HOW FALSE INFORMATION SPREADS

Presenter: Hi, everyone. On today's Tech-times podcast we're lucky to have Sam Wogan, a well-known digital journalist, with us. So, Sam – what interesting techie-topic would you like to talk about today?
Journalist: Hi Brad. Today I'd like to talk about some of the reasons why we shouldn't automatically believe everything we read online, and how false information spreads so easily with the help of technology. One of the reasons for this is a phenomenon known as circular reporting.
Presenter: Circular reporting? What's that?
Journalist: Well, it's basically reports which are based on other reports, rather than on the primary evidence or source. To the reader, it looks like the information is coming from several different independent sources, which normally means it can be trusted. But, in actual fact, all the reports are based on each other. Imagine a piece of false information is published, for example on Wikipedia, and then is referenced in a newspaper article or other publication. Then, in turn, the original Wikipedia entry references or quotes the article as validation that the information is true. In a nutshell, it's the confirmation of false information by more than one publication.
Presenter: OK, let me see if I've understood this correctly. So, someone writes an article on Wikipedia which contains some false information ...
Journalist: That's right, false information which is not referenced or checked and in no way is obvious as being false.
Presenter: OK, and then this false information is copied from Wikipedia by a journalist and included in a newspaper article.
Journalist: Yes, or other type of article, as if it were true information.
Presenter: And then Wikipedia references the newspaper article, which verifies the information in the original Wikipedia article as being true.
Journalist: That's right! And sometimes it's not just one newspaper article that cites the false information. Several publications may include it and so it becomes very difficult to prove that the original information is false. Let me give you an example. A few years ago a 17-year-old American student was on holiday with his family in Brazil. He spotted what he believed to be an aardvark, but which was in fact a type of Brazilian raccoon called a coati. When the boy got home after his holiday, he went online and changed the Wikipedia entry by adding the name 'Brazilian aardvark' to the information on the article, as a sort of joke, and then he forgot about it and thought nothing more of it. However, what started to happen was that articles and blogs began to quote the information from Wikipedia and then those articles were re-reported as evidence in Wikipedia. Before long, everyone was talking about the 'Brazilian aardvark' as if it were factual information.
Presenter: So when information makes its way from a Wikipedia page into a published article, the article could be spreading false information without even realising it?

Journalist: Exactly! It makes you wonder how many hoaxes initiated by people in this way have ended up as truths in many people's minds just because people copy and paste vandalised Wikipedia pages. That's not to say that all information on Wikipedia is false by any means. There's a ton of really valid information there and it is constantly being updated – many people consider it to be the most up-to-date and unbiased encyclopaedia in the world. However, it is the open structure of Wikipedia, compared to a traditional encyclopaedia, which makes it a target to be tampered with.
Presenter: So we just have to be aware that there may be a certain amount of inaccuracies on Wikipedia?
Journalist: Yes, and it's also worth mentioning that circular reporting is not just restricted to harmless information like the 'Brazilian aardvark'.
Presenter: Isn't it?
Journalist: No. For example, some time ago, claims that certain vaccines could cause autism in children were published in a prestigious medical publication by a British surgeon. The problem was that the unsupported claims were picked up by the media and the news spread like wildfire. Soon enough the general public were understandably concerned about the risks and huge numbers of parents refused to vaccinate their children. Consequently, in recent years we have seen an increase in the number of children suffering childhood diseases such as measles. By the time the claims were proven unfounded, the damage was done and even to this day some people still believe that there is a link between vaccines and autism.
Presenter: It just goes to show how difficult it is sometimes for the truth to be heard.
Journalist: Absolutely.
Presenter: So, in practical terms, how can we be sure that what we're reading is true?
Journalist: Well, we can take certain steps such as checking the original source of the information and, if at all possible, checking that the original source is reliable and not just taken from either Wikipedia, Facebook or the media.
Presenter: Right, so we need to be a little more critical and not just believe everything we read online.
Journalist: That's right, although it's difficult because we want information quickly and immediately, so it's not always viable to spend time checking the sources of information, even though we should. And we should certainly try and reflect on the information and decide ourselves if we think it's true or not. If you feel unsure about the validity of certain information, then there's no harm in looking into it further to check how true it actually is.
Presenter: That's very true. We often take things at face value and don't really take the time to think critically about them.