

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #202

A History of Fake News

15th Oct, 2021

[00:00:00] It is so dishonest. It is so fake. You know, I've really started this whole fake news thing. Now they've [turned it around](#)¹. And then now they're calling, you know, stories put out by diff- by Facebook, fake and they're fake, what could be more fake than CBS and NBC and ABC and CNN.

[00:00:19] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:27] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:36] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about The History of Fake News.

¹ turned it in the opposite direction

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[00:00:44] For most people, the first person you will think about when you hear the words “fake news” will be the man whose voice you heard at the start of the episode, the [former](#)² president of the United States, Donald Trump.

[00:00:59] But while he might have popularised, and even [weaponised](#)³, the [term](#)⁴, as we will discover the concept goes back a lot further than Donald Trump.

[00:01:11] So, in this episode we are going to explore the weird, interesting, and dangerous world of Fake News, what “Fake News” actually means, who is creating these fake news stories, and for what reason, and we'll see that for as long as people have spread real news they've understood the power of fake news.

[00:01:34] OK then, let's get started.

[00:01:39] The [term](#) Fake News really came into the public eye in late 2016, after the US election.

[00:01:49] There were 20 times more Google searches for the phrase “fake news” in February 2017 than a year beforehand.

[00:01:58] The Collins Dictionary made “fake news” its word of the year for 2017.

[00:02:05] In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries had selected “post-truth” as its word of the year.

² of an earlier timer, previous

³ used as a weapon

⁴ the word used to describe the concept of fake news

[00:02:13] There seemed to be an [assault](#)⁵, an attack on the [authenticity](#)⁶ of the media.

[00:02:20] Its [posterboy](#)⁷, the person most famous for it, might have been Donald Trump, but he has been followed by leaders from all over the world in attacking the [truthfulness](#)⁸ of the media.

[00:02:34] From the US to Brazil, Hungary to the Philippines, political leaders have attacked the media for publishing what they claim to be fake, untrue, stories.

[00:02:47] And it's not, of course, just authoritarian leaders.

[00:02:50] Politicians in almost every country in the world have seen how effective [labelling](#)⁹ a story as “fake” can be, and this [tactic](#)¹⁰ has been [deployed](#)¹¹ to [cast](#)¹² [doubt](#)¹³ over the [authenticity](#) of news stories.

⁵ attack

⁶ the quality of being true

⁷ the person who is most famous for something

⁸ the fact of being true

⁹ describing

¹⁰ a planned way of doing something

¹¹ used

¹² cause something to appear

¹³ the feeling of not being certain about something

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[00:03:07] So, were these politicians bravely pointing out something that no politician had been brave enough to do, was the news really becoming more fake, or is the news not fake at all?

[00:03:21] Well, in many cases, as we both know, the news stories are not fake, the stories just do not [reflect well on](#)¹⁴ the political leader, and simply [claiming](#)¹⁵ that they are not true is, unfortunately, an effective tactic to [distract](#)¹⁶ attention from reality, from the truth.

[00:03:41] But in other cases, the stories are fake. They are not true. They are lies.

[00:03:47] And these stories, the “real” fake news, will be the centre of today’s episode.

[00:03:55] So what do we actually mean by “fake news”?

[00:04:00] It is a [term](#) that has come under some criticism because it is [broad](#)¹⁷, and can be [interpreted](#)¹⁸ to mean a wide range of ideas.

¹⁴ give good evidence on the qualities of someone

¹⁵ saying that something is the case

¹⁶ make people stop doing something

¹⁷ very wide

¹⁸ understood or explained

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[00:04:10] It can refer to [misinformation](#)¹⁹, which is information that is simply incorrect, but might not be [intended](#)²⁰ to cause harm.

[00:04:21] It can also refer to [disinformation](#)²¹, information that is false and [intended](#) to [mislead](#)²² people and cause harm.

[00:04:30] And it can be [misinformation](#) that turns into [disinformation](#).

