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Date: 03/06/2023  
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START AUDIO

Interviewer: You’re on and you’ve got little green things, that’s good. I shouldn’t have pressed record until actually it was ready, should I?

I’ve just given you the data book, the little diary. One of the things in that shows you on page four the times of day that you shared your news with us. Do you think that is an accurate portrayal of when you read news? Is there any kind of regular pattern to when you actually access news online?

Irene: I’d say that’s probably most likely going to be the time that I would access news. It’s the time when I access random things on my feeds or on my internet because that’s when I have lunch. I combine my lunch and tea into a 2:00 meal, so 2:00 is usually about that time.

Interviewer: Have you noticed any patterns or trends in the way you consume news over time? Has there been an increase or decrease in the amount of time you’ve spent reading articles?

Irene: I’d say probably a decrease. Ever since I got a smartphone it comes up on a Google feed and then it’s from various sources, whether it be BBC or Sky. Then I click on those if there’s a story that I think could be important to me. I think over a long period of time I’d say it’s probably decreased.

Interviewer: Why do you think that’s decreased?

Irene: I personally think with all the rise in social media and everything being online things are less likely to be trusted. Even if they come from a reputable source, like BBC or Sky, they’re still going to put a spin on it. I used to study sociology and we used to talk a lot about how news companies would put spins on stories to make them sound exciting. They have lots of drama in them, otherwise people won’t read it. To me, that’s too fictional. I just liked the old type of news where it was direct and to the point, standard English, no opinions. It’s getting less and less like that.

Interviewer: The book also shows the typical issues that you were drawn to, in particular on page seven. Why do you think you tend to gravitate towards these kinds of issues?

Irene: I think because these are more likely to be factors that affect how the country works. The main example could be the COVID pandemic back to that, that is something that is going to majorly affect how you do stuff in the country, buy tomatoes say. I think the Ukrainian war and how the politicians interact with each other is a factor that’s going to contribute to that.

Interviewer: You think things that might affect you on a…

Irene: On a country level. How it will affect distribution of goods and in turn affect the cost of goods from grocery stores. It’s kind of like a knock on effect, especially with the war and how people… Their opinions of that.

Interviewer: I’m looking at your trust scores as well as I ask this. How often would you say you encounter online news that you suspect is fake or misleading?

Irene: I’d say when it comes to fake news I’m never entirely sure if it’s fake, but naturally misleading. That’s where it comes from, an opinion base. For example, when they say one in two rather than 50%, because 50% doesn’t sound as much as one in two. I know they use those methods and because I know that I’m kind of dubious when I’m reading these things.

They’re trying to portray to the public that something is maybe more or less of an issue than it actually is. It’s more trust based on how they’re trying to tell the story than whether or not it’s fake. I’ve always believed that if it comes from the BBC website or the Sky website it’s going to be the truth, it’s just going to be spun in a political fashion.

Interviewer: You think fake news is something that is out there but you don’t generally encounter it.

Irene: Yes, yes, yes, exactly. I think it’s more likely to be on social media, like TikTok, Facebook or something.

Interviewer: What would prompt you to check the accuracy of something you’d read or encountered online?

Irene: Based on the sources that I go to probably if it was farfetched I think that would be the only factor that would make me think it was not believable or fake.

Interviewer: If that was the case, if you did see something that you might think that’s farfetched, what might you do to verify that thing that you weren’t sure of?

Irene: Funnily enough, I’d probably Google it to see what the majority opinion was. I get a feeling that it could also be fake. I can’t actually think of any other way of doing it. For something that was well-known it would usually be on the radio, as well as on the websites, as well as on television. If it’s on all three of those, I’d say that I believe it. A lot of the stuff I was getting from the websites I was hearing on my alarm clock radio, so that led me to believe it was actually going on.

Interviewer: Rather than this big, complete fake, made up thing. Talking about when you read something and you think, “That might be a little bit misleading. That element might not quite sit right with me.” What kinds of things would you do to verify that? Would it be the same as what you’ve already just said?

Irene: Yes, I think I’d Google the stuff involved. For example, if someone was saying a politician was being impeached or he had to resign because of accusations of, I don’t know. I would wonder, is that really true? Is it just a vote of popular opinion because they’re on the side of the other person? I would Google what the other person’s background is and why they would want that person to be impeached.

Interviewer: You would Google the person giving the news rather than who it was about.

