



Faculty of Engineering
and Applied Science

EVALUATING THE CREDIBILITY OF ONLINE INFORMATION

Credibility – the quality of being trusted and believable

Anyone can publish material on the internet, so it is essential that you think critically about the sources of information you consult to be sure you are relying on a trusted resource. In this module, you will learn how to identify credible sources of online information.

When visiting a site with the intent of using the information to inform and guide your understanding of a subject, the answers to the following questions will help you judge site credibility. Ask yourself:

1. Has the author of the material been identified?

2. What connection does the author have with the subject matter?

3. Is there evidence that other sources of information have been consulted?

4. Is the website current?

5. Is there evidence of bias?

Suggestions for interpreting the answers to these questions are discussed below. After reading, it should become easier for you to determine whether the information contained on a site you have visited is accurate and trustworthy.

1. Has the author of the material been identified?

- Is the name evident and are his/her credentials provided?
- Is the organization/institution that the author is associated with identified and recognizable?
- Is there contact information provided, i.e. email, phone, address?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, this is a red flag as to whether you should place value on the credibility of the information. Any person or institution that does not identify themselves with current contact information does not constitute a reliable source of information.

2. What connection does the author have with the subject matter?

- Is the author an expert on the subject?
- Has he/she published other material on the subject?
- Has the author been referred to by others or by another respected website or source?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, this offers evidence that information contained on the site is likely trustworthy.

3. Is there evidence that other sources of information have been consulted?

- Does the content include references to other related material?
- Are other sources of information acknowledged through the use of external links?
- Is there a reference list provided?

Evidence that the author has relied upon the work of others through citations and external links adds to the site's credibility.

4. Is the website current?

- Has it been recently updated?
- Are there broken links on the page?

Depending on the nature of the subject matter, the date that the information was last updated can say a lot about whether its contents are reliable. For example, for subject matter that is driven by innovation and technology, information that is mere days or months old may be considered outdated. If there are indications that the site is not regularly maintained, you should question the credibility of the information. If a more up to date site dealing with the same subject matter is available, it may represent a more reliable source of information.

5. Is the information presented objectively? Is there evidence of bias?

- Does the site contain advertising? Is this advertising related to the content? If so, you need to consider the motive or intent behind the material.
- Does the site only present one point of view? Do you think there is a reason why this particular point of view is being supported?

If you feel that the information presented is biased and only presents "one side of the story", then you should be wary of relying too heavily on the content to guide or inform your decisions.

One final thought....

The quality of information obtained from a search engine will vary greatly. You must seriously consider whether or not the subject area you are researching can be accurately examined using sources found through a search engine alone. Many times, there are more reliable sources of information available in books and journals that should form the basis of your understanding.

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