[00:04:36] So, who is creating “fake news”, and for what purpose?

[00:04:41] Let’s dive first into the why, then the who, and we will see that these reasons, these [incentives](#)²³ to create fake news, have been around since [the dawn of time](#)²⁴.

[00:04:55] The reasons for creating fake news are essentially [threefold](#)²⁵, they can be put into three [broad](#) categories.

¹⁹ incorrect information

²⁰ planned

²¹ information that is presented in a wrong way on purpose

²² cause people to have a wrong idea about something

²³ reasons to do something

²⁴ always, ever

²⁵ three times as many, triple

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[00:05:04] Firstly, for political gain. You want people to believe certain things, which will [influence](#)²⁶ their opinion on a subject, and they will vote or behave differently.

[00:05:17] Secondly, for money. You want to make money, and making fake news is an effective way of doing so.

[00:05:26] And thirdly, to [disrupt](#)²⁷ society. You get some sort of joy, satisfaction, or political benefit from causing chaos, making people believe things that are not true, and making it harder for people to [distinguish](#)²⁸ between truth and [falsehoods](#)²⁹.

[00:05:47] With our first reason, for political gain, this is as old as time.

[00:05:53] Going back all the way to 33BC in Ancient Rome, there was a power struggle between Octavian and Mark Anthony.

[00:06:03] After Julius Caesar's death, both wanted power.

[00:06:07] Mark Anthony was away in Egypt, while Octavian was in Rome.

²⁶ have an effect on

²⁷ causing disturbance or problems

²⁸ notice the difference between two things

²⁹ lies

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[00:06:13] To win power, Octavian knew that he needed to have the public on his side, and he put out a [vicious](#)³⁰ propaganda campaign [portraying](#)³¹ Mark Anthony as a drunk [womaniser](#)³² who had been [corrupted](#)³³ by his affair with Cleopatra, the Egyptian Queen.

[00:06:32] He was having an affair with Cleopatra, they had even had three children together, but a lot of what was written about Mark Anthony simply wasn't true.

[00:06:44] Octavian had arranged for coins to be made with [slogans](#)³⁴ about Mark Anthony's behaviour, and the news [spread](#)³⁵ throughout Rome about his bad behaviour, and [unsuitability](#)³⁶ for the position of Caesar.

[00:07:02] Public opinion turned against Mark Anthony, Rome declared war against Cleopatra, and after Mark Anthony and Cleopatra's suicide Octavian became emperor, becoming Augustus Caesar.

³⁰ hurtful and dangerous

³¹ presenting, describing

³² a man who engages in a lot of casual sexual affairs

³³ made him dishonest and bad

³⁴ short easily remembered phrases

³⁵ reached or were known in a wide area

³⁶ the quality of not being right or appropriate for a particular position

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[00:07:16] So, there is Octavian, over two thousand years ago, understanding the power of fake news for political gain.

[00:07:25] And ever since, fake stories have been used for political gain, often with far more **tragic**³⁷ consequences than one man failing to become emperor.

[00:07:38] On Easter Sunday in 1475, in Trento, in modern-day Italy, a young boy went missing.

[00:07:46] A priest told his **congregation**³⁸ that he believed the boy had been killed by Jews, who had drunk the boy's blood to celebrate Passover.

[00:07:58] Before long someone else **claimed**³⁹ that the boy's body had been found in the basement of a Jewish house.

[00:08:06] The entire Jewish community of Trento was arrested and **tortured**⁴⁰. 15 of them were **burnt at the stake**⁴¹, publicly burned in front of the town's residents.

³⁷ very sad

³⁸ a group of people who had come together to pray in a church

³⁹ said that something was true

⁴⁰ made to experience great physical pain

⁴¹ burnt on a wooden post as punishment

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[00:08:19] Even though the story was recognised as completely false, it simply didn't happen, the news was [spreading](#)⁴² fast.

[00:08:28] The Gutenberg printing press had been invented in 1440, and it was easier and cheaper than ever before to print [pamphlets](#)⁴³ containing simple text.

