



Click Restraint: Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #9

Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=5tw44SkkXQg>

<https://nerdfighteria.info/v/5tw44SkkXQg>

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

So, you know when you take a slice of pizza out of the microwave and it's extremely hot, but you're so hungry that you decide to just fight through the pain and take a bite anyway? Whereupon, you confirm that you're basically eating hot lava and now your tongue is burnt. And also, you couldn't even really taste the pizza, so you put it back down for like 10 seconds, blow on it, and then try again. And then, you continue that cycle until your meal is actually cool enough to eat but by then, of course, you have no more taste buds.

Right. What I'm saying is that patience is a hard-earned skill for humans, especially when you're really hungry. And, on the internet, I at least am hungry for information basically all the time. I want to know about the news stories I care about so much that I will scroll through endless posts and Wikipedia edits and even, god help me, YouTube comments looking for more information. And, when I am done getting all the known information about that story, I will scroll through endless speculation while I wait for more facts to come out, because I am incredibly bad at being patient.

But also, the architecture of the social internet tell you not to be patient. It tells you that if you load more tweets or see more posts, there will always be something new, something that could be very important. And the ubiquity of newness can make it difficult for us to read an entire article that was published yesterday, because, ugh, that is literally so yesterday.

So instead, maybe I should just read the headline and then see if there's anything new on Facebook, which there always is, and then I'm scrolling and scrolling and-- Enough!

Approaching the internet this way has left me with a lot of bad habits that don't actually help me find the answers I'm looking for. So today, we're going to learn a skill to help break that bad habit of impatience called click restraint.

[Intro]

During this series so far, we've talked a lot about what to do when encountering new information online, like before believing and sharing, we need to find out who is behind the information and what evidence there is for their claims. We also want to find out what other sources. One of the strengths of the internet is that there are always more sources. So, if you're not sure about a claim, or you can't decide whether a source is reliable, then you should try to find another reliable source.

But, often the problem isn't finding multiple sources to corroborate or verify claims, because there are many, many, many sources for almost anything. Like, if you search for "Flat Earth Theory," you will get like seven million results debating whether the Earth is flat, and it would take you a lifetime to look through them all. That's not a challenge, by the way. Do not do that. You have but one wild and precious life, my friends, please spend it knowing that the Earth is roughly spherical.

My point is that understanding information is not about finding multiple sources; it's about finding multiple reliable sources when conducting a search. It's about learning what expertise is and when to trust it.

But, when many of us search the internet, we pick from among the top two search engine results, even though there might be literally millions of results to choose from. But, researched from the Stanford Education Group found that fact checkers, who confirm facts and debunk myths for a living, spend more time on search results than like everyone else does. They typically scroll through the entire first page of search results, and sometimes even check

the second or third page, as they decide what looks most promising.

And, they practice what researchers call click restraint. Instead of immediately clicking the first thing they see, fact checkers restrain themselves. They scan results to check out their options, get a sense of what sources are available and what information is on offer, and then, based on what they're looking for, make informed decisions about which website to visit first.

So obviously, there's, you know, a lot of content to sift through on the internet, and a search engine's job is to sort all of that for you. But, search engines don't just, like, arrive on the web fully formed. There is no search engine stork dropping them on Silicon Valley doorsteps. Humans create and manage search engines, so the results they produce, via complex algorithms, are not somehow separate from human fallibility. Algorithms are human products just as much as this table is a human product, and this physical representation of a virtual representation of a physical flower is a human product. What I'm saying is that algorithms are not objective. There's always going to be a degree of human influence, even if that degree is supposed to be small.

Now, before we go any further, I want to highlight a potential conflict of interest here. This series is funded in part by a grant from Google, which is a search company. As part of that grant, they viewed final scripts of these videos, but they did not write or edit them. The content of these videos was developed by the Stanford History Education Group, not Google, but I think it's important to reiterate here that Google did help fund the series.

Having said that, search engines, like Google, are profoundly fallible and they are subject to human influences, and are shaped both by the people who work on those search engines and also by the people who use them. So, when you enter a keyword into any search engine, it doesn't spit out a list of sources ranked by trustworthiness. Instead, they sort links based on a variety of factors using an algorithm, a set of rules or operations a computer follows to complete a task. And, those algorithms, to reiterate, are created by people.

Now, the exact algorithms search engines use are secret, that's why they remain in business. But, roughly, and I mean roughly, they didn't like tell us any secrets, Google return results based on, one, how relevant it thinks a page will be to what you search for and, two, the quality of the site based on google's own definition of quality.

