
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Fake News: Fact and Fiction

8: Don't get caught out

Hugo

Hello and welcome to Fake News: Fact and Fiction from BBC Learning English. I'm Hugo.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Hugo

In the programme today we hear from Jenni Sargent, Managing Director of First Draft News.

Jenni Sargent

The issue of trust and truth online is one of the most urgent challenges facing our global society today.

Sam

Yes, and we find out that even the experts can be tricked by a fake news story as researcher Samantha Bradshaw tells us.

Samantha Bradshaw

I definitely have been caught out by a fake news story. I believed for the longest time that ...

Sam

So what was it that she believed? Stay with us to find out.

Hugo

Before that though, we have some vocabulary which you are going to tell us about today. Sam what do you have for us?

Sam

Today Hugo I have a range of phrases we can use if we realise that we have been the victim of a scam or believed some fake news.

Sam

English has many phrasal and multi-word verbs. These are a natural part of everyday language and are used for good things as well as bad. Take 'fall for' as an example. When you fall for someone, it means that you become strongly attracted to them. You fall in love with them. And if you've ever fallen for someone you might remember that feeling of butterflies you have in your stomach.

But you have a very different feeling, a sinking feeling in your stomach, if you fall for a scam. To fall for something means that you've been tricked into believing something that isn't true. This isn't always bad. It could just be a simple joke or a prank but it could also be a con or a scam or some fake news.

If you completely believe something that isn't true you can say: "I fell for it hook, line and sinker". 'To fall for' isn't used in the passive and suggests perhaps that you think you believed something too easily. To highlight the action of the scammers rather than your own response, there are a number of other phrases with similar meanings which we use which are generally only in the passive.

These are 'to be taken in by' and 'to be caught out by'. Now to help you avoid falling for, being taken in by, or caught out by fake news and scams, let's go back to the programme for some more tips.

Hugo

Thanks Sam. It can be easy to be taken in by fake news but in today's programme perhaps some advice from our first guest, Jenni Sargent. She is the managing director of an organisation called First Draft News who work around the world to fight what they call 'information disorder'. We spoke to Jenni earlier and asked how we can face the challenge of identifying and dealing with fake news.

Jenni Sargent

We have an acronym that we use which is S.H.E.E.P. We say to think about: the source, the history, the emotion, the evidence, and whether it includes pictures. Because those are the five things that you can remember and help you think before you share. Take time to think through who shared it, what's their motivation, what else have they shared that might be relevant? Have they tried to manipulate me emotionally? And what evidence do they present with this piece of information, this story, or this video or this image? Have they used images, which are very easily, easy to persuade us to think differently? So taking time as a member of society before you share is something that we can all do to help.

Hugo

Sheep: an acronym to help you think before you share. So let's take a look at it in a bit more detail now. So 'S' is for 'source'.

Sam

Yes, the source is where the information is coming from. Is it someone you know? Is it an organisation you trust? Are they who they say they are? If it's a well-known person, is it their actual account?

Hugo

Well it's very easy to fake a social media post. Just take a look at this for example

Sam

Wow. So the former president loves us! Looks just like the real thing, doesn't it? Except it's fake. It's just an image. It's been automatically generated by one of a number of fake tweet sites. And if you really weren't sure, you could go to the actual account and see that this post doesn't actually appear on the timeline.

Hugo

And one way of finding out more about the source is by looking at the history of the account of the person or organisation posting. So 'History' is the 'H' of sheep. How old is the account? Who follows them? Who do they follow? What else have they posted? Do all these things make the source more or less reliable?

Sam

For example the other day on Facebook I saw a post a friend of mine had shared. It was from a company offering a great prize for liking and sharing their post. This is a common scam on Facebook but some are genuine. So I did a bit of digging and when I checked out the company's own Facebook profile, their account was only a few days old and there was no history of posts. This was a red flag and made me think it was probably one of those scam competitions.

Hugo

Yea. The next part of the acronym is 'Emotion'. Is the post manipulating your emotions? Does it want you to feel angry or outraged? Is it biased? Is it saying something for example you wouldn't believe about someone you like, but you would believe about someone you don't like?

Sam

But just because a post might generate strong emotions doesn't mean it's fake news. There are many news reports that might make you feel sadness or anger but does the language of the post suggest you should be feeling a particular way? Does it suggest

you should or must share it? I always get a bit suspicious whenever a post tells me to share it.

Hugo

Yeah and the next part of the acronym is another E. This one is for 'Evidence'. If the post is making claims about politicians, health, science for example which aren't being reported in the mainstream media, what evidence is there that they are actually true?

Sam

This is a tricky area as the mainstream media can't and doesn't report everything. And of course in some cases has its own agenda and also does make mistakes. These are areas that can be really very complex. If you don't trust the mainstream media, how do you decide what sources you do trust? And is that trust based on objective evidence or because those sources say things you agree with or want to be true.

Hugo

Yeah it can be very difficult to recognise and ignore our own biases which is why it's helpful to look for multiple sources and opinions that are different from our own.

Sam

The final part of the jigsaw is pictures. Are photos and videos used as evidence? We've seen how easy it is for images to be misleading. So do the images show what you are being told they show? Are the captions accurate? Could the pictures have been manipulated?

