



Who Can You Trust? Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #4

Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=o93pM-b97HI>

<https://nerdfighteria.info/v/o93pM-b97HI>

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course Navigating Digital Information.

So, here at Crash Course, we work hard to bring you entertaining and educational videos on everything from science to literature, but how do you know that we're, like, telling you the truth? And is our work invalidated by the fact we sometimes make mistakes? I would say often.

The thing is, unless you're an expert in every subject we make videos about, you don't know. And, that is precisely what makes it so easy to be misled, both online and off. None of us has the time or talent to become an expert in everything. I made this helpful Venn diagram of people who could debunk myths about climate change, myths about Victorian literature, and conspiracy theories about the Illuminati, and, as you can see, there is nobody who can do all three.

So, we have to trust information from outside of ourselves. We have to find a way to accredit and trust experts, even though they will be wrong some of the time. So today, we're going to think about how to do that, especially online.

[Intro]

So, whenever you open an app or a website, you see information and content that was made somewhere by someone. With lateral reading, or leaving a site to find out what others say about it, you can learn who that someone or group of someones is.

But, when we try to learn more about a person or organization, what should we be looking for? Well, before putting your trust in a source, you need to explore two more things: the authority of the person or organization presenting the information, and their perspective.

When I say authority, I mean one's recognized knowledge or expertise on a topic, like famed primatologist Jane Goodall is an authority on chimpanzees; Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is an authority when it comes to lifting heavy objects repetitively, and also he is the greatest actor of his generation. Slight side-note, I once met Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and I know he looks ripped in movies and stuff, but in real life, he is so ripped!

What were we talking about? Right, authority. If you want to tell if a source is an authority on a topic, you need to leave the source, because nobody is going to be like, "I am not an authority on this topic, but here, listen to me bloviator."

Look, you're going to hear me say that a lot during this series; you need to leave sites to understand them. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but it's always a good idea to leave a source to understand if it is a good source. Vertically reading a website or article only gives you the information that the source wants you to see. As we talked about in our last episode, it's really easy to make a website or social media account look authoritative.

While using lateral reading techniques to investigate a source's authority, you want to consider several factors: the author or authors' professional background, the process they used to produce that information, and the systems that are in place to catch mistakes and correct them.

An author's professional or educational background can indicate whether they are actually qualified to speak knowledgeably about a topic. Generally speaking, those who work professionally in a field, or have done lots of work within it, are better equipped than, you know, random people off the street. That doesn't mean that experts are always right, of course, but they are more likely to be right than the random people off the street. So, a scientist who has published

studies of climate change in prominent journals is a much more reliable source on climate change than a blogger with no formal science training.

My neighbor who has been gardening for 40 years knows more about growing plants than I do, as they like to remind me every time they see me toiling in ignorance in my new vegetable garden. And, an agriculturalist who has spent years studying the growth of plants will know even more than my neighbor. I don't want to go on a rant here, but failure to, like, believe in and trust expertise is a big problem on the internet. Also, probably off the internet, but I live here.

Another good indicator of whether a source is reputable is the process that source used to produce or gather information. If you're reading an article on, like, my favorite celebrity become the first pop star to sing on the moon, and there are no sources list, yeah, no, that's just fan-fiction I'm writing. And, also you can't read it yet, it's not done. Actually, you can read it, but it's really rough so be gentle.

Anyway, the process a source used to gather information is often right there in their work. A reporter might attend a protest and talk to some protesters, and then describe those conversations in a story. Or, a professor might explain in their new study that they asked 5,000 people whether they liked chocolate or vanilla best. An Instagrammer tagging the person they've re-grammed is also citing their process. Some news organizations even publish their journalistic ethics, philosophies, and methodologies for the public. *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* all have their lengthy handbooks on editorial standards, which are available online.

The system in place to catch mistakes is just as important as the process a source uses to collect information. As I've mentioned in previous videos, news publications are often employ fact-checkers and professional journalists and editors also take part in fact-checking efforts during the process of writing articles.

And, sometimes another force steps in to help point out mistakes: the public. They might write a letter to the editor or leave a comment. They'll definitely tell you when you're wrong. But, you already know that, you're on YouTube. Hello commenters. It's me, John Green. I'd like to thank all 3.7 million of you who've pointed out the Nile River flows north in that Crash Course World History video. We know! That's why we published the correction in the annotations, which I guess you didn't read. But actually, seriously, thank you for pointing out that mistake. In response, we issued a correction.

We work hard to not make mistakes or spread inaccuracies, but we don't always succeed, and correction are a way for trustworthy institutions to acknowledge their failures. Now, they aren't always perfect, because, of course, by the time the correction has been posted, the misinformation has already spread. But, what are you going to do? We're human.

When very serious corrections are made, sometimes a publication's editor-in-chief, public editor, or ombudsman will step in to help explain what went wrong. Here at Crash Course, when those situations arise, we sometimes make separate videos devoted to the mistake or mistakes, and how they came to happen.

Let's head to the thought bubble for some news gathering and corrections.

In 2018, the *Drudge Report*, a right-wing news aggregation site with a lot of followers, tweeted, "REPORT: OBAMA PLEADS WITH JAY-Z TO PREVENT OTHER HIP HOP ARTISTS MEETING WITH TRUMP..." The tweet linked to InfoWars, a website known for



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spreading conspiracy theories that has been banned from social media sites for using hate speech. And, the InfoWars story was based on one Twitter user's tweet, which claimed sources said that Obama and Jay-Z were discussing this.