Irene: No, no, no. I meant I would Google who it was about.

Interviewer: You said, just to be clear, you might Google. You said you’d look at other’s opinions and stuff like that. Could you just talk a bit more about that? When you Google stuff, what typical sites might come up and then whose opinion might you see, how might you find this majority of opinion? What does that look like?

Irene: For example, if I was to Google one of the politicians I would… You can see it in the search bar but then upon scrolling down it’s different hits of what they’ve done in the past and different news stories.

Interviewer: You’ll look at the headline level.

Irene: Yes, the top Google hits. I’d say maybe like the top four or five. Then look at those what they had done in the past or what they’re currently doing, so it’s not just from one source. Especially when it’s a vote of public opinion. Especially in Britain there have been massive examples of how public opinion has been massively wrong, for example with Brexit. They look back on it and say, “This was wrong.” I like to look at those multiple sources to see if everything is indeed how that news has reported it.

Interviewer: Slightly differently. Have you ever intentionally sought out some kind of online information or news to cross-reference something you’ve read? It’s kind of similar to what we’ve just talked about. I’ll say that two part. Have you ever intentionally seen something and thought, “I’m going to cross-reference that with something else.”? How often do find yourself doing that?

Irene: I’d say maybe only on a few occasions I’ve done that. When it comes to cross-referencing I’d switch from BBC to Sky, the popular ones like the Daily Mail. Even seeing them in passing in grocery stories, the actual papers themselves. I’d see what the headline title was, but then probably wouldn’t go to read the text. See if the headline title agrees with the main story.

Interviewer: In your book it shows how you told us you responded to news. Your response is 100% of the time you said you did nothing.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: Have you ever made a decision or taken an action based on something you have read online?

Irene: I don’t go and have a conversation about it at work. I don’t alter how many tomatoes I buy. I’d say pretty much the only action I do is reading the news itself, then maybe thinking about how it could affect how my life works. A lot of the stories I find so far in these few weeks haven’t affected my everyday life, then I have done nothing about it.

Say if they were stories that would have affected how I would have done something, then maybe I would have told my parents and said, “Watch how you do your groceries this week.” With these stories I don’t think there was anything that would have affected that.

Interviewer: Another thing where people have responded to online news is by sharing them within WhatsApp groups, online, whatever. Do you ever do that?

Irene: No, I tend not to do sharing. My activity on social media is very, very minimal. When it comes to WhatsApp, I only use it for very necessary messages. I really hate using my mobile phone. That’s why most of my, in fact all when I was looking at the news, was on my laptop. I do it when I’m working and in between working. When I need a break I just scroll, so to speak. Not sharing at all.

Interviewer: Have you ever changed your mind about an issue or a topic after something you’ve read online?

Irene: Ever in general. When you say changed my mind, do you mean my opinion?

Interviewer: Yes, I think so. It could be on a certain issue, a topic or even a person. You’ve held a belief for a while, you’ve read something online and then you’ve just changed your perspective or viewpoint on that.

Irene: I’d say, most of the time, no. For example, especially the political stories where they have to resign, I think it’s a bit unfair that person is bombarded by public opinion. Like I said, the stories are made to dramatize the fact. For that person to have to give up their job simply because the public think they’re doing wrong, I think that’s wrong. You wouldn’t have the same happen to a grocery store worker. An Asda worker, if they had a particular opinion about something they wouldn’t have to leave their job.

I know people would say it’s because they’re in the public eye, if they have these opinions it’s either good or bad. What people do in their private opinions and private lives, I think that is their own business. I’ve never really changed my mind on someone because of what the news has said. Equally, about situations. I’ve never changed my mind on situations because of what the news said.

Interviewer: You gave a hypothetical example of when you might call a parent about something you’ve seen in the news. Do you ever discuss news with family or friends or stuff you’ve read online at all on social media? Do you ever discuss news with friends or family at all?

Irene: No, I’d say it’s not in my main repertoire of conversation. It’s mostly about what we do in the day, not about what’s in the news. Most of the time I think based on the sources that I’ve looked at, I probably don’t know enough to make an opinionated point or argument about it. Like I say, I mostly do it on the internet, but these guys will do it on social media as well and they’ll talk to their friends about it. I don’t often bring it up in conversation.

Interviewer: You don’t actively avoid talking about the news, but it’s something you would never…

Irene: Bring up myself.

