Fake News Podcast

## Introduction - [0:02]

**Niamh:** Hello, you are listening to a podcast from the Centre for Educational Development at Queen’s

**N:** I’m Niamh Kelly

**Claire:** And I’m Claire McGeough

**C:** And today we’re going to be talking to you about fake news.

## Defining Fake News - [0:16]

**N:** So let's start off by defining fake news. If we turn to the OED, the entry for fake news says:

*‘Originally U.S. news that conveys or incorporates false, fabricated, or deliberately misleading information, or that is characterized as or accused of doing so. The term was widely popularized during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, and since then has been used in two main ways: to refer to inaccurate stories circulated on social media and the internet, especially ones which serve a particular political or ideological purpose; or to seek to discredit media reports regarded as partisan or untrustworthy’. (1)*

I think we could all agree with this – the US presidential election is certainly what I’d associate with the phrase and definitely my first memory of hearing it.

**C:** Since then the phrase has been expanded to describe a number of phenomena when it comes to online news. The Guardian reporter Elle Hunt deemed it a ‘a catch-all term to discredit all kinds of stories’ and that’s kind of reflected in the definition too – what is interesting is the ability for this phrase to refer not just to fabricated news, but to anything that is even said to be fake news, regardless of whether it is fake or not. (2)

**N:** It’s this wide spread use to include news that isn’t actually false that is problematic. The universality of the phrase can lead to us not understanding what exactly we’re looking at when we see ‘fake news’, we don’t understand how it came to be and what purpose it may serve. Naturally, we’re ill-equipped to deal with it.

**C:** So in this podcast, we’re going to break down some of the types of fake news and therefore how to approach them.

## Is it really fake news? - [2:19]

**N:** We’ll start off with what you could call ‘Fake News light’. These are news stories that are branded as ‘fake news’ but that aren’t exactly harmful in the same way that other forms of fake news can be.

**C:** For example, we’ve all seen really sensationalist headlines reporting studies that show ‘Gin Drinkers are all Psychopaths’ or that ‘Coffee cures Cancer’. They (sometimes) take authentic, complex studies and simplify or distort a message into what would attract the most clicks. A more accurate term for this could be click bait.

**N:** We’d maybe associate clickbait with ads that pop up on websites, telling us that we’ve won a free iPhone. This is more likely to take us to a malicious site. But often clickbait is just an article written in a sensationalist way – the writer still wants us to click on it, but only so the website gets views and generates revenue from ads. So it is deliberately misleading and sometimes stretched beyond any resemblance of the truth.

**C:** Also branded ‘fake news’ are satirical or ‘joke’ news sites. They write deliberately implausible headlines that are intended as a joke. Technically fake news – but never intended to be taken seriously.

**C:** With satire and joke news, context is key. If you have a fair understanding of what it is being poked fun at, you’re in on the joke. But if not, the satirical mimicking of actual news sites just reads as a legitimate source to you.

**N:** Exactly. While these sorts of articles aren’t meant to harm, there is a much more sinister spreading of fake news - what is known as misinformation or disinformation.

## Misinformation/Disinformation - [4:10]

**N:** In the information age, we have terms like these that are defined differently depending on who you are talking to. A report from 2019 that the UK Government carried out on fake news stated:

*In our work we have defined disinformation as the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. ‘Misinformation’ refers to the inadvertent sharing of false information. (3)*

**C:** So here, disinformation is deliberate, and it is what the creator of the false information generates. Misinformation is what happens when we as an audience see this disinformation and share it as though it were true. We are misinformed.

**N:** Disinformation is made to be distracting, sometimes to pull our attention away from something else going on (like as part of a political stunt) or to muddy the waters of something controversial. It gets its’ power from misinformation, as we are mislead to accept and perpetuate the information by unknowingly sharing ‘fake news’.

**C:** Much of human behaviour online facilitates this – for example, with the excess of information available on the Internet, we are likely to share articles after only reading their headlines.

**N:** Psychologists are researching how political bias actually impacts on information processing in the human brain, so that people believe even the fakest of news if it aligns with their core beliefs.

*Van Bavel and Pereia posit that “There is extensive evidence that people engage in motivated political reasoning, but recent research suggests that partisanship can alter memory, implicit evaluation, and even perceptual judgments.” (4)*

## Here’s where the students come in - [6:17]

**C:** So where do students sit in all of this? Well, it seems that everyone has work to do in using their own criticality to recognise fake news.

**N:** We even have work to do to combat our brain’s susceptibility to fake news, especially when it aligns with our beliefs.

**C:** But the good news is that students are well positioned to do this.

**N:** As students, you’ve learned how to deal with information. You’re familiar with processes like choosing search terms and citing sources. You know the value of a peer-reviewed article. You understand why your information should be up-to-date.

**C:** Skills like these and knowledge like this makes up information literacy. This is the capability that you need when approaching fake news. If you want to to be well informed and news literate.

## What can I do? - [7:15]

**N:** So here are some general tips for spotting fake news and ensuring that the information you do find and chose to use is trustworthy.

**C:** Check the URL – Some websites will have a dodgy looking domain like.com.co or an obviously odd name like The Onion. If you’re unsure about the website, search for them or visit their About Us page.

**N:** Check for an author/date – Do a quick search of the author to see if they are a reputable journalist or maybe an expert in their field, especially if it’s an article relating to science, health or politics. A date of publication is also good practice among legitimate sources and helps you to realise how current the information is.

**C:** Check if they back up their claims – Like any good student’s essay, articles should support the claims that they make with evidence. Do they link out or reference? Are there quotes? If they interpret a study, you’d like to be able to see the original, peer reviewed publication yourself/ Another way is to check claims is to see if any other, more reputable sources are reporting the same information.

**N:** Unfortunately, there is no secret formula we can give you for checking fake news. There are fact checking websites but the most reliable way to combat fake news is by developing good habits, maintaining criticality and questioning everything.

You have been listening to the Fake News podcast, from the Centre for Educational Development at Queen’s.

Thank you for listening.

Sources:

1. <https://www-oed-com.queens.ezp1.qub.ac.uk/view/Entry/67776?redirectedFrom=fake+news>
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3. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf>
4. <https://www-sciencedirect-com.queens.ezp1.qub.ac.uk/science/article/pii/S1364661318300172>