[00:08:40] The [papacy](#)⁴⁴ had tried to get involved to stop the rumours, but it was too late.

[00:08:47] The story [tapped into](#)⁴⁵ pre-existing [anti-semitic](#)⁴⁶ feelings, anti-Jewish sentiment, and even though it was proved to be fake, it almost didn't matter - the damage was done.

[00:09:01] People believed what they wanted to believe.

[00:09:04] And indeed, to this day there are still some [anti-Semitic](#) websites that claim this story is true.

⁴² reaching a lot of people

⁴³ small books with a few pages that give information about something

⁴⁴ the office of the Pope

⁴⁵ connected with

⁴⁶ showing extreme dislike for or hostility to Jews

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[00:09:12] Now, while we don't know for sure the motivations of the priest who started these rumours, it is probable that he did so for a combination of [anti-semitic](#) and political reasons.

[00:09:26] And this was, of course, not the first, the last, or the most [tragic](#) time the Jewish community has been targeted by fake news for political gain.

[00:09:37] No greater example of this exists than during the rise of the Nazis, and the successful [portrayal](#)⁴⁷ of the Jewish community as being responsible for a large part of Germany's problems.

[00:09:50] Stories were printed by the Nazi propaganda machine [portraying](#) Jews as an [obstacle](#)⁴⁸ in the way of a united Arian population, and at the same time stories were [suppressed](#)⁴⁹, they were hidden, about the [atrocities](#)⁵⁰ that were being committed as part of the Holocaust.

[00:10:11] It's hard to find a group in recent history that better understood the power of [manipulating](#)⁵¹ the media, and with more tragic consequences, than the Nazis.

⁴⁷ presentation, description

⁴⁸ something that prevents something from happening

⁴⁹ ended, hidden

⁵⁰ extremely violent and shocking acts

⁵¹ controlling to their advantage

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[00:10:23] But there are other examples of politicians and countries using fake news for political gain that we look back on with a certain acceptance.

[00:10:35] In 1917, during World War I, the British government gave one particular fake news story to the press. The story claimed that Germans were using the bodies of dead British soldiers to make soap and [margarine](#)⁵² - a butter-like substance.

[00:10:55] The story was completely false, but was published by newspapers such as The Times and The Daily Mail. It was [intended](#) to build support for the ongoing war effort by [portraying](#) the German enemy as completely [barbaric](#)⁵³ and [inhumane](#)⁵⁴.

[00:11:14] So, fake news for political gain is as old as time, it just so happens that in the 21st century it is easier than ever to [spread](#) it.

[00:11:25] We'll explore this further in a minute, but let's first look at the second motivation for fake news: to make money.

[00:11:33] This too has been a motivation for fake news since the dawn of "news". This is not the time or the place to fully explore how news has changed through the ages, but the [purpose](#)⁵⁵ of news has not always been simply to inform.

⁵² a butter-like substance

⁵³ extremely cruel and violent

⁵⁴ cruel and causing suffering

⁵⁵ the reason for which something is done

[00:11:51] Before the invention of the printing press in 1440, there was a very different concept of “news”.

[00:11:59] In Europe, you might hear information at a church service from a priest, or there would be a town crier, someone who would stand in a square and read out official information in a loud voice.

[00:12:13] A little bit of slightly pointless but quite interesting vocabulary is that the way a town crier would announce their presence in English is by saying “Hear Ye - Oyez, Oyez, Oyez”, “Oyez” actually [derives⁵⁶](#) from the old Norman word for “to listen”.

[00:12:33] As literacy rates started to increase, and it was cheaper to print information on [pamphlets](#), information was increasingly shared in written form, but there was not the same concept of “[objective⁵⁷](#)” journalism, of simply reporting the facts.

[00:12:51] The purpose of news was often to entertain and [amuse⁵⁸](#), not simply to inform.