Interviewer: Bring to the table.

Irene: I wouldn’t bring it to the table, but if someone else brought it I would give an opinion if I felt strongly about it or find it amusing if it was a silly story. I would talk about it if someone brought it up, I wouldn’t actively shut it down.

Interviewer: You kind of pointed towards a difference between people who more actively use social media than you. For example, they might have already…

Irene: Circulated it.

Interviewer: Yes, discussed topics or whatever. Do you think that…? For example, if I was someone who used social media a lot, do you think I would potentially know more about a topic than you if you’ve just read it on a website? Is that what you were getting at?

Irene: Yes. They know more to be able to make, not really an argument as opposed to a point about it.

Interviewer: Have an opinion.

Irene: Yes, to have an opinion.

Interviewer: Your book also indicates the most frequent sources of news that you shared with us during the study. Do you tend…? You have kind of touched on this. Do you tend to rely on some sources more than others? Which you kind of said. Has this always been the same or has this changed over time?

Irene: I’d say it’s probably been the same. I have always believed if it’s a big news company like BBC or Sky or the original news companies like ‘The Telegram’ and ‘Daily Mail’ that they’re not allowed to lie. This is what I think anyway, it’s illegal for them to lie because they’re telling the public something that’s happening. If they lie, they themselves would be brought out as lying and the newspaper would lose shares because nobody would buy it. I tend to go for the trusted sources.

Then again, I’m also aware that sometimes these newspapers do create either farfetched or untrue stories. I think it was in the ‘70s when ‘The Sun’ brought out stories about spaghetti grows on trees for April Fools’ Day. I’m less likely to read those, not really lower, but not as high-end newspapers or news sites.

Interviewer: Newspapers that have been around for a long time that aren’t tabloid. Other than that, you think they’re kind of regulated as well. You were indicating they’re not allowed to lie, there is some kind of regulation.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: For you that would be that’s a trusted source at that point.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: As you’ve told me and as we were able to work out from using your data, you don’t get news from social media. You get it directly from news sites and a little bit from Google News, which is a curated news page. Yes?

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the role of social media in disseminating news?

Irene: Personally, I think it probably shouldn’t be done. I think that social media was designed to be a platform where people can say anything they want to. It’s just a bullhorn. If you have an opinion and you want to share it, then you can put it on social media because it’s easier than standing on a street square. The news shouldn’t be on it. Like I said, I believe that shouldn’t be opinionated. Also, when it goes on social media it gets lost among mundane things like memes and jokes. Again, you start to wonder, is it real and true or not?

Even if it was disseminated on the social media by the company itself, like Sky, you’re scrolling down the Facebook app and you’ve seen a meme about something stupid and then you see a really important Sky newsflash, it kind of undermines the importance of it. I don’t think social media is really good for news at all.

For phones, I would say the Google thing is a good idea because it pops up on your top feed and it’s not related to the social media. At least that’s what it does on my phone. Then you just have the news that you can go to. You’re not on a social media site. I would say that would probably be a good way to spread it on phones.

Interviewer: It’s about it being alongside trivial unimportant things.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: Whereas as the curated Google News feed or some people might have an Apple one or whatever, because that’s all news do you think that’s a better way to access news if you were to use a mobile rather than a laptop?

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: You’ve talked about the long running newspapers, the BBC and Sky as being a source of trust and how you trust information. Are there any other factors that you consider when deciding whether to trust something or not?

Irene: Apart from what I said about is it believable or farfetched and what I said about public opinion. I’d say I probably wouldn’t be able to think of any other way I would be able to test that out, short of doing loads and loads more cross-referencing, which is tantamount to doing a history degree. (Laughter)

Interviewer: It’s the source primarily and then to a lesser extent the subject matter. If you see something you think, “That doesn’t seem right.” Have you ever stopped following or accessing a certain news source or website because you no longer trusted it?

Irene: No, I don’t think I’ve ever done that. Most of the time when stories come up, sometimes you can only access certain stories on that paper or site. You pretty much have to go to that one. I haven’t stopped using any of them.

Interviewer: You talked a little bit about social media. How do you think the development of new technologies, such as deepfake videos, AI generated content, like some of the stuff in that book, how do you think that will affect people’s ability to verify online information in the future?

