
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Fake News: Fact and Fiction

6: How to be a critical thinker

Hugo

Hi, I'm Hugo.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Hugo

And this is Fake News Fact and Fiction from BBC Learning English. In the programme today we look at the topic of critical thinking with our special guest Dr Steven Novella.

Dr Steven Novella

Being able to evaluate the information that we have access to critically is now probably the most important skill any individual can have.

Hugo

Hear more from Dr Novella later. First Sam, do have some vocabulary for us?

Sam

Yes I do. So, today I'm going to be talking about: spin, cherry-picking, bias and the phrase 'critical thinking' itself. Let's have a look.

See that

It's a ball. To turn it quickly is to spin it. Now if we put the truth on this ball then spin it, can you still see the truth? It's still there somewhere but difficult to see clearly. Spin makes the truth difficult to see. And this is a bit like political spin, a term first used in the 1970s to talk about the way politicians and their spokespeople present information. They will present information in a way that makes things seem as positive as possible without always telling you the whole truth or the whole context.

They might highlight the most positive details but ignore the other details that don't make them look quite as good. Selecting which facts are chosen to publicise is known as

'cherry-picking' and it often doesn't give a full or accurate picture of the whole story. And it's not just politicians, of all sides, who do this. It happens in the media too, mainstream and social media, and very often we do it ourselves. To explain why, I'm going to need another ball, like a bowling ball. Bowling balls don't roll straight. They curve to the left or right when they're rolled.

One reason for this is that their weight is not centred. They have what is called a bias. Bias is the same word we use to describe an opinion that is not impartial. One that is not based fairly on facts but which may turn one way or another because of personal feelings, political preferences or ideology. So we might disagree with someone and think that they're wrong not because of evidence or facts but just because they have a different way of looking at the world than we do.

And when it comes to the spread of fake news something called 'confirmation bias' is incredibly important. This is when we ignore or dismiss anything that doesn't support our own beliefs and only pay attention to information that confirms the views we already have. We like to read and see opinions that reflect our own beliefs. We might want to share something that we really agree with, something that makes us really angry or upset and not stop to think whether it's actually true.

The challenge is to be open to trying to understand opinions that are different from our own and not ignore any evidence that doesn't confirm our own view. This is where critical thinking becomes very important. The skill of looking at information objectively and impartially and trying not to be persuaded by our own biases.

So that was my balanced spin on spin and now back to the studio.

Hugo

Thanks Sam. I may be biased but I thought it was really interesting. And it takes us nicely into our topic today. Critical thinking. Why is this something that is important when it comes to fake news?

Sam

Yeah well one of the ways that news spreads is when it's shared and if it's fake news, that can be a problem. Thinking critically is a bit like social distancing for fake news. If we know how to spot fake news, we are less likely to spread it.

Hugo

And in order to spot fake news you have to be a little bit of a sceptic and not believe everything you read on the Internet. So what does it mean to be a sceptic? Let's turn to our guest today Dr Steven Novella. Dr Novella is a clinical neurologist at Yale University.

He's a science communicator who presents a weekly podcast called "The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe" and he's also written a book with the same name. We spoke to him earlier and first asked him about what being sceptic means and why he believes it's important.

Dr Steven Novella

A sceptic is somebody that wants to believe only things that are actually true. We want to use facts logic and evidence to base our beliefs on.

Now the opposite of being a sceptic is being gullible and I don't think anybody would want, would self-identify as gullible or want to be gullible. But you know we're advocating scientific scepticism, using a formal method, using a process to evaluate the information that we encounter. We're deluged with information, we have to filter it somehow.

We have to figure, have some way of figuring out what's likely to be true and what's not true. If someone's trying to deceive me; if someone is trying to sell me something; if someone else has been deceived and they're trying to pass that along to me; if the government is trying to maintain some fiction to maintain control. I mean it's all sorts of reasons why people would give me information that's not correct or that's biased or that's inaccurate.

And sometimes people just make honest mistakes. We're flawed. Our brains are flawed, our memories are terrible. We sort of construct an approximation of reality as best we can but it's never totally accurate. And we have to be aware of all those biases and flaws.