[00:13:00] By the early 19th century, newspapers were printing increasingly fake stories to try to sell more copies.

⁵⁶ has its root or origins in something

⁵⁷ reporting just the facts

⁵⁸ cause someone to find something funny and laugh

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[00:13:08] In 1835, for example, The New York Sun published a story over six days reporting that a famous [astronomer](#)⁵⁹ had looked through his [telescope](#)⁶⁰ and discovered life on the moon.

[00:13:23] The article described the animals he had seen through the [telescope](#), and included detailed pictures of this society on the moon.

[00:13:33] It [did wonders for](#)⁶¹ newspaper sales, it sold a lot of copies.

[00:13:38] Of course, it was completely fake, completely invented, and - as an [indication](#)⁶² of how unimportant the newspaper thought this was - the newspaper never actually printed an apology admitting it was fake.

[00:13:52] Fast forward almost 200 years, and although the technology has changed, the desire to make money from fake news hasn't.

⁵⁹ someone who studies space objects

⁶⁰ a device using lenses or mirrors for making distant objects appear larger and nearer

⁶¹ had a very good effect on

⁶² something that shows and makes something clear

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[00:14:02] For example, in the [run up](#)⁶³ to the 2016 US election there was a headline with the title “Pope Francis [shocks](#)⁶⁴ world, [endorses](#)⁶⁵ Donald Trump for President, releases statement”.

[00:14:17] This was completely untrue, it was completely fake, and had been created by a group of teenagers in Macedonia, in Eastern Europe.

[00:14:29] They weren’t interested in getting Donald Trump elected. They couldn’t care less who was in the White House.

[00:14:35] They simply wanted to attract people to their website, which had advertising, which would make them money.

[00:14:42] The Pope Francis article wasn’t the only one.

[00:14:46] They would [pump out](#)⁶⁶ dozens of articles that they knew would [trigger](#)⁶⁷ people’s reactions, especially Trump supporters, they would then post them in pro-Trump Facebook groups, there would be thousands of comments on the posts, which would mean Facebook’s algorithms would show them to more people, it would

⁶³ the period before an important event

⁶⁴ causes people to be surprised or upset

⁶⁵ supports publicly

⁶⁶ produce in large quantities

⁶⁷ set off, cause

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be shared, millions of Americans would click on the link and go to the website, and the teenagers would make tens of thousands of dollars in advertising.

[00:15:17] Now, this is an extreme example, because it was a completely fake article, a story that had no [basis](#)⁶⁸ in truth.

[00:15:26] Even more reputable news organisations are guilty of writing [sensational](#)⁶⁹ headlines and stories because they know that they will get clicks, and [resonate](#)⁷⁰ with a certain demographic.

[00:15:39] The Guardian, for example, a left-leaning newspaper in the UK constantly publishes articles on Amazon and its tax payments, mentioning only certain types of taxes that Amazon pays, and always forgetting to mention other types of taxes that it pays, because it knows that this will [resonate](#) with its audience.

[00:16:01] On the other end of the political spectrum, the right-leaning UK newspaper The Daily Telegraph is full of negative articles about the European Union or Joe Biden, again not always mentioning the full truth about the subjects of its articles, because it too is a business that makes money from advertising and newspaper sales.

[00:16:25] I'm sure you can think of similar examples from your country.

⁶⁸ a fact or circumstance on which something is built or established

⁶⁹ exciting and interesting

⁷⁰ be in agreement

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[00:16:29] And our third, debatably most dangerous motivation for creating fake news is to cause trouble and confusion.

[00:16:38] You will, no doubt be familiar with the Russian [troll farms⁷¹](#) pumping out fake news articles to try to [influence](#) the 2016 and 2020 US elections.

[00:16:51] Whether or not they did [influence](#) them is another question, but it seems pretty clear that they tried.

[00:16:58] Part of this was no doubt for political reasons, but it was also to cause chaos and increase [distrust⁷²](#) in American institutions.

[00:17:09] It seems to have worked.

