16.

A LIBRARIAN TEACHES EVALUATING INFORMATION

Holly Reiter

What You Will Learn in this Chapter

- How to distinguish between different types of web sources
- Strategies for fact-checking popular information sources found on the web
- Ways to evaluate information for bias, scope, and relevancy

Key Terms

- Popular information sources
- Mis/disinformation
- Confirmation bias

Popular information sources

The ways that information is packaged and shared online is constantly evolving. Social media as we understand it today (like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat) did not exist 20 years ago. Today, we are bombarded with information in so many formats that it can quickly become overwhelming and impossible to keep up with. As you are reading this chapter, there may be new forms of information being developed and shared that didn't exist yet when we were writing it. Much (though not all) of what you encounter on the web daily are what we call *popular information sources,* i.e., information written for a general, popular audience. They are intended to be easily accessed and understood by anyone who might happen across them. While the web is made up of websites term "websites" is too broad for what we want you to think about when you evaluate information. Information can be found on government sites, organizational sites, blogs, social media, apps, news organizations, retailers, and many more. When you are online, it is important to pay attention to *what kind* of website you are visiting, especially when fact-checking, as that can tell you a lot about the intention, expertise, and credibility of the information being presented. In the past, when information had to be accessed in print forms (like a physical copy of newspaper, or a pamphlet from a charity organization), it was easier to tell what type of source you were looking at. On the web, we have lost a lot of the visual clues that help us identify information source types. That is why when fact-checking and evaluating information, it is important to look at more than just the package it comes in (and yes, that includes looking beyond .com, .org, and .gov).

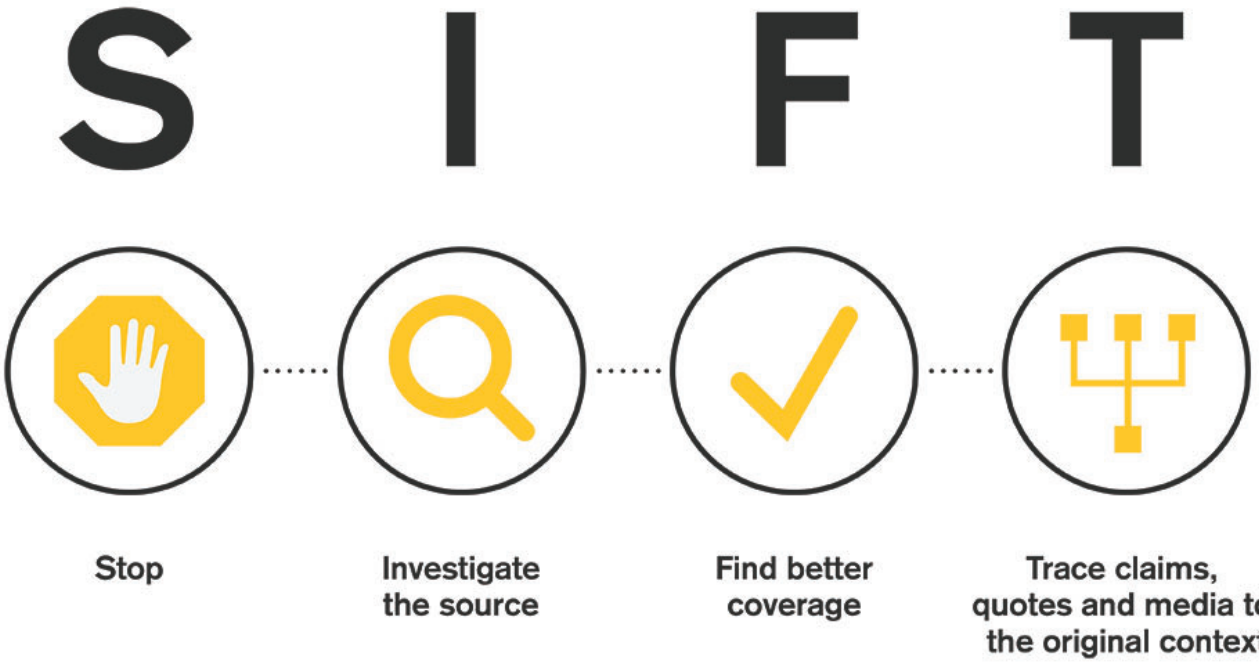
Fact-checking information

In recent years, the topic of "fake news" has been widely talked about. The term "fake news" is used in many different contexts, and it's meaning often shifts depending on who is using it. It is not a concept that can be easily defined. Instead of calling something "fake news," we should look at terms that more specifically define what kind of information we're looking at, and how or why it is misleading.

