See this page in the course material.

Learning Outcomes

- Discuss the importance of evaluating sources and understanding biases

Perhaps never before in mainstream discussion has the importance of evaluating sources been more important. The effect of “fake news,” and contested information is now a common feature of contemporary life. When evaluating sources, for which a variety of good techniques and rules of thumb exist, we argue that doing so is an essential part of critical thinking, which is the bedrock for good communication and report writing in any field.

The Human Fund

To illustrate the importance of evaluating sources, consider our case study with Martha of The Human Fund. Recall that she read a variety of secondary source materials after developing her research question. In addition to ensuring her sources were scoped properly—that they addressed elements of her research question—she would need to evaluate their authorship, determine how recent and reliable the information is, and understand any bias.

Evaluating Websites

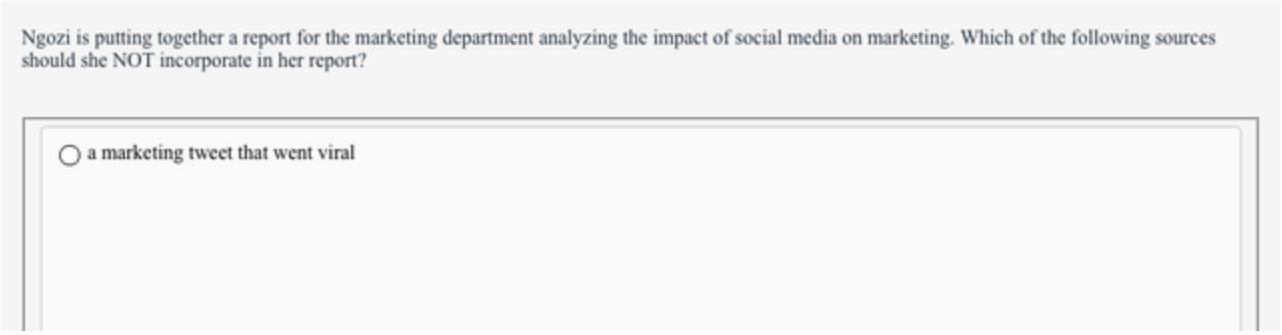
As our world becomes more and more connected by technology, our ability to evaluate and use information has become more difficult, but not impossible. It is essential to understand how these technologies work and how people use them.

Websites, broadly speaking, are perhaps the most difficult sources to evaluate; however, the following tips can act as basic guidelines:

- Consider the URL: generally speaking, .com, .org, .ac.uk, .edu and other more common domains are a bit more likely to have reliable and good content.
- What type of website is it? If it is a blog, social media site, or other tool for personal expression, proceed with caution. Much of the “fake news” problem is driven by sharing questionable material on social media.
- What is the main purpose or claim of the website? Be careful with websites interested in selling downloadable information sources, such as “How to Conduct Research” or “Make Money in Real Estate.” The content may be accurate and useful; however, the sheer abundance of poor sources means you should only use these types of data/sources with

caution.

Practice Question



See this interactive in the course material.

Learn More

While we've boiled the evaluation of websites down to a few key tips, it is actually a complex topic that could fill books. For more information, check out Mike Caulfield's Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers.

This book is (as stated in its own introduction) "an unabashedly practical guide for the student fact-checker. It supplements generic information literacy with the specific web-based techniques that can get you closer to the truth on the web more quickly."[1]

Understanding Bias in Your Sources

A word on bias: some consider bias to be a problem. However, we might argue here that bias is a normal part of life and human interaction. We are all biased by our upbringing, our experiences, and our perspectives. While any attempt to be objective in your analysis is a good thing, it can be just as useful to acknowledge your biases in your research and arm the reader or consumer of your material accordingly. In a way, this is a form of respect to your readership; you acknowledge their critical thinking role in consuming your material and also acknowledge that ruling out all bias—no matter how professional or scientific one's research approach might be—is ultimately impossible.

The following video from Chris Flipp illustrates one way to acknowledge and represent bias. It uses a term called Bracketing, that comes from a qualitative research method/idea known as Phenomenology. Bracketing is the act of reviewing and gaining awareness around your preconceived notions of a given topic before pursuing further study. This awareness should help your evaluation of sources and keep you mentally engaged in the review of your own sentiment towards your data.



Video Link

Practice Question



See this interactive in the course material.

The following video from Practical Psychology illustrates various biases. Note how these biases could affect your thinking, and consider ways you might apply this awareness to evaluating

sources:



Video Link

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1. Caulfield, Mike. "Why This Book?" *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers*. Web. 30 June 2018. ↵

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