

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam. What's the matter, Neil? You sound upset.

Neil

Well, I am, Sam - I just spent an hour working on my computer when it suddenly froze. I lost everything and had to start all over again!

Sam

Agghh, that's so frustrating - like pop-up internet ads and buffering videos that never play!

Neil

Modern computers and the internet have revolutionised the way we live today, bringing us the world with a click of a button. But not everyone feels happy about these technological developments.

Sam

While potentially acting as a force for good and progress, the internet also provides a way of spreading hate and misinformation. And for some people, the World Wide Web remains a mysterious and confusing place.

Neil

In this programme, we'll hear about a new academic subject called Web Science. Web Science studies the technology behind the internet.

Sam

But from the human side, it's also interested in how people interact with each other online. So we'll be asking whether studying Web Science could make the internet better for humanity in the future.

Neil

But first it's time for our quiz question. I wonder what the pioneers of the internet would think about how it is used today. So the question is, who invented the World Wide Web? Was it:

- a) Bill Gates,
- b) Tim Berners-Lee, or
- c) Steve Jobs?

Sam

Well, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were the brains behind Microsoft and Apple Mac, so I'm going to say c) Tim Berners-Lee.

Neil

OK, Sam, we'll find out later. Now, because of coronavirus the annual Web Science conference was held online this year. Its theme was 'making the web human-centric'.

Sam

One of the conference's key speakers, and co-founder of the new discipline of Web Science, was Dame Wendy Hall. Here she is speaking to BBC World Service's *Digital Planet*:

Dame Wendy Hall

People think about the web as a technology but actually it's co-created by society. We put the content on, we interact with the technology, with the platforms, with the **social media networks** to create it. What we study is how that works as an **ecosystem**, this coming together of people and technology, and it's very **interdisciplinary**, very socio-technical, and of course these days a lot of it is powered by AI.

Neil

Web Science is not only interested in the technology side of the internet. As a subject it's very **interdisciplinary** - involving two or more academic subjects or areas of knowledge. Web Science combines digital technology with subjects ranging from psychology and robotics to economics and sociology.

Sam

Exchanges between humans and the internet can be seen in **social media networks** - websites, apps and computer programmes, like Facebook and Instagram, which allow people to use electronic devices to communicate and share information.

Neil

This view of technology sees the internet as an **ecosystem** – a complex pattern of relationships and mutual influences that exists between all living things and their environment.

Sam

One ongoing and topical example of websites helpfully interacting with humans is the Covid contact tracing app.

Neil

You might think the mobile phone app, which tracks movements and contact between people to combat coronavirus, would be a useful practical application of internet technology.

Sam

But as Carly Kind, Director of the Ada Lovelace Institute in Cambridge, explained to BBC World Service's *Digital Planet*, things are never that straightforward:

Carly Kind

Actually, there's a lot of more fundamental questions that haven't been answered yet such as: is Bluetooth even an adequate mechanism for **doing what it says on the tin**, which is detecting contact between two people? The **trials** so far show that it's not actually that great and so, do we know for sure that these apps work and they work in the way we want them to? Do we get the **public health** information that we need?

Neil

Apps like this are designed to support **public health** - services to improve the standard of health of a country's general population.

Sam

But Carly thinks the mechanisms used must be suitable and adequate – they must actually work or **do what it says on the tin** – an informal idiom meaning work exactly as it is intended to.

Neil

To find this out, **trials** - tests to discover how effective or suitable something is - are carried out over a period of time.

Sam

The kind of trials which were carried out during the invention of the internet in the first place, right, Neil?

Neil

Ah yes, the invention of the internet – or to be more accurate, the World Wide Web. In our quiz question I asked you who invented the World Wide Web? What did you say, Sam?

Sam

I said b) Tim Berners-Lee.

Neil

Well, you're a first class web scientist, Sam, because that's the correct answer!

Sam

Great! In this programme, we've been hearing about Web Science, a new **interdisciplinary** subject, combining several areas of study, which investigates the **ecosystem** of the internet – the complex pattern of interconnections between humans and their environment.

Neil

Social media networks – websites and apps, like Facebook, which let people use electronic devices to communicate on the internet – show how humans and technology can successfully interact.

Sam

A new Covid contact tracing app is currently undergoing **trials** – tests to see if it works effectively. This will discover if it **does what it says on the tin** – works as it's supposed to.

Neil

If successful, by alerting people to coronavirus risks the app will support **public health** – services aimed at improving the health of the general population.

Sam

And that's all from us for now.

Neil

And we hope you'll join us again soon for more topical English vocabulary here at 6 Minute English. Bye for now!

Sam

Bye bye!

VOCABULARY

interdisciplinary

involving two or more academic subjects or areas of knowledge

social media network

website, app or computer programmes, like Facebook and Instagram, allowing people to communicate and share information on the internet using electronic devices

ecosystem

complex pattern of relationships and mutual influences between living things and their environment

public health

system of providing services to improve the standard of health of a country's general population

does what it says on the tin

does exactly what it is intended to do (informal)

trials

tests carried out over a limited time period, to discover how effective or suitable something is