that we have to be really, really careful when we're sharing information online. Most of us only share cute cat videos probably, but there are consequences to things like gossip that are shared.

Sam

It seems a little bit insensitive to talk about vocabulary after such a tragic story, but Reha did use a really interesting journalistic term there. So could you explain to us - what 'double sourcing' means?

Hugo

So, it is making sure that you have two independent sources confirm the same information, but you also have to make sure that these sources are not confirming, you know, the news using the same source themselves. Now if you are an avid news consumer and want some advice on what you consider before you share anything on social media here's Reha again with her top tip.

Reha Kansara

The best tip that I can give people who are consuming news non-stop is that you need to if you see something you need to find a way to verify it. That means if you see something in the news, check another media organisation's coverage of

that news to see whether they are following the same line. If you see something on Whatsapp that isn't news but people are spreading, question why they're spreading it - what's their agenda? You know if there is something involved in it that shows that it could have a reliable source of news then go to that source and find out what's happening.

Hugo

Well, it's a great tip there, not just for journalists but for everybody. It's very important to verify before sharing.

Sam

Absolutely and 'to verify' simply means to check that something is true.

Hugo

OK well almost done for today. Before we go, Sam, remind us of today's key vocabulary.

Sam

Of course, very happy to. So, today I was talking about different forms of the word 'information'. 'Information' itself is an uncountable noun, and when it comes to fake news you can talk about 'disinformation' which is deliberately fake information, and then there's also 'misinformation' which is accidentally fake information. So for example if you're sharing something that you didn't know was fake, that's 'misinformation', but you might hear 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' being used interchangeably. The adjective for something that is interesting and useful is 'informative'. In the programme we also talked about the word 'consequences', which are the negative results of something, and we also heard the word 'double-sourcing', which is checking a news story is true by seeing if two independent sources are reporting the same thing. And if you do that, you may be able to verify the story, and you may be able to confirm that it is indeed true.

Hugo

Thank you, Sam. And that's all from us today. Share safely, good bye,

Sam

Bye.