Hugo

So remember SHEEP as a fact checking guide to detecting fake news.

Sam

To be a fake news detective you have to be aware that it is out there. You have to be sceptical and want to find the truth before you share something. And if you do come across a post that is suspicious or maybe something that a friend has shared, how should you go about dealing with it?

Hugo

Yeah there are many fact checking and debunking websites and services out there. It's often very quick to do a search for particular phrases or keywords to see if the topic has been covered on one of them. And another tip here is to include the word 'fake' or 'scam' in the search term as well.

Sam

But the trouble I have is if I come across something a friend has posted or shared, should I let them know?

Hugo

Good question. Do you do that Sam?

Sam

I have done. Yes.

Hugo

And how did it go?

Sam

To be honest it was a bit mixed. It depends on who shared it and what it was. So most friends are OK with it if, for example, it's a fake competition and you warn them about it. Some don't acknowledge it at all but if it's something a bit more controversial, like a conspiracy theory or one of those miracle cures the pharmaceutical industry is apparently hiding, then some people get quite angry if you challenge their beliefs even when you link it to the facts. Or maybe because you link to the facts. I'm not sure.

Sam

Yeah. That's an interesting observation and it's a question we put to disinformation researcher Samantha Bradshaw from Oxford University. How do you deal with fake news people share which appears on your social media channels? And this is what she had to say.

Samantha Bradshaw

So combating fake news as it appears in our own news feeds and our Twitter feeds. It's a very delicate task I think because one can't simply just post a debunked news article and have the problem fixed.

The reason why fake news often spreads further and faster than other kinds of information again comes back to this whole issue of identity signalling and people don't necessarily care that the information contained in a story, whether or not it's true. They don't care about the facts or not they care more about belonging to a sense of community.

And so posting a debunked story doesn't necessarily change people's minds. Instead I think we need to engage more critically one another but in a way that promotes empathy and promotes understanding so that again we can negotiate consensus and come together to build our democracy and find balanced viewpoints.

Hugo

Anything you like to comment there, Sam?

Sam

Yes I'd like to pick out the phrase 'a delicate task'. Samantha said that dealing with fake news on our own social media is 'a delicate task'. So this means it's a difficult job that needs to be done carefully with sensitivity. And she also talked about 'empathy' which is understanding other people's feelings and experiences.

Hugo

Well I think if we all had more empathy and understanding the world would be a better place.

Sam

But it might put you out of a job as a journalist Hugo if there wasn't any conflict.

Hugo

I think there would still be plenty of conflict to go around and there will always be people trying to take advantage of other people which leads us back to our guest Samantha Bradshaw. Has she ever fallen for a fake news story? Take a listen.

Samantha Bradshaw

I definitely have been caught out by a fake news story. I believed for the longest time that teacup pigs were a real thing. And for anyone who doesn't know, a teacup pig is a little baby pig and there would be all these cute viral videos on the Internet of these little pigs running around and the idea was that they would stay that little forever. But in reality they were just normal pigs that would grow to be a real sized pig. But I had it in my mind that I was going to buy a teacup pig one day because they were just so adorable and dog like and cute only later to find out that those are not real. They are fully grown pigs. You can buy one, it will just be massive one day.

Hugo

So even the experts can be caught out although happy to report that Samantha realised it was a scam before she actually bought one.

Sam

Yes and you might think that selling cute pigs is a harmless scam but this and other similar hoaxes lead to all sorts of problems. So, for example, what do you do if you live in a tiny flat and you bought a tiny pet that then grows to be a huge hungry pet? Many of these pigs have been starved, abandoned and poorly treated. Yet there is still a market for them on social media.

Hugo

Yes not all fake news is about issues such as politics, health, science. Well, now a lot to digest. Please Sam remind us of today's vocabulary.

Sam

Of course. So to start with there are some phrasal and multi-word verbs.

To 'fall for' someone means to fall in love but to 'fall for something' means you believed something that wasn't true. And if you completely believed it without any doubts, you fell for it 'hook line and sinker'.

The verbs 'to be taken in by' or 'caught out by' something also mean that you believed something that wasn't true but these are generally used in the passive if you are talking about the victim.

A 'delicate task' is a difficult job that needs to be done carefully with politeness and sensitivity.

And 'empathy' is understanding other people's feelings and experiences.

Hugo

Thank you Sam. Now the Internet and social media are fantastic resources of information and great tools for keeping in touch with family and friends. But because they make communication so easy it makes communication of fake news and disinformation so easy too. As this is the last programme in the series, I wonder if you have any final thoughts Sam.

Sam

Yes I do. So one of the things that struck me was how long fake news has been around but also that fake news only spreads if it is shared. And the one thing we've heard again and again in this series is always to think very carefully before sharing something. Don't take everything you see on the Internet at face value but be vigilant, be sceptical, be aware of your own biases and research anything that raises a red flag. How about you Hugo?

Yeah absolutely. I think that's why we all have a role to play. There's so much out there that's not true that it's vital for all of us to share responsibly. Well that's all from us today and from this series. It's been a pleasure to have your company and Sam, thank you!

Sam

And thank you to Hugo it really has been a pleasure. Goodbye.

Hugo

Goodbye.