
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Fake News: Fact and Fiction

7: Images, scams & hoaxes

Hugo

Hello 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're talking about images and we meet viral image debunker Paulo Ordoveza.

Paulo Ordoveza

Things that you need to look out for when you're looking at a viral image, you want to look for any signs of manipulation tell tales that it's been edited.

Hugo

Before we get to that though, Sam. I'm looking forward to your vocabulary section. What are you going to be telling us about today?

Hugo

Today Hugo I am talking about the world of deceit and the words 'con', 'scam', 'phishing' and 'hoax'.

Sam

There have always been people who want to take our money and the Internet and social media have provided criminals with different opportunities to try and con us. The verb 'to con' means to deceive, to trick or to cheat and the noun 'a con' describes the method of tricking. For example, on social media you sometimes see competitions with fantastic prizes like a car or a boat and all you have to do is like the post and share it to have a chance of winning.

Many of these competitions are cons. They're not real and are designed to get us to share personal information which many people will do because they want to win the

prize but no one ever wins and the people who run the con have collected lots of personal data. The word 'con' dates back to the mid to late 19th century and is a shortened version of 'confidence man', which was the term for a person who was able to persuade people to give him money in return for a service that was never given and was not what was promised.

This was known as a 'confidence trick', or a 'con trick'. And now just 'a con'. A similar word for a 'con' is a 'scam'. Scam is a much newer word though, from the late 1960s and in most cases it can be used in the same way as a con. Those online competitions are often scams so be careful and beware of 'scammers'. The people who are trying to trick you.

A good piece of advice is: if it looks too good to be true, it probably is.

A very modern type of scam is 'phishing'. The term was coined in the 1990s and is a variation of the word 'fishing'. The scammers are fishing for your personal details. This is often done through emails which try to get you to log on to a web site that looks like your bank's but is actually a fake site from which the phishers collect your log-in details.

Another type of scam that has been around for centuries but is also popular on the Internet are 'hoaxes'. A hoax is something that has been created to trick you into believing something that isn't true. This could be a fake news story but hoaxes are also common with photos and videos. Take this one as an example. If someone claims with authority that it's proof of the existence of the creature known as Bigfoot, it's a hoax because it's just a person in a hairy costume.

Hugo

Thanks Sam, and that leads us on nicely to today's topic about images.

Sam

Yes. So there's an old saying that the camera doesn't lie. But I'm not so sure we believe that any more.

Hugo

Well the camera can only record what it sees. So in that case it can't lie. But what we are told we're seeing in the image is not necessarily what the image actually is.

Sam

Yes so the camera doesn't lie. But people do.

Hugo

Yeah. Well that's a good way to put it. And of course with the digital tools at our fingertips today we can change, manipulate, or even create a completely digital image that looks like a real photograph.

Sam

Yeah. But now we're not talking about just putting a nice filter on our social media selfies, are we?

Hugo

No. There are a few different ways images are used to tell a different story to the one that was photographed. One thing we see a lot is real images. They're not fake or photoshopped but they are from a different time or place than the caption states.

Sam

So the caption on an image can also be misleading in the way it describes what is happening in the photo particularly if it generates strong emotion.

Hugo

Yeah well here's an example. Look at this picture and it might make you feel completely different emotions depending on how it's described.

"Amazing. I saw the police helping an injured protester!"

"Terrible. I saw the police attacking an innocent protester!"

So what do you think Sam. Do you think the different captions tell a different story?

Sam

Definitely yes. Those two captions elicit two completely different emotions but which one is right? Without a wider context, we wouldn't know which one was correct.

So that's not the only way images can be misleading. It's not just captions. Images can be cropped, manipulated and edited to add things that were never there or take away things that were there. In fact it's so easy to do this now that an aged relative of mine, who shall remain nameless, removed an in-law from a family photo and replaced her with a bush. That photo now hangs in the living room. And unless you really examined it closely, you wouldn't realise at all that someone was missing.

Hugo

I'm glad I'm not in your family Sam! Most mainstream media organisations are very

careful about the images they use and how they're described particularly if those images have come from members of the public.

Sam

On social media though, anyone can publish an image and say anything about it.

Hugo

And that's where people like today's guest come in. Paulo Ordoveza is a viral image debunker. He's known as Pic Pedant on Twitter and spends his free time verifying images which seem to him to be not quite right. It's an activity he took up while working as a contractor at NASA. We spoke to him earlier and asked why he does it.

Paulo Ordoveza

Well. Partly I'm just pedantic. I'm a stickler for accuracy. But partly it's also that I get annoyed at seeing digital art, seeing manipulated images passed off as real. And in a sense it's, it's unfair to the people who made them because you, you rob them of attribution, you rob them of context and credit. And I want to see justice done in that sense. But on a grander scale it's also that small lies can later lead to bigger lies. I've seen, I've seen cases of viral image purveyors who just grab stuff off Reddit later be cited in bigger contexts and the damage they can do is amplified significantly by the nature of social media.

I've seen people go from historical photos and go into full blown health conspiracies about the pandemic. I've seen nature photos lead to eco-fascism. So you know it's the kind of thing I'd like to see nipped in the bud before it leads to grander or more harmful falsehoods.

