



The Facts about Fact Checking: Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #2

Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information

https://youtube.com/watch?v=EZsaA0w_0z0

https://nerdfighteria.info/v/EZsaA0w_0z0

Hi, I'm John Green, and welcome to Crash Course Navigating Digital Information.

So, the internet is a place where you can meet friends for life from halfway around the world, you can keep in touch with your loved ones, you can learn new languages, and pick up new skills. It's also a place where your mother can tag you in an extremely detailed Facebook post about the night of your birth that all your friends can see. And, it's a place where you can accidentally like your ex's new boyfriend's Instagram selfie from three years ago. God, it would be hard to be a young person on the Internet right now. I really admire your fortitude and resilience.

These days, a lot of us are asking whether the internet is a net positive or a net negative in our lives, but I tend to think that question might be what the Buddhist Zen masters called a question wrongly put. Instead, the better question might be, "How can I make the internet a more positive force in my life, and the lives of others?" And, part of the answer, I think, is that better information leads to better decision making, which leads to a better world.

So, for the sake of our collective souls, let's improve our information sorting.

[Intro]

So, as you may remember from our first episode, we've teamed up with MediaWise, with support from Google, to bring you this series. Our friends at the Stanford History Education Group (or SHEG) have done a lot of research on how internet users evaluate the information they find. They've tested middle school, high school, and college students, also history professors, and professional fact checkers, who were by far the best at judging the reliability of information.

Professional fact checker work with news organizations to verify facts. Sometimes that means they look over articles before they're published to ensure the content is accurate and up to date. They might call up a source, for example, to double check the spelling of their name. Once, there was a profile of me in *The New Yorker*, and the fact checker asked me questions for over an hour! And, in the end, the piece contained no errors. Although, it did have an illustration I found a tad unflattering. To be fair, the illustration also contained no errors; I just don't think I like my face.

Anyway, fact checkers also work for publications whose sole purpose is to verify claims made by public figures or on the internet, and explain why they are or are not true. *Snopes* and *PolitiFact* are some of the more well-known fact-checking sites.

So, in the Stanford study, college students, history professors, and fact-checkers were all asked to look at two websites. One website belonged to the American Academy of Pediatrics (or the AAP), the main professional organization of pediatricians. The other site belonged to the American College of Pediatricians (or the ACP).

Now, of course, they sound very similar, but the ACP is actually an organization that broke away from the AAP, because the AAP supports adoption by LGBTQ couples. The AAP is a large, well-respected professional organization. My kids' pediatrician is a member. The ACP, on the other hand, is a much smaller, more ideologically-motivated interest group.

But, looking at the two sites, many of the professors and students thought the ACP's site was more credible. Why? Because, they focused on the site itself. They spent time examining and reading the website, noticing that there were footnotes, and checking out its design elements.

One student said of ACP's website, "I can automatically see this source and trust is just because of how official it looks... even the font and the way the logo looks makes me think this is a mind hive that compiled this." The ACP's website may have looked official, but when compared to the AAP's website, its information was less reliable. AAP is the trustworthy group.

So, the professors and students focused on the websites themselves, and how they presented information to decide which was more credible. That meant they didn't do a great job evaluating the source itself.

The fact-checkers, on the other hand, did much better, because they consistently asked themselves three questions while evaluating the sites: 1. Who is behind this information? 2. What is the evidence for their claims? And, 3. What do other sources say about the organizations and its claims?

These questions are a really useful framework when you want to interpret the accuracy of information you've encountered. Let's begin with who's behind the information. First, we want to know who exactly is sharing it with you. A friend on facebook? A stranger? A news organization? Is it a promoted post that a company paid to insert into your feed? An anonymous social media account?

And then, we should ask ourselves why they are sharing it. Each of those sharers mentioned could have very different reasons for presenting information in a particular way. I am, for instance, incentivized by my career to say that I think teenagers should read contemporary fiction, specifically contemporary fiction written by me, and I am more likely to share stories of people who benefited from ready contemporary fiction.

And, even your personal friends have motivations for sharing what they do online. They may want to signal what kind of person they are or wish to be seen as, or they may want to win over others to their worldview, or they may be trying to get someone's attention with a sub-tweet.

A journalist might be sharing information because they think it's important for their readers to know. But, of course, that decision is based on their own personal experiences. An advocate for a particular cause might be sharing information to persuade others to join that cause.

Once you've established who is sharing information with you and thought about why they might be doing so, you can get to the heart of the matter: the claim itself. Take a moment to identify what, if any, claims are actually being made. It could be a factual claim or an opinion statement. "Reading is a useful skill" is a factual claim. "Reading *The Fault in Our Stars* will make your life better, clear your skin, and improve your wardrobe" is an opinion statement. And, a true one.

Next, you'll search for two things: whether they've backed up that claim with evidence and whether that evidence is from a reliable source. Evidence could come in the form of a link to the article or study they're referencing. It could be a video or photo illustrating what they've described. It could even be the name of someone who made the claim in the first place.

The next step is to look at the source of this evidence. Is it a reputable source, like a trusted news organization or an expert in the field? Or, is it from some random blog you've never heard of? Does it back up its claims with other sources or explain how its information was gathered? If you've never heard of the source of this information, you can use a search engine to discover what others say about it.



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The sheer existence of evidence is not enough to verify a claim. The absence of evidence, on the other hand, is reason to be skeptical of its veracity until you can verify it.

