



Check Yourself with Lateral Reading: Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #3

Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=GoQG6Tin-1E>

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

So, today we are going to learn one of the most important skills of 21st century life, and I don't say that lightly. So, you know my name and that this is an episode of Crash Course, but there's a lot that doesn't tell you. It doesn't tell you, for instance, that Crash Course is a product of Complexly, a company owned by my brother and me and funded partly by the support from Patreon, partly by advertisers, and partly by grants from organizations. It also doesn't tell you who works on the show - a large team of producers, editors, writers, illustrators, and more. You're looking at some of them now. And, as I mentions in previous videos, the folks at MediaWise also helped us make this video. MediaWise was created with support from Google, and it's a collaboration between the Poynter Institute, a non-profit journalism school, and the Stanford History Education Group, a university-based research group.

All of this is helpful to know when navigating digital information, because understanding where information came from helps us to understand if it's reliable. How do you even find a source in a world where no one has to cite sources, and what citations do exist are perpetually disappearing? Well, to quote my friends Rhett and Link, let's talk about that.

[Intro]

So, information does not just appear, even if it's automated or driven by an algorithm. A Twitter-bot, for instance, is not a person, but they were created by people, as are the algorithms that declare what topics are trending in online discourse.

So, all your information is produced by someone, but it's also produced for a purpose. Like, newspapers are created by journalists and editors to inform the public about things editors think they should know. But, of course, they also have to sell subscriptions and advertisements to support themselves. Advertisements are created by companies to convince customers to buy or use their products. Movies and books are created to entertain or to stir up important cultural conversations, or both.

The lines between these motives, of course, are not always clear. Advertisements often feel informative, and sometimes seek to be informative, like those medicine ads that list 143 side effects in 10 seconds because they are required to do so by law. And, while journalism should seek to inform, journalists are human and they make choices both about what to cover and how to cover it; choices we may not agree with. Movies and books may exist to entertain and enlighten, but they can also exist to sell things. It's no coincidence, for instance, that everyone in *The Fault in Our Stars* movie uses Apple products.

So, the first question we have to ask is who made this and why? And, we mustn't oversimplify those answers. Like, I wrote *The Fault in Our Stars*, because I was inspired by my friend Esther, and also because I wanted to explore whether a short life can be a full life, and also because I thought people would read it and pay for it. The book was also a product of my editor and Penguin Random House, my publisher. They also thought people would read it and buy it. None of those motivations negates any of the others.

But, of course, understanding who is actually behind a product can be really difficult, especially online. I mean, catfishing is now a verb, because it's so easy to pretend to be what you're not. The "Stop City-Funded Internet" campaign is a good example of what I mean.

So, in early 2018, the city of West Plains, Missouri was working on a taxpayer-funded municipal internet service project. If successful, it would provide residents with cheaper high-speed internet. And,

while the city was working on this plan, a website for the Stop City-Funded Internet campaign popped up. It claimed to be a grassroots community of local fiscal conservatives against the plan. The campaign site looked pretty sleek and professionally designed, it had a clear, stated mission, and high-quality photography. Oh, and also, a list of all the ways municipal internet service projects have failed.

And, just by looking at the website, you would not be able to tell who was really behind that campaign, because it didn't name names or list its leadership. But, in the end, someone did discover the brains behind the operation.

It was, of course, Fidelity Communications, a local commercial internet provider that didn't want to lose customers. And, the only reason they came clean was because a Missouri man noticed the file name of the site's logo had Fidelity in it. But, most of the time, we don't need to search source code to know more about who's sharing the information that we're consuming. We just need to learn to read it differently.

So, we tend to read websites like we read books or articles: we start at the top of the page, look at the title, and scroll down from there. We read vertically. And, many websites look legitimate when you're reading vertically, because you're only seeing what their creators want you to see. And, creators know what we think make websites look authoritative: a well-designed logo, references and citations, professional photography, no grammatical errors or typos. And so, when you read vertically, it is often impossible to distinguish reliable information from unreliable.

But, introducing other strategies into your reading, like looking elsewhere for additional information, can help you find out a lot more. When you're on a new website, instead of staying put and taking their word for it, you should just leave. Open a new tab and start looking for more information. That's called lateral reading. It's lateral because, instead of moving up and down, you're moving from tab to tab. Basically, what I'm saying is that when your browser looks like this, it can actually be good news.

Like, here's a website from the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC. This page from 2018 is about a back-and-forth in the federal government over regulating internet service providers like Comcast, Verizon, and AT&T. Regulating those providers could include setting the prices and rates for their services, or whether they're allowed to collect tolls from websites or content creators, among other things. Apparently, ALEC is against government regulation of internet service providers.

So, we want to know who ALEC is. We can tell a few things by looking at their website, namely that this site is apparently not run by Hailey Baldwin's famous uncle. Also, the site does have a dot-org web address, which is often used by non-profits, and the logo looks serious and kind of fancy. The website is easy to use. ALEC's about page says it's "America's largest nonpartisan, voluntary membership organization of state legislators dedicated to the principles of limited government, free markets and federalism." Its board of directors page lists many U.S. representatives and senators.