Irene: I’m quite dubious about that actually. For example, I live in an accommodation complex and I occasionally talk to the staff. There’s a member of staff I come across quite a lot who only gets his news from TikTok. He blatantly tells me that he doesn’t trust BBC, Sky or any of the big news companies. Heck, even the government himself or themselves. He just solely trusts TikTok because he thinks it’s from the people, from the real people for the real people.

I think that a lot of people probably think that, because it comes from the public it’s for the public and it’s not swayed by political views. Like I said, I do believe the news is swayed by political views, but it’s still true. Whereas I believe the social media news, it’s exactly that. It’s made up by the public, so anything is anything.

This is why I don’t normally use Wikipedia for my scientific research because I know that people can put into it anything. I think a lot of people are probably going to believe that it’s real. There might be some, like myself, who will believe it’s made up. The people that I’ve come across genuinely believe that it’s real news, more real news than from the reputable companies.

Interviewer: Do you think the way you make sense of that and the way you trust or don’t trust social media, TikTok, has been affected by certain recent events? The more recent AI stories or just generally an understanding about fake news campaigns and people spreading fake news for various political reasons. Do you think things like that have a big impact on your lack of trust in these sites? Is it something else or both?

Irene: I’d say that’s probably part of it. I personally believe that a lot of public opinion will sway what gets out on the social media as well because social media is obviously monitored. If someone says something that a lot of people think is offensive, then it will be taken down. I don’t think that’s a very good way to disseminate information. Even if it’s very, very, very offensive, it’s still something the public should know about. Then they know what these people think, rather than just try and hide it behind this cloud of everything is going to be okay.

I think that’s what social media does. It coats the world in this sugar-coating and tries to prompt everyone to act in a certain way that doesn’t insult people. You can’t do that in real life. There are always going to be situations where you’re going to offend someone or you’re going to do something that someone doesn’t like because everyone has different opinions. There’s no way you’re going to not offend anyone at any point. I think because social media platforms do that, they stop stories. That’s another reason I think they’re not real and they’re not reputable for news.

Interviewer: Although you don’t use social media you do sometimes access the Google News curated feed. How comfortable are you with that personalised newsfeed?

Irene: I know obviously that was created by this AI based on my past patterns. I don’t mind that at all, companies using AI to create things based on your previous search patterns. That’s just business. That’s just them trying to make money. Often times it’s done in such a way that it’s useful. When it comes to news you sometimes wonder, are they only putting forward stories that say Google thinks is appropriate for the public to look at? I guess that’s something you just have to live with because you’ve got no other choice. These big companies control a lot of stuff.

I can only really go on what I think is reputable and what I think is good. I’d like to think they’re giving me true news and the personalisation of it is only based on my past research and its algorithms I use to find out my preferences. I’d like to think it’s not trying to give me a certain political sway or opinion.

Interviewer: There’s something I want to come back to in that, but I’ll come back to it in a sec. Following on from what you just said, have you ever been concerned about that use of your personal data by news websites and Google?

Irene: I don’t use online banking. I know the only personal data I have on these platforms is my email address, my number, my home address. There are not really a lot of scams people can do with that, short of giving you spam mail. I keep myself relatively safe online. In that fact I don’t really mind them using this data to create algorithms. If anything, it just makes things more convenient and it’s something you can’t not experience.

For example, if you want to use the internet, then you have to sign up to these cookies that access your personal data. There’s no other way you can do it. In the modern world everyone is doing it and you have to do it for work and various reasons. I think as long as you try your best to keep your details safe then it doesn’t matter if they use these ones like the email address or address. Like I said, a spam email, what’s the worst that could happen?

Interviewer: In terms of steps that you’ve taken to keep yourself safe in terms of personal data you mentioned not using online banking. Are there any other ways you think you can keep your data safe? At least in the way you’ve spoken about where some stuff is, it doesn’t matter if people can use that. Are there any other steps you can take, apart from not having online banking?

Irene: For example, I’ve had to recently think about purchasing a new phone. If the phone company advertises that it has security on it, I think it’s VPN, then I’m led to believe that will protect my data. I think I would take a step to get security platforms, virus protection say. I’ve always tried to be safe on the internet in general. I don’t use non-https links. I don’t click on spam emails, I just straight off delete them.

Short of doing that, I think it’s very difficult to protect your details. No matter what you do on the internet there’s always something they’ll ask you to sign up for. If you want a Gmail account, they’ll ask for your home address and your phone number. Where you pretty much need to use this things, you’re going to have to do that.