The most common types of false or inaccurate information we see on the web falls under one of two headings: *misinformation* or *disinformation*. Misinformation is used to describe information that is unintentionally false, such as a mistaken statistic or if someone takes a satirical story seriously. While the information may be inaccurate, the person creating or sharing that information was not intentionally trying to mislead people. Disinformation, on the other hand, is false information that was intended to mislead, manipulate, or lie. Both terms can refer to information that is completely made up, or information that is edited or changed, such as manipulated photos or videos.

When confronted with potentially false or misleading information, we want to develop habits and skills to evaluate what we're seeing and determine if we can trust it or not. To do that, we're going to go over a method of fact-checking called SIFT.

SIFT is a series of moves developed by Mike Caulfield to critically examine information on the web for accuracy and reliability. The letters stand for Stop; Investigate the source; Find trusted coverage; and Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original source.



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We will go through each of these moves in detail, and share tools and tricks you can use in your fact-checking process. Before we do that, however, we want to make it clear that this is not a checklist approach like you may have encountered before. Information is a lot more complicated than that. You won't always go through each move in the same order every time, and you may circle around and repeat moves in your fact-checking process.

Move 1: Stop

Much of the mis/disinformation you encounter online is designed to play into your emotions: people want you to get angry, sad, or happy, because that means you're more likely to interact with that information in some way, such as commenting or responding on a post, or by sharing the story online or talking about it with friends and family. That's why the first move is to stop. When you encounter new information online, stop and pay attention to several things:

- What kind of emotional you are having, if any
- Where this information is being shared, and by whom
- The context around the information, such as what form the information takes (i.e., a tweet, a news story, a blog post), if images or videos are also present, and if people are already interacting with it and how
- What kind of bias you are bringing to the information

Stopping in this way lets you do several things. First, it allows you to resist the temptation to immediately share or repeat something based on an immediate emotional response. Second, it gives you a chance to consider the source of the information: is it someone you trust to share good information, or is it on a website you've never been to? Third, it encourages you to pay attention to the context in addition to the information itself. For example, if it is a Twitter post, you know that it is going to have to meet their character limit–which means that by nature it has to be short and succinct, and may not contain all the relevant information. You might also notice if it has been shared a lot and by whom, or if people have commented on it and what they have to say. Finally, you take the time to consider your own biases: do you want to accept or reject that information because of your own preexisting beliefs? Or because it confirms or differs from your own opinion?

All of these things force you to slow down and not accept what you see at face value. It also gives you a chance to make note of things that are worth investigating further as you progress with your fact-checking.

Move 2: Investigate the source

The next step you might take is to investigate the source. From the previous move, you should have stopped and paid attention to where the information was posted or share, and who was doing it. It's possible you already know something about the source, such as if it is a trusted website or a writer known for sharing hyper-partisan content. If that's the case, you can use your previous knowledge and experience to determine if and how you should use the information. On the web, though, it is common to end up an unfamiliar or new website. In this case, you will want to dig in to learn more about that website, news organization, or person, etc.

One great way to do this is to use Wikipedia to learn more about the source. To do this, you simply type the name of the person, website, or organization into Google or another search engine, and add the term "wikipedia" to the end of your search. For example, you might type "Vox wikipedia" or "Washington Post wikipedia" (without the quotation marks).

You can then use the Wikipedia page to look for details about the source. If it is a person, look for things like education, employment, publications, and if they're affiliated with groups, movements, or organizations. If it is a website, news site, or other type of organization, look for things like how they are funded, if there is a history of controversy or questionable practices, and if they are known to have a bias.

Finding out more information about *where* or *who* information is coming from enables you to make a more informed choice about what do to: whether that means to trust that information, try to find information somewhere else, or keep digging. Remember, too, that just because information has a perceivable bias does not automatically make it *bad*. Knowing what that bias is simply helps you determine how to interpret that information, and if it is appropriate for your needs.

