



Introduction to Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #1

Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=pLlv2o6UfTU>

<https://nerdfighteria.info/v/pLlv2o6UfTU>

Hello, and welcome to CrashCourse Navigating Digital Information. My name is John Green, and you may know me from my various channels on YouTube, my all-caps Tweets about Liverpool Football Club, Q&As about my books on my website, or elsewhere on the internet. I spend a lot of time online. In fact, in some ways, I live here. The average American spends 24 hours per week online, but 1 in 4 U.S. adults say that they are online almost constantly. And I am among them.

I love the internet! It contains so much helpful information, it connects us to each other, it allows more people to have a voice in public conversations. But of course the internet is also littered with misleading, sensationalized, and downright false information.

So, okay, I only know two jokes. I'll tell the other one at the end of the series, but here's the first one, which was made famous by the American writer David Foster Wallace. Two young fish are swimming along one day when an older fish swims past and says, "Morning kids, how's the water?" The young fish just look at each other for a second and then swim on for a while. And then one says to the other, "What the heck is water?"

Now, I am not the wise old fish of this enterprise. I am as susceptible to misleading information as anyone. I tend to focus on information that reinforces my preexisting worldview and to passively ingest all kinds of media while scrolling and swiping endlessly through my feeds.

But I also think we ought to be suspicious of anyone who claims to be the wise old fish with some special understanding of what we're swimming in. Believing that you're immune to the seductions of false and misleading information is, if anything, a symptom of being influenced by false and misleading information.

But I tell that joke for two reasons; first, because I need you to call me out if I start acting like the wise old fish; and second, to point out that much of what we're swimming in is new and strange, and we are still figuring it out together.

So, for this series, Crash Course has teamed up with Media Wise, a project out of the Poynter Institute that was created with support from Google. The Poynter Institute is a non-profit journalism school, and 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 that they began in 2015. Other Mediawise Project partners include the Local Media Association for Media Literacy Education. I'm saying all of that, and I'll say it again because I think it's important to understand where this information about information came from.

Over the next 10 episodes, we're going to dive deeply into the feed and share some tools that are proven to work when it comes to evaluating the quality and accuracy of information. We may not figure out exactly what water is, but we're going to try and learn to improve our swimming.

Stan, have we rolled the intro yet? We're like multiple minutes into the video. Roll the intro!

[Intro]

So, when you want to see what your friends are up to, you might head to Snapchat or WhatsApp or Instagram, or, maybe, Thinstagram. I don't get that joke, but young people in the office said it was funny. And then, when you want the news you may want to be startled by a push alert from a news app, or you might go to Twitter or Snapchat or Reddit. And, when you need to settle a feud over how to pronounce "G-I-F" or possible "Gee-I-F," you just use a

search engine.

These habits all feel quite natural to me, but, in fact, they're part of a huge shift in how humans find and produce and share information. Just a short time ago, the production of information was controlled by a much smaller group of people. Instead of googling movie times, you had to buy a newspaper or call the movie theatre, and risk talking to an actual human being. To write a research paper, you had to hunker down in the library, not for the outlets and free Wi-Fi, but for the access to encyclopedias and books.

Now I should note that there's a lot of information that is not available online and that is available at your library. Libraries continue to be incredibly valuable resources, but these days anyone can hop online and produce information via their personal website, or their social media, or their YouTube channel.

Well, *actually*, no. Access to digital devices and high-speed internet is still a real barrier to entry for many people, which means unequal access to information. It also means that while it can *feel* like everyone is participating in Facebook or Instagram, in fact, *billions* of people are not part of those conversations.

Still, the barrier for creating and retrieving information is *much* lower than it was a generation ago. Like, when I was a kid, if you wanted to share an opinion with the public, you wrote a letter to the newspaper and hoped they would publish it. There was no other way for a stranger to hear your story or your perspective.

Furthermore, as you already know from the three DMs you've answered since you started this video, the Internet changed how we communicate. We can talk across time and space. We can connect across geographical and political boundaries, we can create organizations and communities, find people with similar interests, or we can lift people up when they feel alone.

But when information flows that freely, dangers are inevitable: misinformation (unintentionally incorrect information) and disinformation (information that's wrong on purpose) spread quickly online as do hate speech and propaganda.

Plus, we can easily create online worlds where we *only* see information we already agree with or that lines up with our point of view. For instance, if I only followed people on Twitter who were Team Blake, I would have been pretty blindsided when Garrett won The Bachelorette. And the same could be said for, *you know*, actual elections.

And because we use information for all kinds of decisions, misinformation and disinformation are *really* powerful. This is true for small everyday decisions, restaurant reviews affect where we eat ...and for much larger issues, like choosing a college to attend or a place to work. The quality of our information directly shapes the quality of our decisions and the quality of our decisions, of course, shapes the quality of our shared experience as humans.

