

Sorting Fact from Fiction: Finding Trustworthy Information

In today's digital age, we are flooded with information from various sources including social media, news outlets, blogs, and more. It can be difficult to sift through the noise and identify what's true and what's not. Often information from one source totally contradicts information from another!

If we were to believe everything we saw online without critical evaluation, we would be left with a very distorted perception of the world. Continually reading sensationalised news stories, alarming social media posts, and biased narratives can leave us feeling very anxious and insecure. **Media literacy**, the ability to critically evaluate and analyse media messages, is essential for making informed decisions and navigating the vast landscape of information. By honing our media literacy skills, we can become wiser consumers of information, reduce confusion, and maintain balanced and helpful perspectives.

Searching for Information

The words we type into an internet search engine affects the sort of information we find. For example, if we want to find out about the impact of social media on mental health, we might search online for "social media and depression".



This can lead to biased results because of the "filter in" and "filter out" phenomenon. That is, you will most likely:

- filter in web pages that *do* talk about there being links between social media use and depression, and
- filter out any that *do not* talk about or debunk such links.

This *unhelpful* searching can therefore reinforce our belief that there is a link!!

There are two steps you can take to change the way you gather and filter information from the internet.

Step 1: Practice using more helpful and balanced search phrases to find out what you want to know.

Step 2: Look for ways of including alternative view points.

Instead of:	Try:
"Social media and depression"	"What causes depression?" or "Factors associated with mental health"
Less helpful More biased filtering	More helpful Less biased filtering

You can do this by typing in mismatching statements. E.g.

If you typed:	You could also try:
"Is social media bad for you?"	"Is social media good for you?"

These strategies can lead to you coming up with some very different information!

Evaluating Information

Even when using helpful search strategies, not all of the information we find is factual. Unfortunately, anyone with access to the internet can put information online and claim it as fact. Information can come from a multitude of sources ranging from professional journalists to amateur bloggers or celebrities/influencers. It's important to recognise that not all sources are based on fact. Some may be biased or present information in a way that aligns with a particular agenda. For example, a nutritional supplement company may have commercial interest in promoting certain dietary information in order to sell products.

We must consider the qualifications and expertise of the source when evaluating the credibility of information, to ensure that we are not reading someone's opinion, or their particular bias.



Some Questions to Ask...

The following questions can help us to evaluate the credibility of information:

- Is this written by a qualified expert in the relevant field?
- Does the author represent an established and trustworthy organisation (e.g. government body, university, major hospital)?
- Is the author free of commercial interests (i.e. they are not trying to sell you a product, service, or sell a story)?
- Does the article include multiple pieces of evidence to back up its claims (i.e. claims are based on research rather than one person's experience)?
- Is enough information provided for you to check the background research for yourself?
- Is this information consistent with information you have read from other trustworthy sources?
- Are statistics clearly explained?
- Is there a date to show this information is recent?

Seek a Second Opinion

The more ticks you have above, the better the information is likely to be. However, it is important to remember that information from the internet and media is one resource only. When in doubt, you can always seek advice from experts in the field of information you are searching for.

By prioritising quality over quantity, and being careful about what we believe online, we can maintain a balanced perspective amidst today's vast information landscape.