Move 3: Find trusted coverage

When you want to determine if information you have found online is trustworthy, one of the best steps you can take is to verify that information in multiple sources–better yet if those sources are independent of each other (meaning they are not just citing the same source). You will want to see if you can find multiple places that report the same thing, and be sure to check places you are familiar with and know are trustworthy, like majors news organizations such as NPR, New York Times, or CNN. Look for a consensus across multiple sources, a history of the issue or claim, and any additional context that will help you better understand the information.

Many people and organizations today are tracking mis/disinformation, so you can also check fact-checking websites like Snopes, Politifact, and FactCheck.org to see if someone else has already done the work of investigating the information.

Move 4: Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original source

With the ease of creating and spreading information online, a lot of what we see is taken out of context: a photo pulled from a Google image search without knowing the details of where it was taken or uploaded, a clip from an interview missing important details, or a image of a social media post that never actually existed are all examples of ways that different kind of media and quotes can be used to show false evidence and lend credibility to mis/disinformation stories. A lot of the tools you already use on a daily basis can be used to trace media. For example, you can paste a link for a photo into a reverse Google Image search or upload a photo to TinEye to look for the same or similar photos. This is a great way to find where an image originated or where it has been used. To look for videos, use apps like Youtube. And of course, you can look for original social media posts on the sites where they came from, but it is always possible that posts have been deleted. To look for older versions of websites, you can use the Wayback Machine, a website that archives pages on the web.

Bias, scope, and relevancy

Bias

In the previous section, we mentioned the word "bias" multiple times. The term bias, like "fake news" is used a lot, and people don't always mean the same thing when they talk about bias. In this case, we want you to think of bias as the experiences, beliefs, and purpose of a creator or source that could influence what they write, create, or share. *Everyone* has bias, and bias on it's own is not inherently a bad thing. It is when that bias is used *against* other people or ideas that it becomes a problem. When our own biases lead us to automatically believe information that supports our pre-existing beliefs, or to reject information that contradicts our beliefs, that is what is called *confirmation bias*. This is why the first move in our fact-checking, listed above, is to stop and pay attention to the biases of people who wrote or shared the information, and to our own biases. Just because a source (or you!) have a bias does not automatically make it bad. Consider, for example, the fact that Barilla, a company that makes pasta, funded research that news organizations claimed proved that eating more pasta could help you lose weight. It is quite possible that the science behind the research is sound, but you would still want to know if this potential bias existed.

Scope

Another key thing to examine when evaluating any information source is the scope. The scope of a source refers to what kind of and how much information it is trying to impart. This is influenced most heavily by the format a source takes. Consider how much longer books are than news articles. A book's scope is much broader–it can cover a lot more detail than a news article, which is trying to be succinct and convey the most important information. Now think about the difference between a news article and a tweet. Social

media platforms in general are not designed for a lot of detail, so even regardless of a user's intention, they are going to be limited in what they are able to convey in that format.

Relevancy

One final aspect to examine when evaluating information is the relevancy. If an information source has passed all the moves from your fact-checking, some final questions to ask yourself are:

- What perspective is being presented?
- What does this information add to your knowledge and understanding of the topic?
- How can you use it to demonstrate or prove your points?

Discussion Questions

- Locate a web source that is relevant to your writing topic, or find a social media post that makes some kind of claim or assertion. Evaluate it using the SIFT steps. Describe your process of completing each step. When you have completed your evaluation, reflect on the entire process: which parts were easy or challenging? What is your final assessment of the source you found?
- What kind of "information bias" do you have? Are you more likely to access, consume, or believe content made available through certain websites or organizations? Do your preferences change depending what information you need or what you need to use it for? How so? Do you feel that your preferences are justified, or do you think you should seek out other sources of information? Explain your reasoning.
- How do you feel about using information that you find through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media? How could you determine the authority of an author who posts something online through social media?

About the Author

Holly Reiter
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
https://experts.okstate.edu/holly.reiter

Holly Reiter is an associate professor and the Director for Teaching and Learning in the university libraries at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include critical information literacy, privacy literacy, and intersectional feminism in fan studies. She is the co-author of *Information Now! A Graphic Guide to Web Literacy and Student Research* (2021, University of Chicago Press) and

Austentatious: The Evolving World of Jane Austen Fans (2019, University of Iowa Press), as well as numerous peer-reviewed articles and chapters.