



National
Qualifications
2019

X824/76/11

**English
Reading for Understanding,
Analysis and Evaluation — Text**

WEDNESDAY, 8 MAY

INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES

Candidates should enter their surname, forename(s), date of birth, Scottish candidate number and the name and Level of the subject at the top of their first answer sheet.

Total marks — 30

Read the passages carefully and then attempt ALL questions, which are printed on a separate sheet.

The following two passages discuss news in the modern world.

Passage 1

Read the passage below and attempt questions 1 to 8.

In the first passage, Katharine Viner considers the impact that the internet has on what we believe to be true.

Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1440. For the next 500 years the main form of information was the printed page. This meant that knowledge was primarily delivered in a fixed format, one that encouraged readers to believe in stable and settled truths.

Now, 25 years after the first website went online, it is clear that we are living through a period of dizzying transition. We are caught in a series of confusing battles between opposing forces: between truth and falsehood, fact and rumour, kindness and cruelty; between the connected and the alienated; between the original vision of the web as an open platform and the gated enclosures of social media; between an informed public and a misguided mob.

What is common to these struggles — and what makes their resolution an urgent matter — is that they all involve the diminishing status of truth. This does not mean that there are no truths. It simply means that we cannot agree on what these truths are, and when there is no consensus about the truth and no way to achieve this consensus, chaos soon follows.

Increasingly, what counts as a fact is merely a view that someone feels to be true — and technology has made it very easy for these ‘facts’ to circulate with a speed and reach that was unimaginable in the Gutenberg era (or even a decade ago). A dubious story appears in a tabloid one morning, and by noon it has flown around the world in social media. This may seem like a small matter, but its consequences are enormous. To pick one example among many, during the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, rumours quickly spread on social media that the Louvre and the Pompidou Centre had been hit, and that the French president had suffered a stroke. Trusted news agencies found it difficult to correct such fake news.

Sometimes stories like these are spread out of panic, sometimes out of malice, and sometimes out of deliberate manipulation, in which a corporation or regime pays people to convey their message. Whatever the motive, falsehoods and facts now spread the same way in what is called an ‘information cascade’. As one expert describes it, ‘people forward on what others think, even if the information is false, misleading or incomplete, because they think they have learned something valuable’. This cycle repeats itself, and before you know it, the cascade has unstoppable momentum. You share a friend’s post on social media, perhaps to show support or agreement or that you’re ‘in the know’, and thus you increase the visibility of their post to others.

Social media organisations design news feeds to give us more of what they think we want. This means that the version of the world we encounter every day in our own personal stream has been invisibly crafted to reinforce our pre-existing beliefs. The term ‘filter bubble’, created by Eli Pariser in 2011, refers to personalised search functions which mean that we are less likely to be exposed to information that challenges us or broadens our worldview. We are also less likely to encounter facts that disprove false information that others have shared.

Eli Pariser believed that those running social media platforms should ‘prioritise balanced views and news that’s important, not just the stuff that’s most popular or most self-validating’. But in less than five years, thanks to the incredible power of a few social media platforms, the filter bubble has become more extreme. Asking technology companies to do something about this issue presumes that it is a problem that can be easily fixed — rather than one hardwired into the very idea of those social networks designed to give you what you and your friends want to see.

There's no denying that, in recent years, many news organisations have steered themselves away from public interest journalism and towards junk-food news, chasing page views in the hope of attracting clicks, advertising or profit. And, like junk food, you hate yourself when you've gorged on it. The most extreme version of this has been the creation of fake news farms, which attract traffic with false reports that are designed to look like real news and are therefore widely shared on social networks.

Of course, news media have got things wrong in the past. But what is new and significant is that today, rumours and lies are read just as widely as facts — and often more widely — because they are stranger than reality and more exciting to share. This approach, instead of strengthening social bonds or creating an informed population or reinforcing the idea of news as a democratic necessity, creates online 'gangs'. These gangs spread instant falsehoods fitting their views, reinforcing each other's beliefs, driving each other deeper into shared opinions rather than established facts.

It need not be like this. The truth is a struggle but the struggle is worth it. Media organisations must put the search for truth at the heart of everything, building an informed, active public that scrutinises the powerful — not an ill-informed, reactionary gang that attacks the vulnerable. Traditional news values must be embraced and celebrated: reporting, verifying, gathering together eyewitness statements. All in the cause of making a serious attempt to discover what really happened, and taking responsibility for creating the kind of world we want to live in.

Passage 2

Read the passage below and attempt question 9. While reading, you may wish to make notes on the main ideas and/or highlight key points in the passage.

In the second passage, Matthew Parris reflects on the impact of new technology on communication.

Among the smiles with which future generations will reflect on early 21st-century thinking, the broadest may be reserved for our alarm over the arrival of the internet. We're probably right about only one thing: for good and ill, mass, cheap, instant global communication will have a tremendous and growing impact on humankind. But what that impact will be, how society will respond to it, how it may change us and how it will finally bed down in our culture is impossible to predict. How we end up regulating the internet is at this stage equally impossible to anticipate.

By 'impossible' I don't mean problematical: I mean impossible. Pointless, hopeless, a waste of time. We're no more able to peer even a couple of decades into a future world's relationship with the internet than in 1440 Johannes Gutenberg could have guessed how fast and how completely his printing press would shape the world to come. Did he know where his invention would lead? Of course not. Any contemporary speculation on the future impact of the printing press would have been futile. As futile as our guesses, now, about where the internet will take us.

In the end, all we're talking about is human communication. Based on the history of communications so far, there are two important points to remember.

First is the need to question the supposedly ‘new situation’ that social media and internet communication presents us with. Ask yourself what genuinely new ethical or legal dilemma we face and what genuinely new principle is involved. I’ve yet to see either. So criminals and terrorists can communicate with greater ease using the internet? But all communication opens up opportunities for criminality. The easier the communication, the easier the conspiracy. The railways, the motor car, post and telegraphy, radio, the telephone, television, the mobile phone — each was greeted with the same anxieties, for each enlarged the scope not only for good but evil too.

Secondly, we should never forget that humans can evolve very fast to adapt to new circumstances. We are not looking at social media platforms in the way the next generation will. It’s possible they will learn to dismiss ‘trolling’ just as readers of the first newspapers learnt, after an initial shock, to dismiss the sensationalised reporting that soon appeared. I believe the immediate response of my generation — that such things must somehow be stopped by ‘regulation’ — is wrong: first because this is in practice impossible if we’re to maintain platforms on which people can express opinions. And second because protecting people from nastiness makes them more vulnerable: it impairs the production of the ultimate defence against abuse, which is learning to take no notice.

None of this is to deny the importance of law. We can prosecute those who incite illegal acts or racist behaviour; we can sue those who libel. But vulgar abuse? Bring it on. Let’s learn to treat it with contempt.

There’s a great truth to be learnt about an essentially open-access social media platform. Cyberspace is not like a big, democratic newspaper. It’s a chaos, an infinite tip, much of it rubbish, much of it wrong. There’s plenty that’s useful; but you must pick your way through oceans of nonsense, mountains of trivia and a good deal of poison. Unless this could be filtered, cleansed, pre-viewed and regulated — and it cannot — we make people more vulnerable, not less, by feeble attempts to render a dangerous space safer for them.

So bring on the fake news; bring on the slosh of sentiment; bring on the wildfires of anger and accusation. They are windows into the interior worlds of other human beings. Let us learn to see what lives there and make our own judgements. Let us learn to navigate, as we do in the spoken word, in the printed word and in our own lives. Let us learn to think for ourselves.

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