

Help Is Where You Find It

Resources for Evaluating Information

As previous chapters have demonstrated, evaluating information is not for the faint of heart. You have to keep up your guard to make sure that you don't fall for information that seems credible but is not. Even when your guard is up, evaluating any given piece of information can take considerable time and effort; so much so that no one can thoroughly evaluate all the information they encounter and must, instead, carefully ration the time spent on evaluation. The good news is that there are information resources designed to help you check facts and/or gain perspective on an information resource's reputation for credibility.

INFORMATION WATCHDOGS

According to the nonprofit Poynter Institute for Media Studies, by June 2016 there were "more than 100 fact-checking projects active in approximately 40 countries."¹ The good news is that this means there are now many *information watchdogs* you can turn to for help in checking facts and evaluating information resources. The bad news is that keeping up with all the existing and newly emerging information watchdogs represents an ongoing challenge. Not only do you need to keep aware of what information watchdogs are out there, you need to know which of those are truly trustworthy. The fact that there are so many self-proclaimed information watchdogs means that the field is open to watchdog sites that claim to be impartial but that are, in fact,

highly partisan. After all, what better way to spread lies and propaganda than by claiming to be a resolute defender of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

When turning to any information resource that endeavors to evaluate the credibility of other sources of information, it is good practice to learn what you can about the methodologies it uses for evaluation. Among information watchdogs, the methodologies used for evaluation are often described on an “About” page or on a separate page devoted to methodology. It is a red flag when anyone who evaluates anything fails to describe the methodologies they use for evaluation.

When checking facts, it is never a bad idea to consult more than one fact-checking resource—if second and third opinions are readily available, always seek them out. It is also important to remember that even the most reliable information watchdog may change (for the better or for the worse) over time, demonstrate occasional bias, or simply make mistakes once in a while. One of the truths about journalism is that checking facts costs money, and as a result the failure to fully check facts is often more attributable to financial considerations than it is to bias or incompetence.

A final point about information watchdogs is this: no matter how fair and impartial a watchdog may be, somebody, somewhere has blasted it as biased, unreliable, and/or in the pocket of special interests. The situation is very much like that of reviews of restaurants on public recommendation sites like Yelp—no matter how good a restaurant may be, there are always going to be at least a few negative reviews of it. Whether it is restaurants or websites that are being evaluated, your task is to look at the total picture and decide whether the praise given and the criticisms dished out are fair and reasonable.

Recognizing that no information resource is infallible or absolutely free from bias, the following resources can stake reasonable—though not irrefutable—claims as either reliable fact-checking resources or as reliable evaluators of the credibility of other information resources.

Allsides

Rather than evaluating information, Allsides presents multiple views (left, right, and center) of news stories with the goal of allowing the reader to decide what information is most credible. Allsides also rates other media outlets

on a left-to-right bias scale. Funding for Allsides comes from contributions made by individuals and foundations.

Launched: 2012

Home page: www.allsides.com

About: www.allsides.com/about

American Fact Finder

Created and maintained by the US Census Bureau, American Fact Finder “provides access to data about the United States, Puerto Rico and the Island Areas.” American Fact Finder is especially useful for checking facts about US populations (national, state, and local), economic conditions, health, crime, and more. The funding for American Fact Finder is provided by the US government.

Founded: 2011

Home page: factfinder.census.gov

About: www.census.gov/about/what.html

Blue Feed, Red Feed

Blue Feed, Red Feed shows unedited and unverified liberal (blue) and conservative (red) Facebook content side by side in an effort to undo the echo chamber effect in which the views of only one side are heard. Blue Feed, Red Feed is a service of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Launched: 2016

Home page: graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed

About: graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/#methodology

Climate Feedback

The mission of Climate Feedback is to “help Internet users—from the general public to influential decision-makers—distinguish inaccurate climate change narratives from scientifically sound and trustworthy information in

the media.” The Climate Feedback team of reviewers is composed of research scientists who review popular articles on climate change, rating each article’s scientific credibility. Climate Feedback is funded by the University of California, Merced; the University of California’s Center for Information Research in the Interest of Society; and individual contributions.