[00:17:10] Trust in the media is at an all-time low in America, with only 46% of Americans saying that they trust the media to tell them the truth.

[00:17:22] Naturally, this [decline⁷³](#) can't completely be [attributed⁷⁴](#) to the [spread](#) of fake news, but it certainly has not helped the situation.

⁷¹ organised groups of people whose aim is to spread fake news

⁷² a feeling of not trusting someone or something

⁷³ gradual loss of something

⁷⁴ be considered as a result of

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[00:17:32] So, what is the future of fake news? Is it [poised](#)⁷⁵ to become more and more of a problem, or have we learned how to spot the difference between true and false?

[00:17:44] Certainly there are some new technological developments that will make it harder than ever to spot the difference between truth and falsehood.

[00:17:54] For example, [deep fakes](#)⁷⁶, faked videos or audio clips that are made to look and sound like someone, but are completely computer generated.

[00:18:05] You might have heard this one of Barack Obama:

[00:18:08] we're entering an [era](#)⁷⁷ in which our enemies can make it look like anyone is saying anything at any point in time, even if they would never say those things. How about this?

[00:18:18] Simply president Trump is a total and complete [dipshit](#)⁷⁸. Now, you see, I would never say these things, at least not in a public address, but someone else would.

[00:18:31] [Creepy](#)⁷⁹, right?

⁷⁵ Ready, in a position

⁷⁶ faked computer generated videos or audio clips that are made to look and sound like someone

⁷⁷ period of time

⁷⁸ very foolish

⁷⁹ strange and making you feel frightened

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[00:18:33] You might think, well, I guess you need to have a large studio and hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment to create something like that.

[00:18:42] You don't.

[00:18:43] Just listen to this.

[00:18:45] This isn't actually me. This voice isn't real. I didn't record this.

[00:18:49] Ok, I'm back again, this is actually me.

[00:18:53] Can you tell that was fake?

[00:18:55] Maybe you could, but the point is that I was able to do it pretty easily, only from clips of my voice, which is freely available on the Internet.

[00:19:06] And it did sound a lot like me.

[00:19:09] So [figuring out](#)⁸⁰ the difference between what is real and what is fake is becoming harder than ever before.

[00:19:17] And it isn't just technology like [deep fakes](#) that make Fake News harder to fight.

[00:19:23] The fact that half the world's population has a smartphone means that anyone, anywhere can start a rumour, they can [spread](#) information that can reach

⁸⁰ understanding

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millions of people in an instant means this means that these fake news stories can be read or watched by hundreds of millions of people before they are taken down.

[00:19:46] And even when they are removed, or proved to be false, as in the case of the Jewish community in Trento which was accused of killing a young boy, the damage is often done.

[00:19:58] So, what can be done to solve this?

[00:20:01] Governments, as you will no doubt have seen in the news, are increasingly putting pressure on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to stop the [spread](#) of fake news stories.

[00:20:13] Their response has typically been that they are a platform, not a media company.

[00:20:19] They also point out that there is not just one type of “fake news”, and [figuring out](#) what is fake and what is not is a difficult task.

[00:20:30] They are right.

[00:20:31] This is not to say that they shouldn't even try, but [distinguishing](#)⁸¹ between what is true and what is false is not easy, and the line is rarely as clear as the story

⁸¹ recognise something as different from something else

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about finding civilization on the moon or the Pope [endorsing](#)⁸² Donald Trump for president.

[00:20:50] So, to summarise, fake news is nothing new.

[00:20:54] Since the dawn of time people have understood the power of lies to [deceive](#)⁸³ people and [acquire](#)⁸⁴ power.

[00:21:02] It started out with whispers in the Roman Forum, the Gutenberg Printing Press made [spreading](#) it easier still, TV and radio made it even easier, and social media and communication apps have made it easier than ever before.

[00:21:20] So, while the man most commonly associated with the [term](#) Fake News might be long gone from The White House, as we've heard today, Fake News is nothing new, and the line between fact and fiction is more [blurry](#)⁸⁵ than ever.