A page might be relevant to your search if it contains multiple instances of the keyword you searched. Like, if you search "Golden State Bridge" it may surface the official website of the Golden Gate Bridge, because it says Golden Gate Bridge like 12,000 times in key places, like the page title.

Quality is a bit more difficult to nail down, of course. One parameter search engines use is how many other sites link to a result, and whether those sites are of high quality. Some search companies also pay individuals around the world to rate the quality of the pages it finds in search. Which, is Google hiring? Because, I would love that job! I feel like I would be good at it, because I spend a lot of time on the internet and I have very strong opinions. Google raters do follow a set of guidelines, of course. We'll link to them in the video description.

But also, search results aren't a one-way street. Like, web content creators know roughly how to try to ensure their websites appear higher in search results. This is called search engine optimization. To use a basic example, keywords are important to search results, so if you make a site about "Doggos & Puppies," but most people



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are searching for dogs and puppies, you'd be better off including dogs and puppies in the title. And, since linking to other sites can impact search results, some creators even create websites to link to their websites. Now, that's considered spam, but it's still very common. Why? Because many of us click those first couple links of a search result, getting your site into those spots can be extremely valuable.

And, research has shown that students interpret the order of search results as an indicator of trustworthiness. As I already mentioned, that's not actually the case, but it benefits a website to appear trustworthy, or a YouTube channel for that matter.

Ok, so the first step of click restraint is not clicking, alright? Take a deep breath, count to 10, or, I don't know, it's the internet, count to 3. Send your friend a search time selfie... I don't, whatever you have to do to not instantly click the first link of your search results.

Then, scan the result titles and URLs of that first page of results. Are there names of major news organizations or blogs you've never heard of? From the title, you can also sometimes tell whether a page is a news article, presenting an opinion (an Op-Ed piece), or if it's just, like, irrelevant to your search. Next, you should scan the snippets below each title. The text under the URL will hint at the webpage's content, and this alone could point you toward the information you're looking for.

Once, you've compared these results, you can try some lateral reading by opening up a couple of results in new tabs. You know what, let's just try out this whole process in the thought bubble.

Ok, my friend told me that the Chinese government is buying Walmart. I had not heard anything about this, so I decided to Google it. I typed in "Did China buy Walmart?" And here are the results. The first is called "China buys Walmart, Will Rebrand it as Greatwallmart" and it's from thefinaledition.com. Now, I've never heard of The Final Edition, and that pun does sound too good to be true. On the other hand, the first three words are China buys Walmart.

A few results down, I see stories from Forbes and Business Insider, two business websites, suggesting that the Walton family that owns Walmart has been selling its shares. The seventh result is Walmart's own website. Then comes its Wikipedia page, and a CNN article about Walmart buying a stake in a Chinese retailer from two years ago.

From this group of results, Walmart's own website is probably the best place to start. While, I wouldn't always trust a company's website to tell its own story impartially, I do think they probably know who their owners are. The company page explains how the Walton family came to own Walmart, and then, in 2016, they teamed up with Chinese e-commerce company, JD.com, to form what they call a strategic alliance. Actually, if we go back to that CNN story, we can confirm that Walmart bought a 5% stake in JD.com. So, no, China did not buy Walmart, but the retailer did do business with a major Chinese company.

Just for kicks, let's go back to that first Google result about the GreatWallmart, since that was the only source that even hinted at China buying Walmart. The link leads to a page that looks like a news article, but when I find the About Page for Final Edition, it explains that it's a satirical site that "aims to be the #1 humor experience on the internet." Definitely not a reliable source of news. Good thing I didn't just click that first link.

Thanks, thought bubble.

So, obviously not all search results will bring up a clear juxtaposition

of true news sites, satirical ones, and primary source information. If you're not finding the kind of results you need when conducting a search, I do have some tips. First, put the phrase you're searching for in quotation marks. That way, a search engine will only look for those words in that order. And, if you want to limit your results to one website domain, add "site:" and then the domain name, as in site:youtube.com. You can even try site:.edu to search websites sponsored by educational institutions. To eliminate words or websites from your search, include a minus sign before the phrase. Like, searching for "Wall Street Journal -site:wsj.com" will give you results about the Wall Street Journal, but none of them from the Journal's own website.

Search engines may be something we use everyday, and we might even know some of these tricks, but that doesn't make them foolproof. As we've noted many times before, when it comes to evaluating information, there just is no magic bullet. No single path will get you to unimpeachable information. Dare I say, you might even want to try the second page of search results or beyond.

Next time, we'll bring this miniseries to a close with the second joke I know, and we'll tackle the great white whale of the contemporary internet: your social media feed. 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 [@MediaWise](#) on Instagram.

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