



Photograph by Lucas Passmore

## An Interview with Author Dr. Seema Yasmin

**Dr. Seema Yasmin is an Emmy Award-winning journalist who was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, medical doctor, professor, and poet. She attended medical school at Cambridge University. Currently she teaches storytelling at the Stanford University School of Medicine and is a regular contributor to CNN, *Self*, and *Scientific American*, among others. She is the author of *What the Fact?!* – a book about the importance of media literacy, fact-based reporting, and the ability to discern truth from lies.**

**Tell us a little bit about *What the Fact?!* and the story of how you came to write this timely and informative book focused on media literacy.**

*What the Fact?!* is a map for navigating the murky worlds of misinformation and disinformation and a how-to guide for protecting yourself against lies and myths. It includes evidence-backed ways to effectively debunk those annoying and sometimes dangerous myths and conspiracy theories that friends and family can fall for. The book came to be because of the glaring need for a fun and easy-to-read guide that empowers readers by showing them that while we're all vulnerable to believing falsehoods, we can all learn how to separate fact from fiction. In fact, false information doesn't have to go viral – it can stop with us.

*continued...*

## Dr. Seema Yasmin

**You study the spread of falsehoods about health and science and are considered an expert in misinformation and disinformation. Was there anything that surprised you during the research phase of writing *What the Fact?!***

Even though I've been deep in this world for over a decade, I still get shocked by some of the myths and hoaxes that spread! "Covid-19 vaccines give you magnetic superpowers" was one lie that stopped me in my tracks for a second because it was wild; another was the record number of cellphone towers that were set on fire in Europe during the pandemic because people believed the coronavirus was spread via 5G waves.

**You explain in the book how false information travels faster and farther than the truth. Why is that?**

False information – particularly in the case of disinformation – is often engineered to go viral. It's packaged in a way that exploits the vulnerabilities of the human brain. For example, it can make grandiose claims about "cures" or "100% effectiveness"; it's designed to come across as novel and trigger emotions, and it's often wrapped around a kernel of truth, which makes it difficult to separate the fact from the fiction.

**The problem of false information going viral seems overwhelming and impossible to get a handle on, and that makes some people doubtful of absolutely everything. Is skepticism a helpful approach?**

What's more useful is the critical-thinking approach described in the book as well as the system of updating your beliefs based on the best available evidence and assigning a strength (or level of credence to your belief) so that you don't make up your mind once and refuse to reassess your beliefs.



### What the Fact?!

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What is a fact? What are reliable sources? What is news? What is fake news? How can anyone make sense of it anymore? Well, we have to. As conspiracy theories and online hoaxes increasingly become a part of our national discourse and "truth" itself is being questioned, it has never been more vital to build the discernment necessary to tell fact from fiction, and media literacy has never been more vital.

In this accessibly written guide, Dr. Seema Yasmin, an award-winning journalist, scientist, medical professional, and professor, traces the spread of misinformation and disinformation through our fast-moving media landscape and teaches young readers the skills that will help them identify and counter poorly sourced clickbait and misleading headlines.

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