Interviewer: Interesting you mentioned https and you’ve also mentioned cookies. How often, if you ever do, do you take the time to adjust those cookie settings, permissions and stuff? Are you the sort of person that does that a lot?

Irene: Yes. If there’s a reject all button, I will straightway go for that one. I look at the preferences and obviously they’ve got the one which is ticked on for essential cookies, which you can’t untick. If it’s a website I have to look at, then I will accept that one. Then all the rest, the analytics cookies or the ones they’re like XC files that get stuck in your computer, I reject. When it comes to cookies, I only accept the essential ones if I have to.

Interviewer: If a site made it so it was very difficult or impossible to reject the other types of cookies, what would you do? Would you still visit the site?

Irene: If sites start doing that I probably wouldn’t visit them. Especially for your laptop, if it gets malware then you have to buy a new laptop and it’s just really annoying. I’d stop using sites if there was no reject all button.

Interviewer: You take the effort to open up, look at the choices, reject all or at least individually turn them all off. If you weren’t able to do that, that would be it.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: I was going to go back. You mentioned the Google curated feed, you won’t click on every single thing it suggests but you’ll click on ones that you think are reputable. This other thing you do is going directly to news websites. Could you just talk to me a little bit about how that generally works? You’ll sit down with your laptop to have your central meal, what does that typically look like?

Irene: I work mostly on remote access and then I have Chrome open on another tab. When I’m working and then I get five minutes to myself because I don’t want to think about work, I go on the Google tab and check out the newsfeed option. If it looks like it’s from a site that I usually go to and usually trust, I click on that link. It’s from Google, it’s from Chrome. Then click on that, give it a scroll down, give it a read. I think that’s how I do it.

Interviewer: You won’t necessarily say… Let’s pick one that you actually look at, BBC. Rather than opening up a tab and going BBC.com, what’s going on? You will go to the newsfeed.

Irene: On Google.

Interviewer: In your case Google. Look for a BBC story or other sources and click on that.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you then come back to the newsfeed, so you’d read a single story or would you then stay on the BBC site and look at other stuff?

Irene: Yes, I go back to the news site. It’s in Google, click the news, current news. Then the top four or five hits. I click on the one that goes to the BBC website, read it, close that tab and then go back on the Google and click on the next one.

Interviewer: We’ve talked already, that’s a form of personalised news for you. You said you’re quite comfortable with the fact it’s suggesting things it thinks you’ll be interested in. Great. Apart from being slightly more convenient for you, what do you think are the main impacts of these personalised news feeds on the type of information that people are then exposed to? What do you think are the impacts of personalised newsfeeds?

Irene: I think in general the impact would be how something is going to affect you locally. I find the newsfeeds are a bit like the weather feeds where it’s a bit like news for Washington, news for Newcastle, based on what your constituency is up to. I think the impact on people would probably be what was going on around them locally. Obviously, locally is affected by what they’re doing down there in London.

Other than that, I think the personalisation… At least I’ve been getting stuff which is pretty general. I don’t know how personal the personalisation can get. I would assume they would probably get stuff which is really niche. That would probably be maybe a problem because then they’re not getting central news.

I’d like to think the central news kind of pushes its way through anyway because it’s the important stuff. For example, when they recently did a test of the emergency sound on people’s phones, that was important for the general public to know about, so it was forced through. I think even if the public are getting very niche stuff through their personalisation, if it’s a big story then it will get through. Breaking news say.

Interviewer: Just to stay on that topic. Rather than speaking about people in general, think of you. Your personalised newsfeed you’re getting these central main things, as you said. Do you notice any other? Have you noticed a story in that feed where you think, “I’m getting that as a suggestion. That makes sense, that’s a good suggestion for me, I like that kind of thing.”? Do you notice that kind of personalisation happening?

Irene: Actually, funnily enough, yes. I notice it when it comes to bands and music. I think Google and YouTube, they own each other now. I get a lot of feeds about band tours and new albums that are out. I never click on them because I always just listen music that YouTube suggests for me based on what I already listen to. I don’t like going to bands conferences or whatever they’re called. I’ve noticed that it does do that kind of personalisation based on what I’ve searched in the past.