Hugo

Well good to hear Dr Novella using one of your vocabulary words there, Sam, bias. But did you pick out any other interesting words there?

Sam

Yeah, so the word 'gullible' is interesting. We use this word for someone who is willing to believe things without questioning. It makes them really easy to trick. So, I remember when I was at school a teacher told me that the word gullible wasn't in the dictionary.

Hugo

Did you believe them?

Sam

Well I thought about it for a second because it was a teacher who told me and I trusted them and then I was going to tell my friends because I thought it was interesting but I

thought I should probably check it out first. And of course the word was in the dictionary.

So being a sceptic and a critical thinker means not believing everything you see or hear, not liking and sharing something even if we agree with it or it feels right to us until we have evidence to support it.

It may not be important whether a word is in a dictionary or not but it is when thinking about the areas of science, health and politics.

Hugo

It does take a little bit of an effort. It's easy to check a dictionary to see if a word is in there but it is more difficult with more complex issues. So how do we start with this? Here's Dr Novella again.

Dr Steven Novella

So whenever I come across a question or a topic that I want to wrap my head around, I make sure that I look for, specifically look for information on all sides. There may be more than two sides but all what I think are at least viable opinions. If there is any large group of people or respected professionals or whatever who are saying something, I want to at least understand what their point is, what is their side. And until you sort of sort through the back and forth of different arguments, you don't really have a good sense of who has the better position.

And if I follow a good process, I look for as many differing opinions as I can, keep a genuinely open mind, don't prejudge the conclusion and then see, 'Ok who has the better evidence'. And when you do that habitually, you do that all the time, you get pretty good at it, just like anything, you do it all the time and you'll get better at it. It still takes work to wrap your head around any complex issue but you have a fighting chance if you do that process.

Hugo

It seems to have some similarity with what journalists do, looking for different sources and analysing the evidence.

Sam

And it's important to look not only at different sources but also at different points of view.

Hugo

Of course this isn't something you need to do for everything. Some things are easy to check and some things are not that controversial.

But when it comes to science, medicine and health, for example, there are many claims that we might like to believe but which may not be accurate. So it's a good idea to develop some of those research skills if you want to be a critical thinker. This is something that Dr Novella thinks is essential for students and adults to develop but it's not the only thing. So here's a look at what else he thinks is important.

Dr Steven Novella

I do think that we need to teach critical thinking as a core skill set to all, all children and adults and what's called media literacy. I think media literacy is more important than it ever was. It's only going to get even more important so people need to understand not just scientific literacy but critical thinking and media literacy. That is the currency now of the modern world. We all have access to massive amounts of information. I mean it's unbelievable when you think about it, at the touch of your fingers you have access to the collective knowledge of humanity. It's amazing.

And so the real currency is in being able to find the information that you want and evaluate it critically. Being able to evaluate the information that we have access to critically is now probably the most important skill any individual can have. And that's what now I think the science communicators are shifting towards. That's what we have to teach people. They can find the facts online. We need to teach them how to know it when they find it.

Hugo

So, Sam, as well as critical thinking, what else does Dr Novella think is an essential skill?

Sam

That would be 'media literacy' which is an understanding of how the media and social media works and how it's being used for good and for bad.

Hugo

And it's also about being aware of where you get your information from, people on social media, blogs and websites you follow.

So, Sam, can you just please recap today's vocabulary for us?

Sam

Absolutely. So we started off with 'spin' which is a way to present information in a positive way, as positive as possible, even if it's not actually particularly good news.

Cherry-picking details is to choose only the information that agrees with your views and ignore any inconvenient facts.

A bias is a belief that something is good or bad which isn't based on evidence but is based on prejudices or our own beliefs and our own ideology.

Critical thinking is the skill of evaluating and judging how accurate something is objectively, without bias, without spin, and without cherry picking data.

A sceptic is someone who wants to use logic and evidence and not emotion when judging how accurate something is.

The adjective 'gullible' is used for people who aren't sceptical, who easily believe what they're told and what they read.

And finally, media literacy is an awareness of our modern media environment and an understanding of how media and social media works and how fake news and disinformation can spread.

Hugo

Thank you very much Sam, I think you deserve a rest after that. And thank you for watching. Until next time, goodbye.

Sam

Bye.