And, that brings us to the final and really vital step: what do others say about this claim. Whenever you're checking on the truth, you can and should check multiple sources to see what other information is out there. Check a search engine or a website known to be an authority on the topic to see what others have published about it. And, if a trustworthy source backs it up, great. If you can't find evidence for that claim, or you find evidence to the contrary, then you can be fairly certain it's not true.

So, these three questions - who's behind it, what's the evidence, and what do others say - really kind of put the information through the ring. Let's try it out in the thought bubble.

Here's a tweet from Steve S, @steelseller002: "Each American uses 25 plastic straws daily. We should use metal ones!!!"

Alright, let's begin by asking who's behind this information and what motivated them to post it. His profile says his name is Steve S. His handle is @steelseller02. So, you search "Steve S., steel seller." It turns out, @steelseller002 sells steel. Perhaps he loves the environment and wants to help reduce waste. He also might just want to sell more steel.

So, now you look at the evidence of this information. He didn't give us any. Even if he had provided a source, that wouldn't guarantee this is trustworthy; claims should be backed up by evidence, and not all evidence is created equal. But the absence of it is suspicious.

Finally, you want to look into what other sources have to say about this claim. As we've established, some sources are more credible than others, but all sources have their limits. So, it's important to steel multiple trustworthy sources when fact-checking.

You do a simple internet search: "Number of straws used by Americans per day." *The New York Times* cites two research firms that say America as a whole uses between 170 and 390 million straws per day. But, search results from *Time Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Seattle Times* cite another statistic: 500 million per day. Some publications, though, say that statistic was compiled by a 9-year-old who polled straw manufacturers.

Regardless, that estimate is still fewer than two straws per American per day. So, we have no consensus, but, from our research, it seems somewhere between 170 and 500 million straws per day is more accurate. Far fewer than Steve's claim. Steve.

Thank you thought bubble. I just.. we were just talking about the name Steve and whether anybody is named Steve, and I asked Zulaiha if she knew anybody names Steve, and she said, "I don't know anybody young names Steve. Just one guy in his late 20s." Oh god. Oh, god, father time has come for me. What were we talking about, Stan?

Right, checking with multiple sources made us pretty skeptical of Steve's claim. Typical for an old guy in his late 20s. Now, that doesn't mean plastic straws should be widely distributed, or that they don't have negative impacts, or that you can trust @plasticseller002 on Twitter. But, regardless of how you feel about straws, we need to have these discussion with real data and real cost-benefit analyses. Better information makes for better decisions. You're going to hear me say that a few times.

Now, I know that this seems like an absurd amount of work to check the veracity of one tweet out of gajillions of tweets. But, there is no

simple, magical way to have an information feed that is always reliable. And, so, when you encounter information that comes from sources you don't already trust, you have to be suspicious of it. And, even when it comes from sources you do already trust, you have to be a little suspicious of it.

Interrogating the information we come across online is just so important. You cannot believe everything you read, but that doesn't mean you should distrust everything you read, either. This is actually its own problem. We've become so skeptical of widely believed information, that we'll believe any evidence that counters that information, regardless of whether it is accurate.

There's a very fine line between being skeptical, or not easily convinced, a being cynical, or generally distrustful of everyone else's motives. A healthy dose of skepticism improves our critical thinking and judgement, but cynicism clouds our judgement with negativity and suspicion. It's really difficult for any of us on a minute-by-minute basis to carefully vet the contents of every tweet or reddit post we see while scrolling and swiping. But, if we can carefully interrogate some sources, we can find some that we regularly trust, which makes it easier to navigate the internet over time.

Whenever your inner skeptic speaks up, your fact-checking can begin by checking in with your trusted sources. But, of course, the problem with this is that your inner skeptic may speak up mostly when you see information that seems like it must be wrong to you, because it does not align with your pre-existing worldview.

Here's an example from my own life. I don't want to alienate anyone here, so I'll use, like, hypothetical examples. Let's say there's some horrible football club named United Manchester FC. Watching one of their games recently, I shared a tweet about how United Manchester FC are awarded more penalty kicks than any other team, and how it is blatantly unfair. And, everyone agreed with me, because almost everyone in my feed also reviled United Manchester FC. It was only much later that I learned the football team I support has actually been awarded more penalties over the past 25 than United Manchester has.

The misinformation that I received and shared did not trip up my inner skeptic or anyone else's in my feed, because it seemed like the kind of thing that would be true.

So, we shouldn't just wait for our inner skeptic to tap us on the shoulder about information we disagree with. We need to make a habit of quickly checking out whatever we find interesting or shareable or that makes us emotional. Because, that is the kind of stuff that changes our decisions and also changes us. And so, we have to train those internal falsehood alarms to respond not just to potential misinformation we disagree with. That's why fact-checkers are so good at this: they have to check everything. But, this work is like any other kind of training: the more you utilize your information analyzing muscles, the stronger they get.

So, we'll continue to work out next time, but, you know, not like with movement, just up here. I'll see you then.

[Outro]

Thank you for watching Crash Course, which is filmed here in Indianapolis, Indiana with the help of all of these nice people.

For this series, Crash Course has teamed up with MediaWise, a project out of The Poynter Institute that was created with support from Google. The Poynter Institute is a non-profit journalism school. The goal of MediaWise is to teach students how to assess the accuracy of information they encounter online. The MediaWise curriculum was developed by the Stanford History Education Group



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based on civic online reasoning research they began in 2015.

If you're interested in learning more about MediaWise and fact-checking, you can visit [@MediaWisetips](#) on Instagram.

Thanks again for watching, and thanks to MediaWise and the Stanford History Education Group for working with us on this project.