But, that user is not a journalist, and though they said the story was "developing," they never provided any other evidence for this claim. But regardless, InfoWars wrote an article about it and Drudge tweeted it. But, the report did nothing to explain how or if InfoWars had confirmed the story. In fact, the only evidence they gave was that Donald Trump Jr. had liked the tweet in question.

What I've just described is not a reliable or responsible news gathering process. Nonetheless, at the time we filmed this video, the article was still up on InfoWars with no corrections issued.

For comparison, consider this *ProPublica* report. *ProPublica* is a respected non-profit newsroom that focuses on investigative journalism. They published a story in 2017 that said CIA officer, Gina Haspel, oversaw the secret base where a suspected Al-Qaeda leader was subject to waterboarding. That was wrong.

When the publication discovered this mistake, they issued a correction. In nearly 1,000 words, they explained the error, how it was made, and how they had gotten their initial information. That was added to the top of the incorrect story, ensuring that anyone who found that page would see it.

Thanks, thought bubble.

So, obviously *ProPublica* made a big mistake with that article, and that mistake did lead to lots of people being misinformed, some of whom will unfortunately never see the correction. That's why it is so important to only try to share verified information.

But, the issuing of the correction and the exploration of how the mistake came to be made, does allow readers not only to understand that the reporting was wrong, but also how it came to happen and what changes are being made internally to decrease the likelihood of such mistakes.

So, in addition to varying backgrounds and processes for gathering information, every source also had its own perspective or point of view. You'll notice I am not using the word bias. These days, we tend to associate bias with anyone we disagree with; like if a sports writer named Steph Curry the best NBA player instead of LeBron James, a fan might say she's so biased against LeBron, because he's so popular. But, bias means favoring something in a way that's unfair.

I don't think everyone unfairly preferences some things over others, but everyone does wake up each morning with a particular perspective on the world due to their lived experiences. Rather than dismiss a source because their background might make them supposedly biased, use the knowledge you learn about them to understand their perspective. Consider their reason for sharing that information. How might their perspective influence what they're sharing, and how they do it?

Basically, I am proposing a radical idea for the internet called empathy. Like take, for instance, the American Enterprise Institute and the Center for American Progress. They're both think tanks, or groups of experts that provide analysis and research on various topics and policies.

Slight side note, the term think tank does come from actual tanks. It originates from military jargon used in World War II to denote a safe place to talk about strategy.

But right, the American Enterprise Institute is a conservative think tank. Many of its leader are well known conservative figures. The Center for American Progress, on the other hand, is a liberal think tank. It's similarly tied to well-known liberal figures. They both clearly have different political perspectives, but that doesn't mean we should immediately reject any report or research they release. We just have to take the perspectives in account when we receive their information, and consider how it might influence the content they produce.

Perspective extends to other sources too, like news organizations. Opinion pieces are typically written with a specific perspective by people outside a news organization. And, when reading an opinion, we should carefully consider that author's perspective while examining their arguments.

But, one can't confuse the opinion pages of a newspaper with its reporting, even though that is really difficult online, because there are no physical sections of a newspaper. But, if a piece is marked opinion or analysis or perspective or viewpoint, it is meant to be persuasive, not just informative. When *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* publishes an opinion piece that is not their reporting, it's an opinion.

News articles don't have that same explicit perspective, but some news websites do have varying political orientations. If we're familiar with an organization's political tendencies, we can take those into account when we think about their work.

For example, take a look at the Daily Kos and The Daily Wire. The Daily Kos is a hyper-partisan left-leaning website. How do we know? Well, if we head to the masthead page, which lists their staffers, you'll find they call themselves a progressive community site. Also, their founder has written a book explicitly about "fighting" President Trump. Plus, their coverage often asks readers to take action via signing a petition or protesting against particular causes, usually in favor of liberal policies. This tells us their perspective is strong, and it will almost certainly influence how they present the news.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, The Daily Wire, is a hyper-partisan right-leaning site. It describes itself an an "irreverent news and commentary site of a new generation of conservatives." On his YouTube channel, founder Ben Shapiro calls himself a conservative political pundit, and his podcast is described as "savagely irreverent conservative." They may not ask their audience to take direct action as frequently, but they're very clear on their political bent. This tells us that their perspective is also strong, and it will also almost certainly influence how they present news.

When reading articles from either websites, we must take their views into account and remember they may be presenting information in a way that aligns with their political beliefs. And, if you think about it, considering other people's perspectives should not feel like revolutionary, because you do it all the time in real life.

When a new Mountain Goats album comes out and I call my brother to tell him that the most important piece of music in human history has just been released, he knows I am speaking to him from a particular perspective, a correct one. He's not going to dismiss my enthusiasm for the Mountain Goats' brilliant lyrics or artful musical storytelling, but he will dial it back to what a normal person might think. And, maybe even check to see what reviewers thought of the album. As if *Pitchfork* knows anything about the Mountain Goats. I am the world's leading Mountain Goats expert... is a good example of how not to act.

That's what this is all about. There is so much information online, both good and bad, that in order to sort through it, we need to stop,



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and think, and look around. We read laterally to find out who is behind information, and then, we seek out specific information about those sources, their authority, and their perspective. And each bit of information we get about a source is like a piece of stained glass, and, once it's all put together, it becomes a lens through which we can view their claims and arguments.

That makes us better at understanding what information is reliable, and what information, in turn, we should pass on. Not only to the people who are here now, but to the people who will come after us.

It also makes your life more colorful. We're going to be diving into a very colorful place next time on Crash Course Navigating Digital Information. Well, figuratively colorful; literally, it's quite black and white: Wikipedia. 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 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 [@MediaWise](#) on Instagram.

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