

# NEWS FOR YOU

by Bernard Beckett

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But Lucy's father had other ideas. "Breakfast will be at seven-thirty sharp," he announced at dinner the night before they went to level 4. "And I expect you to be at the table, showered and dressed. Routine. That's how we'll get through this." By the following morning, he'd drawn up charts and a daily timetable, with one hour of free screen time each day.

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"My dad's making us do yoga," Maia said.

"Yoga ... lucky," said Toby. "We have a family meeting each morning. You can only speak if you're holding the talking stick. My little brother never shuts up."

"Sad!" said Matthew. "We get to stay in bed till we want."



Lucy had never liked watching the news, and now it was especially bad. She didn't want to hear about lonely grandparents in rest homes and travellers stuck overseas. She didn't want to know the number of people getting sick. Or dying. What about the happy stories? Where were they?

"You should try Bigg News," Maia wrote. "It's nothing like the other sites. You'll like it."

The next day, right before the family quiz, Lucy logged on to Bigg News. Maia was right. She did like it. All the stories were so positive. Lucy read about the farmer who fell down a bank and was rescued by his dog and the little kid who gave all his money to a food bank. There were stories about the scientists working on a vaccine and countries that had flattened the curve. Bigg News was exactly what Lucy had been looking for.

The most amazing thing about the site was that it was run by Andrew Biggs, a boy who went to Lucy's school. Everyone said he was a genius. He wore bright coloured vests and shorts every day, even in winter. One time, he brought his pet rabbit to school on a leash, walking it round the playground like a tiny dog. Andrew seemed very serious. Lucy was surprised he'd designed such a happy website, but she was glad he had. She promised herself she would find him and thank him when life returned to normal.

But when school finally did go back, Lucy forgot all about Andrew Biggs. There were so many things to catch up on. Then, one lunchtime, she was talking to her friends when she noticed someone at the far end of the courts, trying to ride a unicycle.

"Look! There's Andrew Biggs," Toby said. "Man, I loved his news site during lockdown."



"I know, right," said Calvin. "All those profiles of mountain bikers were awesome." Calvin was obsessed with biking. He especially loved footage of people flipping off jumps while they clung to their handlebars like frogs and was always sharing links with his friends.

"Mountain bikers?" said Toby. "I didn't see any of them. I was too busy reading about the people who think Covid comes from cellphone towers! And what about that person in Queenstown who saw a UFO?"

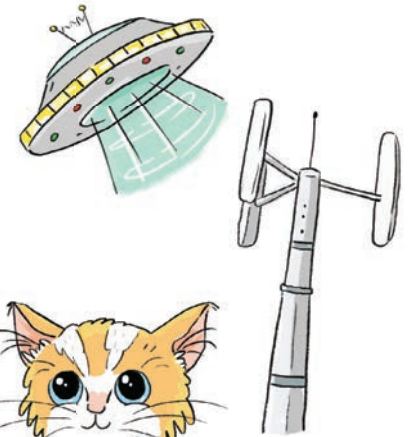
"What are you on about?" said Maia. "I just saw heaps of cute animal photos – all those stories about the SPCA and people who had adopted animals. That's why I told you about it, Lucy."

Lucy was confused. "Well, there were *some* animals in the news," she conceded, thinking about the story of the dog. "But it was mostly just positive stories."

"News?" Matthew screwed up his nose. "Boring!" He was into baking. "What about all those awesome recipes? I made brownies and cheesecake and Russian fudge. My dad loved it."

"OK, so this makes no sense," said Lucy. "How come we were on the same site but seeing different stuff? We're talking about Bigg News, right?"

They all nodded. Maia even pulled out her phone and found a photo of a kitten. It was all very odd. And no one could think of a plausible explanation.



"Ask Andrew," Toby suggested.

So Lucy shouted Andrew's name and waved her arms above her head like she was signalling a plane.

Andrew pedalled slowly and carefully across the court. He stopped in front of them. "What?" he said.

"You make that news website, right?" said Lucy.

Andrew nodded. He wasn't a big talker.

"So, we were looking at it during lockdown," she continued. "We all liked it, but for different reasons. No one can agree ..."

Andrew nodded again. He knew where this was heading. "Algorithms."

"Algorithms?" said Lucy. It was one of those words ... like mercenary or banal. She *thought* she knew what it meant.

"Yep. You got it," said Andrew.

Lucy looked at Maia, who shrugged. Toby shrugged, too. None of them knew what he was talking about.

"What are they again?" Lucy asked.

Andrew Biggs slid off his unicycle and swung it over his shoulder. He looked at them and smiled.

"Thank you for asking," he said. "Putting it simply, an algorithm is a computer program that recognises and responds to patterns. It's how machines solve problems. The best algorithms allow a machine to learn as it goes. That's why computers can beat people at chess."

Lucy nodded. This was sounding familiar, though she only half understood. What did news have to do with winning chess? "So how do algorithms work on your site?" she asked.

Andrew switched his unicycle to his other shoulder. "Whenever you visit my site, the algorithm looks at all the things you've been doing on your computer like the songs you've been listening to, the movies you've been watching ... even who you've been talking to. Then it finds people with similar tastes and looks at the stuff they click on and that's what the algorithm will offer you. It's found a reliable pattern, which solves the problem of what you want. If you like to watch horror movies, for example, the computer won't match you with an article about a dog that thinks a sheep is its mother."

It seemed that Andrew was a big talker after all.

"That sounds cute," Maia said. Calvin put his finger in his mouth and made a vomiting noise.



But Andrew wasn't finished. "The more people who use my site and make choices, the better the algorithm gets at guessing what they want. That's what I mean about the computer learning as it goes. All the big companies use algorithms now. They want to sell you things."

"Wow," said Lucy. "That's kind of clever."

Andrew looked unimpressed. It made Lucy think she'd missed something.

"OK," he said. "I'll get back to my unicycle, then. Bye."

"Wait a minute," Lucy said, but Andrew was pedalling away.

"Sorry," he called back. "Once I get this thing going, it's hard to stop."

Lucy ran after Andrew. She watched him practise figures of eight while they talked. "You don't think algorithms are clever, do you?" she asked.

"Oh, I do," Andrew said over his shoulder. "I also think they're a terrible idea." He stopped and slipped off his seat. "Guess why?" he asked.

Lucy felt a little kick of panic. It was the same way she felt when Ms Potts asked her a question that she couldn't answer. She breathed in and let the air out slowly. She thought about loyal dogs and mountain bikers and Russian fudge. Then she thought about vaccines and the curve – and the answer came to her straight away.

"If we only look at the stuff we *want* to look at," Lucy said, "we'll miss out on other stuff, and we won't know what it was. It might have been important. How will we know if we've missed something that really matters?"

Andrew smiled. "Exactly," he said.



Illustrations by  
Giselle Clarkson

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Published 2020 by the Ministry of Education,  
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
[www.education.govt.nz](http://www.education.govt.nz)

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77663 747 8 (online)  
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū  
Editor: Susan Paris  
Designers: Jodi Wicksteed and Liz Tui Morris  
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop  
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione

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### SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 NOVEMBER 2020

<b>Curriculum learning areas</b>	English Technology
<b>Reading year level</b>	Year 5
<b>Keywords</b>	algorithm, change, Covid-19, current events, digital technologies, family, lockdown, news, privacy, social media, technology