Interviewer: That kind of personalisation I assume is also happening with the other news stories it shares, it suggests for you. I guess what the question I’m asking is... If we can stick on the bands. What do you think is the impact of that personalisation? Saying to you, ‘Here are these bands we think you’ll like.’ What they’re doing, when their gigs are. What are the impacts of that if we think about that on a bigger scale, do you think?

Irene: The impacts on people?

Interviewer: Impacts on the type of information people are exposed to.

Irene: I think obviously the biggest main impact is monetary. The bands are probably going to pay a fee to Google to push this information forward based on the information that Google has collected from personal views and research history. Like I said, it’s massively a business impact.

For example, it’s probably a good thing for bands. I’ve heard that it’s quite hard for them to earn money because it’s all downloads now rather than albums. If they’re going to push forward advertisements of gigs through Google personalisation hits, then that’s probably a good thing I’d say. Anything that is business I think is free game, people have got to make money in some way.

In a business sense pushing forward these stories is just going to have the impact that somewhere along line some company is going to make money. As I said earlier, when it comes to the news I suppose a lot of people are dubious of the fact whether or not Google… Obviously, the people who work for Google themselves are going to have their own opinions and their own political views. Whether or not they’re going to choose to put forward only news stories that they think those agendas. I’m quite dubious about that.

It might affect people a lot more in the future with this increasing AI. With companies like Google they’ve just got control over so many things now. It’s something I don’t think anyone is going to get away from because everyone pretty much has to use a smartphone for everyday use.

Interviewer: Going back to these sources that you rely on, trust and go to. Do you think state broadcasters, the BBC, do you think they are more trustworthy or less trustworthy than privately owned, that are funded by advertising models, for example? Do you think that makes a difference in terms of how you could trust them?

Irene: I think BBC because originally it was designed to just do the standard stories, what’s going on in politics. I’d like to think that it’s kept that stance. I’ve noticed it still is taking on more public opinion than just staying neutral. Private newspaper companies, if they’re paid by companies, then I’d say they’re still going to give stories of what’s going on. It just means that they’re funded by these bodies.

For example, I used to get delivered to my door it was called the ‘Washington Star’. It used to tell local news, it still does in some capacity. Over time it just got more and more advertisements in it because it was harder for itself to pay for itself. You open up this newspaper and it’s pretty much just all advertisement for whatever, you name it. Then there’s one story in the entire newspaper.

I think maybe the main impact of independently owned newspaper websites that are funded by all these companies is just going to be that it’s going to be mostly advertising. I think they’ll still get the story across and oftentimes the story will be true. Even in my own scientific research when I’ve looked at scientific journals, they obviously also have to advertise [incubators, say 0:50:50]. They’ll do stories that are promoted by the company, but then they’ll still also do independent stories.

Interviewer: Do you think they have the same level of objectivity?

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: How important is it to you that news sources, news producers, are transparent about their own sources and their methods of reporting?

Irene: I think that’s probably quite an important thing. Where did they get their information from? It’s important to know that because otherwise you are not completely sure that they have remained as transparent as they have been in the past. I suppose oftentimes you kind of just assume how places have got their news. They send out a reporter, they do the interviews, they do the research and then they write the story.

For example, I used to write for the student newspaper and oftentimes we would just Google the story. The editors would tell us to find stuff on Google. We weren’t actually going out into the world and performing these interviews and doing the research. Sometimes you’ve got to wonder, are they doing the same thing? Then it’s kind of an endless cycle.

If they’re getting it from Google, then where did Google get it from? Where did the information come from? I’d like to think the more professional companies, obviously Newcastle is very independent, the more professional companies have the money to send out these researchers and reporters. I’d like to think that’s what they’re still doing.

Interviewer: Just going back to the state broadcasters, people like the BBC. Do you think that they should be subject to different regulations or standards than privately owned news outlets?

Irene: Any news company I’d really like them to remain neutral, don’t have political sway or an opinion of their own. I think news should be independent of both of those things. Both the big companies and the independent companies I think should be like that.

I know oftentimes the big newspapers it’s been known for some years that ‘The Independent’ is on the Tory side whereas the different one is on the Labour side. Obviously, it’s going to be the same story, it’s just going to be the way they change their wording. The wording and phrasing can change how someone reads something.

Interviewer: A different way of telling the same story from political left and political right, for example. Does it matter to you which of those sources you get information from? If the core of the story is the facts, does it matter to you if it’s been told from somebody who might be politically left or politically right?