[00:21:38] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The History of Fake News.

[00:21:44] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:21:48] A final point, which I think is quite an amusing one, is that Donald Trump wasn't even the first US presidential candidate in 2016 to use the [term](#) Fake News. It

⁸² supporting publicly

⁸³ causing them to believe that something false is the truth for their own advantage

⁸⁴ get

⁸⁵ not able to be seen clearly

was Hillary Clinton, who used it on 8 December 2016, a full month before Donald Trump first used it.

[00:22:09] So, Trump's claim to have invented the [term](#) fake news is, itself, fake news.

[00:22:16] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:22:20] For the members among you, you can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:22:30] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:22:36] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Turned it around	turned it in the opposite direction
Former	of an earlier timer, previous
Weaponised	used as a weapon
Term	the word used to describe the concept of fake news
Assault	attack
Authenticity	the quality of being true
Posterboy	the person who is most famous for something
Truthfulness	the fact of being true
Labelling	describing
Tactic	a planned way of doing something
Deployed	used
Cast	cause something to appear

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Doubt	the feeling of not being certain about something
Reflect well on	give good evidence on the qualities of someone
Claiming	saying that something is the case
Distract	make people stop doing something
Broad	very wide
Interpreted	understood or explained
Misinformation	incorrect information
Intended	planned
Disinformation	information that is presented in a wrong way on purpose
Mislead	cause people to have a wrong idea about something
Incentives	reasons to do something
The dawn of time	always, ever
Threefold	three times as many, triple
Influence	have an effect on
Disrupt	causing disturbance or problems

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Distinguish	notice the difference between two things
Falsehoods	lies
Vicious	hurtful and dangerous
Portraying	presenting, describing
Womaniser	a man who engages in a lot of casual sexual affairs
Corrupted	made him dishonest and bad
Slogans	short easily remembered phrases
Spread	reached or were known in a wide area
Unsuitability	the quality of not being right or appropriate for a particular position
Tragic	very sad
Congregation	a group of people who had come together to pray in a church
Claimed	said that something was true
Tortured	made to experience great physical pain
Burnt at the stake	burnt on a wooden post as punishment
Spreading	reaching a lot of people

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Pamphlets	small books with a few pages that give information about something
Papacy	the office of the Pope
Tapped into	connected with
Anti-semitic	showing extreme dislike for or hostility to Jews
Portrayal	presentation, description
Obstacle	something that prevents something from happening
Suppressed	ended, hidden
Atrocities	extremely violent and shocking acts
Manipulating	controlling to their advantage
Margarine	a butter-like substance
Barbaric	extremely cruel and violent
Inhumane	cruel and causing suffering
Purpose	the reason for which something is done
Derives	has its root or origins in something
Objective	reporting just the facts

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Amuse	cause someone to find something funny and laugh
Astronomer	someone who studies space objects
Telescope	a device using lenses or mirrors for making distant objects appear larger and nearer
Did wonders for	had a very good effect on
Indication	something that shows and makes something clear
Run up	the period before an important event
Shocks	causes people to be surprised or upset
Endorses	supports publicly
Pump out	produce in large quantities
Trigger	set off, cause
Basis	a fact or circumstance on which something is built or established
Sensational	exciting and interesting
Resonate	be in agreement
Troll farms	organised groups of people whose aim is to spread fake news
Distrust	a feeling of not trusting someone or something

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Decline	gradual loss of something
Attributed	be considered as a result of
Poised	ready, in a position
Deep fakes	faked computer generated videos or audio clips that are made to look and sound like someone
Era	period of time
Dipshit	very foolish
Creepy	strange and making you feel frightened
Figuring out	understanding
Distinguishing	recognise something as different from something else
Endorsing	supporting publicly
Deceive	causing them to believe that something false is the truth for their own advantage
Acquire	get
Blurry	not able to be seen clearly

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com