So when we talk about "bad" or "questionable information" that includes "fake news"; the kind of news reporting that is *totally* false. Which is a huge problem, especially on social media and during breaking news events, and it's a problem across all political ideologies and perspectives. But we're not *just* talking about fake news, we're also talking about information that isn't credible because the author of that content isn't an authority on the topic. Take a blog of serious-sounding fitness tips from someone who loves gym selfies, but isn't qualified to give professional health advice.

We're also talking about information that comes from writers or organizations that have something to lose from the whole truth, like



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a company that sells toasters creating "BestToasters.com" to publish lists of the "best" toasters, with their brand at the top of every list. Or friends who conveniently find videos that supposedly "prove" that "gif" is pronounced "jif" when you know that "gif" is pronounced "gif".

But the thing is, quality of information lies on a spectrum. It's not a duality, good information and bad information. It is our job to evaluate the information that we receive, find out where it falls on that spectrum, and decide how to use it going forward. But as a species, we are *not* very good good at judging the quality of information on the internet. In fact, we've always been bad at it.

In 2002, a study with over 2,000 participants reported that a website's *design* was the most frequently mentioned factor in judging a website's credibility. When asked to choose which of two sites was more credible, 46% of participants used the *look* of the website in their evaluations. Adults and young people alike still typically evaluate information based on factors unrelated to its content: How it looks, whether they've used it before, or who referred them to it.

In 2016, our friend in the Stanford History Education Group released a study of over seven thousand middle school, high school, and college students. When asked to evaluate online information, they based their evaluations on a sites look and feel. They focused on things that a website creator could easily change, like the URL or the about page. Spoiler Alert: that technique doesn't work well.

One of the things that participants had to do was judge "MinimumWage.com," a site about, you guessed it, the minimum wage. It claimed to bust myths behind the minimum wage, listing ways that raising it would hurt the economy. Many students never discovered that that site was by a public relations firm working for a group that wants to keep minimum wages low. The firm represents industries that stand to benefit from paying employees less. In other words, the creator of this website has something to lose by telling both sides of the minimum wage debate. So, we can't fully trust them to do so.

Alright, let's go to the thought bubble. During the study, some students also felt the presence of certain types of content on a website meant that it was more reliable. Like, when students found something they thought was evidence on a page, a statistic or an anecdote, perhaps, they assumed that meant the entire page was more reliable. And, they often didn't check the sources, because, you know, it's the internet, people never check sources.

For example, participants also looked at an article that was actually an advertisement for Shell oil. Seventy percent of high school students rated it as more reliable than a traditional news story. Why? Because of this pie chart at the top.

Statistics and infographics are often easy and effective ways to communicate facts and evidence. But, that doesn't mean all charts are trustworthy. Like, here's another chart. It says that ninety six percent of the time the sky is green. The existence of this chart is no more proof of its validity, than, say, a spooky noise is proof that your house is haunted.

But, back to the Stanford History Education Group study. Over 80% of middle school students didn't correctly identify that this was an ad either, even though it was labeled sponsored content. Sponsored content means that a company paid the publication for a space on its site, hoping to advertise with a post that looks like a news article. And, as you may know, sponsored content also shapes a lot of discourse on YouTube. And, it's effective advertising, because many of us can't help but believe that what looks like a news article

must, in fact, be one.

Thanks, thought bubble. So you might argue that the students in that study are still learning, and they'll probably get better at evaluating information when they get older. Well, the Stanford History Education Group also tested historians with PhD's, first-year college students from a pretty fancy university, and professional fact checkers from major news organizations. Fact checkers are the people who go through each bit of copy in a news story to make sure that all the facts are accurate. There are far too few of them in this world.

But, anyway, how effectively would you guess those three groups evaluated information quality? Although the professors and the college students have obviously achieved academic success and are smart, thoughtful people, they also didn't do well with the experiment. When evaluating online sources, they too focused on superficial things, like the site's layout, how much content the site had, and whether it linked to other sites. They focused largely on appearance and the presence of things like evidence and links, not their content or their value.

And, those strategies might have worked to an extent in the early days of the internet, but things are much more complicated now. And there are many misleading or false stories that site sources that either don't say what they are purported to say or are themselves also false. It's misinformation all the way down. So, who did sort out the misinformation from the good info? The fact checkers! I mean, it is literally their job, but it's nice to know that they were good at it.

The fact checkers did well, because they employed a variety of carefully honed skills to decipher fact from fiction. And, we're going to learn those skills together from the fact checkers in our next episode. Also, the one after that, and the one after that, and the one after that. We're going to fact-checker school.

In the meantime, if you're interested in learning more about Mediawise and fact-checking, you can visit [@Mediawise](#) on Instagram, or just search for them. Thanks for swimming with me. I'll see you next time.

[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.

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