Irene: Oftentimes in news you can’t get away from that. It’s less of a factor for me, but just trying to get the main point of the story. I try and stay neutral myself. If it is swayed, I try and notice whether or not it is.

Interviewer: You’re happy to expose yourself to, let’s talk about these two things, the left or the right. You take them with the same sort of criticality and you stay, as you describe, neutral.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: In this kind of time that we’ve discussed today of this distrust in the media, like the TikTok example you gave, this distrust in the media and this fear of misinformation. What steps do you think that broadcasters and producers of news online can do to maintain their credibility and trustworthiness?

Irene: It’s a hard one that one. I’ve seen examples of TikTok videos of a BBC reporter and they’re giving the news from the site. I would think that because they’re a BBC reporter and it’s got the BBC stamp on it, that I know what their TikTok is like, that’s something that’s going to be trusted. Since they’re putting it on TikTok maybe people who, like my friend at the accommodation, who just looks at TikTok feeds, is maybe going to think that’s more reputable.

I for so long now have been unable to fathom why people think that this TikTok feed where everyone can just put anything onto it is the truth. I just can’t fathom why they don’t understand that anything can go on there. When it comes to how the news companies are going to impact that, I really honestly have no idea how they can do that, short of putting their stories out there with their little stamp on. As soon as they put their stamp on people are going to think because it’s by this big company then they’ve got some sort of hidden political agenda that we shouldn’t read.

For example, people were saying you don’t know what’s inside when you get the vaccine. You even had people who didn’t so much reject the vaccine, like some of them do. They still got it, but they still think there’s some kind of hidden political agenda trying to do something like that.

I think forever people are going to distrust the government and you’re going to have those three levels of people. The people who distrust it completely and aren’t going to pay attention to anything the government says. Then the middle people who do what the government says, but then still don’t trust it. Then the staunch people who do believe what the government says. These newspapers, these news companies are only really going to get the middle people and the staunch people. They’re not going to get the people who don’t trust them at all.

Interviewer: That’s interesting. You talked about the BBC putting their stamp on things on TikTok and that might be a thing that turns people away from trusting that because they don’t trust the BBC as an extension of the government. I’ve also mentioned these fakes, deepfakes and stuff like that. Do you think you are someone who would be able to tell authentic images, audio and video from fakes or deepfakes?

Irene: It’s getting increasingly harder these days. Like I said earlier, if it comes to pressing on links, if it’s https then I’d like to think that’s real. The company, like the BBC, has taken the time to pay for that domain and secure the domain. From past experience in the early days of the internet, if it was fake then it wouldn’t be https, it wouldn’t be protected, you would have malware.

This deepfake stuff it’s getting harder and harder to pay attention to and see if it’s real or not, which is why, as I said at the beginning, a lot of the news I read I’m constantly dubious about. You’ve really got to look at different sites to see, has it been repeated by other news websites? Is it really going on? I think it’s very difficult to find out if it’s real or not.

Interviewer: To labour that point a bit. I know we did discuss it earlier, when you’re looking if it’s repeated online, does it matter who those sources are that are being repeated online? If you say your top five links or whatever, how does that play out in your head? How do you make sense of that?

Irene: Most of the time when I get the top five links it is from what I think are reputable sites, like Sky, BBC and the big other news sites. If I’m getting it from multiple trusted sites, then I think that’s enough for me. As I said earlier, short of doing hours and hours of research, you’re not really going to be sure.

Interviewer: You’re using that as a shortcut.

Irene: Yes, a shortcut.

Interviewer: A proxy. That’s from the source. Say we’re talking about something happens to a politician, you might type that politician’s name into Google. On that first page you’ve got Sky News, BBC or both talking about that same person in that same context, that’s enough.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: You believe that at a level. If those trusted ones weren’t on that first page but it was still the same topic, the same issue, what might you do then? How would that play out?

Irene: I think in that circumstance I probably wouldn’t believe it, I’d think maybe it was a deepfake. I’ve seen a lot of examples in the past of April Fools’ stories, there are loads of them on the internet and no matter where you search you still find the same story, it just repeats and repeats. I probably then wouldn’t believe it.

Interviewer: Maybe stop your search at that point. The first page of Google they’re all unreputable sources and at that point you realise, “I don’t trust it.”

