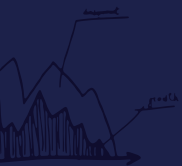


News Literacy:

Discerning Credible Information

WHO TO TRUST IN A DIGITAL AGE





We are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed. Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge?

—NEIL POSTMAN

Amusing Ourselves to Death

With the continuing prevalence of misinformation, artificial intelligence-generated material, “fake news,” conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns, where can we turn for essential, trustworthy information?

Being able to discern reliable information in this day and age has become a critical component of a prudent person’s influence—especially for those whose faith is grounded on the principles of light and truth. No one has the time or energy to become an expert in everything, so we need reliable sources to equip us to be effective leaders and communicators in our field.

A recent MIT study found false news online reaches people about six times faster than the truth, and falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than the truth.

When we passively absorb content, the powerful risk of misinformation and disinformation rises. Passive content consumption allows others to hijack our thoughtfulness, and if we share that information further, we become part of the problem.

Therefore, it is critical that we have a heightened awareness of our information diet. We all need a disciplined filter for wisely determining where we get our news and information, as well as how we assess the credibility of what that source is presenting.

Before we can debate the merit of an idea or information, we need to determine the credibility of the information at hand. So whatever content or source is in front of you, consider asking yourself these six questions to better evaluate whether they are thoughtful and reliable.



True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous and conflicting information.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

6 Questions to Ask When Evaluating Content + Sources

1. WHO IS PRESENTING THE INFORMATION?

“The media” as one, homogenous entity does not exist. It is a diverse industry filled with outlets and individuals who have vastly different standards and viewpoints, focused on every possible niche, affiliation and sect. In addition to traditional reporters, photographers and editors, there are podcasters, pundits, activists and vocal citizens flooding social media channels with advertising, sponsored content, business and political agendas, targeted algorithms, disinformation and firebrands.

When discerning a source, ask:

- What is their credibility and authority on this subject?
- What is their professional background, education or qualification to speak on this issue?
- Are they a trustworthy source who has proven themselves to prioritize accuracy over sensationalism?

2. WHY ARE THEY SHARING IT AND WHAT IS THEIR PERSPECTIVE?

Not everyone is intentionally presenting biased information, but everyone does have a unique perspective on the world derived from their own context and experiences. A source’s conflict of interest or agenda may not necessarily mean they are wrong, but it should at least be considered.

When discerning the motive, ask:

- What is their reason for presenting the information?
- What is their point of view?
- How do their affiliations influence the presentation of the information?
- How are they sharing information (tone, context, hyperbole, presumption, logic, ad hominem)? Are they seeking to inform or inflame?

3. DID THE SOURCE BACK UP THE CLAIM WITH EVIDENCE?

In any educational institution, a research paper would never receive a passing grade without properly citing sources for evidence and credibility. But in today's world, far too many videos, articles posts, and podcasts are allowed to circulate and provoke with a scant degree (if any) of references to reputable sources.

When discerning a claim, ask:

- Is the information presented from one viewpoint or balanced with several perspectives?
- Is it a fact-based claim or an opinion-based claim?
- If there is evidence to support the claim, what is the origin of that evidence and is it from a reliable source?
- Is it hard evidence or a spurious correlation—the implied relationship between events—that are just coincidentally linked? (Remember: Correlation is not causation.)

4. HOW DID THE SOURCE GATHER THE INFORMATION?

It's difficult to conduct thorough research and follow an editorial process, which is likely why far too many people cut corners in this area or simply ignore it. If an outlet has established journalistic protocols, editors, researchers and fact checkers, that does not guarantee the information will be unbiased and fully credible. However, that system of checks and balances does help minimize inaccuracies and weed out sources without authority on a subject.

When discerning the methodology, ask:

- What is the process used to produce the information (research, sources, data, editorial standards)?
- What are the systems in place to verify details and catch mistakes (fact-checking, editorial process)?
- When mistakes happen and something is revealed to be inaccurate, how do they handle corrections?

5. WHAT DO OTHER SOURCES SAY ABOUT THE SOURCE AND ITS CLAIMS?

Lateral reading—comparing the source or its assertions with other sources—is a critical component of accreditation and validation. A savvy consumer of information not only has a diverse diet of sources to foster a broader perspective but also a process to flag assertions that appear odd or questionable. Looking for an array of third-party verifications can expose repeat errors or concerns that a source would likely not divulge about themselves.

When discerning the reputation, ask:

- What do other reputable sources say about the source (credibility, endorsements, reviews)?
- Are other reputable outlets and influencers complementary or critical of the source's content, contextualization or process of reporting?

6. DOES IT AFFIRM MY EXISTING VIEWS?

We need to be acutely aware of when we are feeding our own biases—we may miss opportunities for understanding and illumination, or even blindly accept falsehoods because they are coming from our own “tribe.”

We all have positions and opinions based on our worldview, experiences, community and convictions. But at times, we can fail to see valid information simply because it is in friction with our current posture. Each of us is susceptible to only consuming content that affirms our own beliefs and biases, but that can create unhealthy echo chambers that may hinder us from legitimate facts, findings and reports.

When discerning our own susceptibility, ask:

- Am I interpreting new evidence through the lens of existing beliefs?
- Am I self-aware enough to recognize when my decisions are based on the positive or negative tone with which information is presented (framing effect)?
- Am I drawing incorrect conclusions due to my desire to make sense of random details and events (narrative fallacy)?



The constitution of knowledge requires high degrees of both toleration and discipline, neither of which is easy to come by.

—JONATHAN RAUCH

Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution

**DISCERNMENT IS A PRICELESS PART OF
OUR HUMAN EXPERIENCE,**

but it is also a muscle that must be exercised and developed through intention, repetition and persistence. Only by developing a strong discipline and thoughtful process for evaluating information can we hope to gain a reasoned understanding of content that is being presented and propagated.

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