Hugo

So he sees artists' work being stolen without credit. Fake and edited images being published as real. And also people who do this using their popularity on social media to promote conspiracy theories and radical action. But how do we know that an image is fake, copied or misleading? If you do this a lot, you can spot the signs easily. But for those of us with less experience here are a few tips from Pic Pedant.

Paulo Ordoveza

For one thing there's context. You want to see if, is this image too good to be true? Is it too lucky? Sometimes a photographer will get lucky, but sometimes that image is manipulated. Also think about what emotions these images are eliciting in you. What are they trying to make you feel, or think, or do? What is the publisher's aim? Are they trying to make money or are they trying to become more popular or are they trying to manipulate your view of the world?

And things that you need to look out for when you're looking at a viral image. You want to look for any signs of manipulation, tell tales that it's been edited. Sometimes the edges are too blurry, sometimes the edges are too sharp. Sometimes the light sources are different and you'll see shadows coming, you'll see shadows in different directions. Sometimes the perspective will be wrong or you'll see artefacts of Photoshop clone stamping or you'll see repeating patterns that indicate that something has been, that something has been copied.

Hugo

A few things to look out for there, some technical, some emotional. We've seen throughout the series that many examples of fake news are designed to generate strong emotions and photos are no different.

Sam

Yes. This doesn't mean that every emotional, interesting or spectacular image is suspicious. The latest baby picture from your family are probably not fake but with your critical thinking head on when you see images that make you feel upset, angry or outraged, it might be worth taking a deep breath and doing a bit of investigating before you think about sharing.

Hugo

And how do you investigate an image? Here's Paulo Ordoveza again with a practical tip.

Paulo Ordoveza

The first thing I do is plug the image into a reverse image search tool like Tin Eye, or Google image search which has a reverse image search if you click on the little camera icon in the search bar. And that will show you repeat occurrences of the image across various web sites and how far back the repetitions go. I have to warn you that the oldest or the largest image are not always necessarily the original image. So you have to be able to tell from context, from the site if that is actually the photographer or the digital artist's original image.

Also if, I found that if you search for the caption, if you do a phrase search by entering the caption in quotes into Google, or Duck Duck Go as I use, you might find a Reddit post or some other social media post where the image was first posted or where the image first became popular. On certain photography sites you might be able to find the metadata for the image or the EXIF data as it's called. And that will tell you things like what camera that was used to take the image and what lens they used with lens angle, what F-stop, what exposure, but it will also tell you what software the image has been through.

Now remember that Photoshop is not necessarily a sign that the image has been manipulated or at least has been faked because sometimes a photographer will take an image into Photoshop and do some minor enhancements but that doesn't mean the image has been completely faked. Sometimes it may mean that. Again you have to consider context.

Hugo

So search for the caption that's a good tip.

Sam

Yeah that's also a good thing to do if you see a controversial meme. You know the ones, there's a photograph of a politician or another public figure and a quote next to that image which is supposed to be something they said or was said about them. Put that quote into a search engine to see what comes up and you'll be able to see if it's a real quote or something that's made up.

Hugo

That's very good advice. I do that all the time and the other good suggestion is to do a reverse image search. Are you familiar with that Sam?

Sam

Yes. So that's where you search using an image rather than text to see if that same image has been used before on the Internet. Shall we do a little demonstration?

Hugo

Yeah let's do it. So let's take this image. Let's imagine someone has posted this picture online today with the caption: "The media isn't covering this but there are violent demonstrations outside parliament, please share. "

Sam

OK. So I'm using a site called Tin Eye, which is one of the ones Paulo mentioned, and I drag the image into the box here and then I let it do its thing. It then shows me all the examples of this image it has found. You can sort by date and see that this image has been present on the internet since at least 2012. So it can't be from something that happened today. The image is genuine but the description is misleading.

Hugo

Thank you Sam, very useful tips there. Now, would you please remind us of today's vocabulary.

Sam

Yes of course. I'm going to start by picking out a word that we've used a lot today which is 'manipulate'. To manipulate an image means to change it or edit it in some way to deliberately mislead. And, as we've discussed, you can also manipulate emotions.

Our guest Paulo said that he was pedantic, which I am about grammar, which means being very concerned that things are correct, often things that other people are not that worried about.

And that he is 'a stickler for accuracy'. When you are a 'stickler' for something, you expect or demand a certain level of behaviour. If you see this phrase, you will see it mostly with the noun 'accuracy' or 'rules'.

Two words which mean nearly the same thing are 'con' and 'scam'. These are dishonest schemes designed to trick people and take their money. The people who carry out these schemes are 'con artists' and 'scammers'.

'Phishing' is a type of scam. It's a trick designed to steal your banking information by getting you to log on to a fake web site with your real details.

And a 'hoax' is a kind of deception, something designed to make you believe something that isn't true.

Hugo

Thank you Sam. It's very easy to manipulate images today and images can be used to manipulate our emotions so be sceptical, be vigilant and share safely.

Sam

And remember that just because it's on the internet doesn't mean it's true. And if something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Goodbye.

Hugo

Goodbye.