

Balancing criticism with critique, and gut reaction with deep reflection

Ahead of the EU Referendum Michael Gove boldly claimed that people no longer trust experts. It's been said that, at the time, he didn't realise quite how true his remark would ring.

But there's an important distinction to be made between the trust we have of: advice received direct from experts; advice received that has been responsibly and accurately reported by the media; and advice received that has been dumbed down, or misrepresented, by the media (in order to generate headlines and sell papers).

So was Gove right that people no longer trust experts, or is the real issue that people can no longer tell the difference between what experts have said, what the media has chosen to report based on what was said, and what the media may have in fact misrepresented?

With the sheer overload of information that is now available to us, and from numerous and often-contradictory sources, perhaps we have simply stopped listening to what experts are saying (or are being reported to have said). From health advice to finances, and immigration to trade, perhaps we are too time-poor to delve deeper into every claim we see reported. Or maybe we don't know how to critique and reflect on what we read and so dismiss anything that is difficult for us to accept, listening instead to our gut reactions, quick to criticise what we see. People seem able to maintain perceptions and beliefs that cannot coexist, being so far from the truth, and yet they switch off and don't take action on reconciling these conflicting ideas, because it can be difficult to know where to start.

A Guardian article recently highlighted a disconnect between expert advice, which has been extensively publicised, and the beliefs Britons have, about the causes of cancer. [Half of Britons mistakenly believe stress causes cancer; half do not know that processed meat increases the risk of cancer; and half are also unaware that physical activity is linked with reducing a person's cancer risk.](#)

So why are these messages not getting through to the general public? Perhaps because the media needs to package news, opinion and research findings into bitesize digestible chunks, with attention grabbing headlines, and so they publish, and readers become used to looking for, 'quick fixes', 'top tips' and a 'top line summary' of what was said or done. By their very nature, quick fixes and top line summaries don't tell the whole story and, therefore, are likely to appear to be contradictory and susceptible to being painted as opinion rather than fact. It just isn't possible to boil down issues about health, immigration or the country's finances into bitesize chunks without losing the nuance of the arguments.

I'm sure many of us do query or critique what is before our eyes, and reflect on how a new discovery might fit in with what else we already know about a topic. But I'm also sure that many of us must not be doing so if, as a society, we are not being successfully informed about what does and doesn't

cause cancer. Society isn't necessarily to blame – many of us are time-poor and don't think as often as we might about the extent to which what we read may well have been 'massaged' in order to sell something – from products, to behavioural change, to political views, to newspapers!

And, while we have long had a tendency to accept or reject news at face value rather than making sure to critique what we read, as more of our information consumption takes place online we have added reason to doubt the validity of what is presented to us. [The Washington Post reported in 2016 that:](#)

“the satirical news site the Science Post published a block of 'lorem ipsum' text under a frightening headline: 'Study: 70% of Facebook users only read the headline of science stories before commenting.' Nearly 46,000 people shared the post, some of them quite earnestly — an inadvertent example, perhaps, of life imitating comedy. Now, as if it needed further proof, the satirical headline's been validated once again: According to a new study by computer scientists at Columbia University and the French National Institute, 59% of links shared on social media have never actually been clicked: In other words, most people appear to retweet news without ever reading it... So your thoughtless retweets, and those of your friends, are actually shaping our shared political and cultural agendas... This is typical of modern information consumption. People form an opinion based on a summary, or a summary of summaries, without making the effort to go deeper.”

In [a more recent article, published on The Atlantic this month](#), political scientists call for a new drive of interdisciplinary research “to reduce the spread of fake news and to address the underlying pathologies it has revealed”, based on the findings of an 11 year study of social sharing:

“The massive new study analyzes every major contested news story in English across the span of Twitter's existence – some 126,000 stories, tweeted by 3 million users, over more than 10 years – and finds that the truth simply cannot compete with hoax and rumor. By every common metric, falsehood consistently dominates the truth on Twitter, the study finds: Fake news and false rumors reach more people, penetrate deeper into the social network, and spread much faster than accurate stories.”

In the latest concerning reports about Cambridge Analytica, the data analytics firm that is said to have played a major role in the success of both the Leave campaign for the EU Referendum and Donald Trump's election campaign, we have to recognise the power to manipulate us, through what we see and read online, that private contractors have as a result of the information gathered about us as users of the Internet. I'm sure many of us don't think too long and hard about the reasons we are being presented with a particular article while we're online but, if [“'psychological operations' – or psyops – changing people's minds not through persuasion but through 'informational dominance', a set of techniques that includes rumour, disinformation and fake news”](#) becomes more prevalent, I

would hope we will all take the time to assess the likely reason for being presented with particular content, and to reflect in greater depth on the headlines and summaries we read.

In order to equip our students for life beyond school – where they will no doubt take a lead on this next wave of managing information and communication online – we make sure to encourage a love of ‘learning in context’. Since we embraced the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma programme in 2007 – offering our Sixth Form students the choice between taking either the Diploma or A Levels – we have valued the Extended Essay (EE) ‘core’ element so highly that we now invite all of our Sixth Formers to undertake it, regardless of whether they are IB students. The EE develops students’ skills in engaging in a personal exploration of a topic of their own choice; researching the subject in greater depth; properly critiquing arguments and reflecting on their findings; communicating ideas; and developing an argument.

Current Sixth Former Marta is undertaking a fascinating EE project on the very topic of the media – with a focus on how women were portrayed following the Harvey Weinstein scandal. She compared print media articles and the way in which the reporting of the case seemed to differ depending on who the assumed audience of each paper was. She explained that, “the media is confronted more often than it used to be, as it is increasingly socially acceptable to have an opposing opinion, and therefore, in order to gain or maintain readership, the media need to write stories that are shaped in favour of the person/idea which the public is most likely to side with”.

We recognise the immense value of the Diploma’s Theory of Knowledge (ToK) too, which equips pupils with the ‘tools’ they need to think around a subject matter, in-depth, allowing them to analyse and critique in an informed manner. What’s more, all IB programmes are purposefully interdisciplinary in nature, based on the belief that it’s important to provide young people with sufficient context in order to bring their learning to life – so IB programmes cherish an interconnectedness of subjects, from History and Geography to Mathematics and Arts.

At a time when having the ability to critique and consider context is more essential than ever, perhaps it’s time for the education sector to celebrate more widely the positive aspects of interdisciplinary and contextual learning which focus on developing essential skills of critiquing and deep reflection.