Episode #3. Nearly 4 in 5 Internet users worry about fake news

Seventy-nine percent of internet users worry about distinguishing real news from fake news online, according to a BBC World Service poll released last Friday. The survey of more than 16,000 adults in 18 countries also found that a growing share of internet users opposes government regulation.

The poll comes at a time when reports of false news stories -- often in relation to political candidates or causes -- have grown. Worries about fake news were highest in Brazil, with 92 percent of respondents expressing concern; Indonesia, Nigeria, and Kenya closely followed. Germany was the only country surveyed where a slight majority (51 percent) said they were not worried about this issue.

While respondents in most countries opposed government regulation of the internet, 67 percent of users in China and 53 percent in Great Britain said they supported it.

Chris: I’m not surprised that a majority of people are worried about fake news. But -- 79 percent? That is a very serious problem!

Emily: I was surprised by the percentage too, Chris. This would have been impossible to imagine just four or five years ago. As someone who grew up reading a daily newspaper, it’s especially disturbing...

Chris: A few months ago, we talked about what Facebook was doing to stop fake news ads from spreading. Then, just last week, we found out that it had sold a bunch of ads to fake Russian accounts before the election last year! So I’m wondering... what has actually changed?

Emily: I did see that Facebook now blocks ads from sites that are known to spread fake news. I also read last month that it is flagging more articles that might be false and sending them to fact checkers.

Chris: What good does that do?

Emily: Apparently, it shows articles that have been verified by the fact checkers below the fake ones, so that readers have more information to help them decide what’s true.

Chris: But if people don’t know whether they can trust what they’re reading, why would they trust articles that Facebook says are true? Especially if...

Emily: Especially if what?

Chris: Especially if their leaders are calling them fake.

Emily: Well, I don’t think anyone can expect Facebook—or any other site--to solve that problem...

Chris: Hmm. You know what, Emily? Some of the money that Facebook, and Twitter, and Google make should go toward education. Wouldn’t you agree?

Emily: I do! The more educated people are the better they can distinguish the truth from a lie.