And, if we stay on this page, it all seems, you know, kind of boring and standard. But, if you open a new tab and search ALEC - ok, yeah, the first results are Alec Baldwin. You know, Hailey's uncle. But, below that and below ALEC's website, lies their Wikipedia page and a website called ALECExposed.org. Towards the bottom of the first page of search results, there are news articles by websites like *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian*. These say that corporations and non-profits are also members of ALEC. We learn that one of ALEC's stated goals is to bring corporate leaders and



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legislators together so they can craft laws.

A search for "ALEC members" shows that AT&T, Comcast, and Verizon have all been members, which means the original article about internet regulations has some, you know, big conflicts of interest. Internet service providers obviously have a huge financial incentive to fight regulation, but the article doesn't disclose that. So, in this case, lateral reading helped us find out who's really behind information: a huge group of law-makers working with big corporations towards their common interest.

Alright, so now that you understand the idea of lateral reading, you may be wondering where you should go when you open that next tab. There are plenty of online resources you can use to look into different organizations, and authors. They may not be perfect, but they're a good starting point if you're just trying to learn a little bit about a source of information.

Let's go to the thought bubble.

Newspapers can be a good place to start. Some of them have been around for decades or even centuries. They have tons of information. Traditionally, newspapers provided written information about current events printed daily or weekly.

Today, many newspapers have turned into digital media companies that publish news online daily in a variety of formats. Some focus on international or national news, and others focus on local news. Magazines and digital news sites are useful for lateral reading, too.

However, it's important to not that many online news organizations have their own point of view. Sometimes these are explicit liberal or conservative political leanings, but sometimes they're much harder to pinpoint, like a mashup of their contributors' own interest and perspectives. Like, a website specifically about comics for and by women might cover the new *Captain Marvel* trailer differently than a site with all male writers would, for instance. We'll talk more about authorial perspective in our next episode.

Fact-checking websites can also be an excellent resource. Sites like [Snopes.com](https://snopes.com) and [PolitiFact.com](https://politiifact.com) are well-respected fact-checking sites created by researchers and journalists with the goal of fact-checking articles, public statements, and even social media posts. Of course, that doesn't mean they're never wrong, because they're also created by humans, but they do strive to be right. But, like every resource, fact checking websites are just one tool in the tool box. There is no magic arbiter of truth.

Thanks, thought bubble.

So, to reiterate, no newspaper or news site is infallible. All of this is created by humans, and humans make mistakes constantly. All of us. Our modern media landscape is very difficult to navigate, and that has sowed distrust between the public and the quote-unquote mainstream media.

But, I think there are two important things to remember here. First, "the media" does not exist. It's not a monolith. There are no secret meetings between every reported and editor and photographer in the world to decide about what to report. It is a very large, diverse industry made up of individuals with vastly different viewpoints.

But, secondly, it is possible to take those different viewpoints into account when reading laterally and checking information for yourself.

Now, having waded into controversial waters, I'm about to dive into them. There's another resource you can use while reading laterally, one you may have been told not to use by teachers and parents

and other adults. But, I'm not like them, I'm young. I'm-- What's that Stan? Oh, apparently I am like them. Nonetheless, I am here to tell you that you should use Wikipedia.

Wikipedia can be a very good place to start your research. You've definitely been told at some point that it's an unreliable source or that anyone can just edit it at a whim. Wikipedia can be wrong. It often is wrong. Many articles can be edited by anyone, but Wikipedia is actually also the largest general reference work on the web, and its articles are subject to editing standards. Some of them are quite rigorous, in fact. So, it can be a great place to find a general overview of a topic.

Now, not every article meets Wikipedia's editorial standards, as many articles say about the article, but the ones that do are well-sourced and carefully written. And, if you scroll down to the bottom of any Wikipedia page, you should find citations that work.

We're going to talk about Wikipedia in a future episode, but for now I just want to say this: There is no, like, single source on the internet, or off the internet for that matter. There is no secret way to understand the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I think we sometimes forget this, so I want to state it clearly: Information is made by people - flawed, biased, imperfect people. But, sometimes we conclude that because no source is inherently objective, all information is equally unreliable, and that is dead wrong.

No matter what you're thinking about or trying to learn about, understanding who is sharing the information and why can help you to evaluate what you're reading and place it in its proper context. And, lateral reading can really help with that. I know it feels like extra work - the entering of search terms, looking through sources, and so on - but I've been trying this for the last several weeks, and it has genuinely worked for me.

Instead of asking why read laterally, I think we should consider what we lose when we don't read laterally. When we passively scroll through information feeds and accept what seems true and dismiss what seems wrong. Reading that way gives misinformation and disinformation more power. It allows people to hijack your consciousness, and it also makes you part of the problem.

The world wide web demands we utilize a new kind of reading to evaluate information; one that is very different from how we read books or newspapers, because there is no beginning and end to the web. Vertical reading doesn't work, because it's not vertical, it's a web. So, we often need to leave individual websites to understand that website by using other websites. It will get simpler over time and with practice. Once, you didn't know how to read vertically. So, we're going to keep practicing next time. 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-tips](#) on Instagram.

Thanks again for watching, and thanks to MediaWise and the



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Stanford History Education Group for working with us on this project.