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: When I was talking about deepfakes, you have answered. If were to think about just a video. This person you chat to in your accommodation shows you something on TikTok and it’s got the BBC logo on. How well do you think you would be able to spot if that was real or fake? Do you think you could?

Irene: That’s a good point actually. I often wonder, say for example the actual BBC logo. You’d think it would only be legally allowed to be used by the BBC. As I said with social media, anyone can do anything. Anyone can have the BBC logo as their profile picture. I’ve had to do various Instagram posts in the past for my work and I try to tag companies or institutes and you get five or six hits and it’s like, which one is the real one?

Instagram maybe does the blue tick, like Twitter used to. I’m not entirely sure if TikTok does that. If it does do that, then if it’s got the blue tick then I would believe it. I’ve heard that a lot of research goes into finding out if it is… Let me reword this. To get the blue tick a company genuinely has to prove that they’re it. The social media site makes sure they are it, so I trust that. If it’s the blue tick, yes, I would trust it. If it didn’t have the blue tick…

Interviewer: That might just be somebody you follow on Instagram. Somebody you follow on Instagram could share a video and it could have the BBC logo on. It’s not the BBC account, but it’s someone you know and trust. They can share a story of a BBC reporter in Syria. Do you think you would be able to tell the difference between a really good deepfake? Do you think you could spot a fake in that sort of context with some of the other context taken away?

Irene: In that context I probably wouldn’t. I’ve seen some of the deepfakes and they genuinely look real. Just solely looking on the social media, if my friend had shared that I probably wouldn’t be able to tell if it was real. If I was really curious, I’d Google it. If Google didn’t bring up that, then I would think maybe it’s fake and not pursue or think about the story any further. If it was on Google, maybe then I’d be inclined to think it was real. If it was a deepfake and I googled it and thought it was real, that would be a case where I probably wouldn’t be able to recognise it was a deepfake.

Interviewer: You think there would be certain signs that would make you do that googling. You think there would be something about it that would make you think, “I’m going to Google that just to make sure.”

Irene: No, I genuinely think some of this deepfake stuff is that good that even the most dubious people probably wouldn’t be able to tell.

Interviewer: Would there be certain things about that though that might trigger your distrust? It could be something else that’s slightly unfamiliar about it or the topic. Like you say, they can be really convincing. If they’re talking about something that sounds like the sort of thing the BBC would talk about, then…

Irene: I remember when the deepfakes first started you would get some actors that do it. These actors were really bad actors so you could tell this is not real. Some of the actors that do it now are bang on, so it’s hard.

Interviewer: Nearly finished. You’ve listed or we’ve listed about 12 agencies and news sources which were your most common ones. Do you think there’s any kind of hierarchy or any of those you…? Do you think the ones you’ve read the most are the ones you trust the most? Does it fit that story, that order, or not?

Irene: Yes, it fits that. As we were saying earlier, when it comes up in the feed those are the ones I click on most because I trust most, so they come up most.

Interviewer: Great. I think that is all of my questions. Have you got anything else you wanted to say about what we’ve been talking about or anything that you think from your booklet or from doing this study that you want to bring up?

Irene: I don’t think so. I have noticed as well when it comes to social media news or social media posts in general, they haven’t got as much of a grasp of the English language as they used to. Not a lot of people pay attention to grammar and correcting grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. It’s either down to laziness or they don’t really know it. I find that even in articles that are written by publishers that write for the BBC or Sky, even in those articles you see spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.

When I started my research it used to be if something had spelling mistakes or grammatical errors then it’s not a good paper, it’s not trusted. You see them everywhere now. I think that’s something that needs to be improved upon. Especially with grammar, it can really change how a sentence comes across. I think that’s something that sites and news needs to look at.

Interviewer: The standards.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: You mentioned laziness or whatever. Do you think people like the BBC or individuals at the BBC are purposely letting those standards drop in order to fit in with what everyone else is interested in?

Irene: That’s a good question. I think it’s genuinely laziness. They read their texts and they think that’s an appropriate way to portray the language towards someone else. Then the laziness side comes in, whatever workplace you go into there are always going to be people who do half a job. Why do a full job when you only get paid for half a job? They just let it slide.

Even the editors themselves when they look at a story after the journalist has written it, even they let it slide. When I wrote for the newspaper, the editors oftentimes let my spelling mistakes go through. I think it’s just people doing half a job, so to speak. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Great. I’m going to turn these off now.

END AUDIO

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