Founded: 2015

Home page: climatefeedback.org

About: climatefeedback.org/About

Fact Checker

A feature of the *Washington Post*, Fact Checker is the work of journalist Glenn Kessler. The stated purpose of Fact Checker “is to ‘truth squad’ the statements of political figures regarding issues of great importance, be they national, international or local.” The *Washington Post* is funded through advertising and subscription revenues and, since 2013, has been owned by Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos.

Launched: 2011

Home page: www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker

About: www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/about-the-fact-checker

FactCheck

FactCheck bills itself as “nonpartisan, nonprofit ‘consumer advocate’ for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics.” FactCheck is supported by funding from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

Launched: 2003

Home page: www.factcheck.org

About: www.factcheck.org/about/our-mission

FiveThirtyEight

Taking its name from the number of electors in the US electoral college, FiveThirtyEight (also known as 538) uses statistical methodology to analyze public opinion and provide numerical analysis of politics, sports, science and health, economics, and culture. Founded in 2008 by statistician Nate Silver, FiveThirtyEight was affiliated with the *New York Times* from 2010 to 2012 before being acquired by ESPN.

Launched: 2008

Home page: fivethirtyeight.com

About: fivethirtyeight.com/masthead

Full Fact

Billing itself as “the UK’s independent factchecking charity,” Full Fact is supported by individual contributions and foundation grants, including major gifts from investor George Soros and Iranian American eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Full Fact focuses on such UK social and political issues as the economy, international relations, health, crime, immigration, education, and law.

Launched: 2009

Home page: fullfact.org

About: fullfact.org/about

Hoax-Slayer

Hoax-Slayer is a resource for checking up on the credibility of online hoaxes, social media rumors, scams, and Internet security matters. Hoax-Slayer is supported through advertising and affiliate marketing.

Launched: 2003

Home page: www.hoax-slayer.net

About: www.hoax-slayer.net/about-this-blog

Information Is Beautiful

The mission of Information Is Beautiful is “to distill the world’s data, information and knowledge into beautiful and useful graphics and diagrams.” The visualizations appearing on Information Is Beautiful cover an eclectic assortment of topics ranging from media-inflamed fears to gender pay gaps to misconceptions and myths. The site is self-funded.

Founded: 2009

Home page: www.informationisbeautiful.net

About: www.informationisbeautiful.net/about

Media Bias/Fact Check

Media Bias/Fact Check uses an explicit methodology to rate other media outlets on a scale that ranges from Left Bias to Right Bias and includes such categories as “Pro-Science,” “Conspiracy-Pseudoscience,” “Questionable Sources,” and “Satire.” Media Bias/Fact Check is supported by advertising, gifts from individuals, and “the pockets of our fact checkers.”

Launched: 2015

Home page: mediabiasfactcheck.com

About: mediabiasfactcheck.com/about

MedlinePlus

A service of the US National Library of Medicine, MedlinePlus offers “reliable, up-to-date health information, anytime, anywhere, for free.” MedlinePlus is especially useful for fact-checking information found on commercial and nonprofit sites offering health information. The funding for MedlinePlus is provided by the US government.

Founded: 1998

Home page: medlineplus.gov

About: medlineplus.gov/aboutmedlineplus.html

OpenSecrets

OpenSecrets is the website of the Center for Responsive Politics. The mission of OpenSecrets is “tracking money in US politics and its effect on elections and public policy.” OpenSecrets is supported by grants, individual contributions, licensing data, and payment for custom research.

Launched: 1996

Home page: www.opensecrets.org

About: www.opensecrets.org/about

Politifact

Run by editors and reporters from the *Tampa Bay Times*, Politifact bills itself as “a fact-checking website that rates the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others who speak up in American politics.” Politifact is supported by funding from the *Tampa Bay Times*, grants, online partnerships, and advertising.

Founded: 2017

Home page: www.politifact.com

About: www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2013/nov/01/principles-politifact-punditfact-and-truth-o-meter

Sense about Science

UK-based Sense about Science describes itself as “an independent campaigning charity that challenges the misrepresentation of science and evidence in public life.” Sense about Science is funded by gifts from individuals, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations.

Founded: 2002

Home page: senseaboutscience.org

About: senseaboutscience.org/who-we-are

Sunlight Foundation

The mission of the Sunlight Foundation is to use “civic technology, open data, policy analysis and journalism to make our government and politics more accountable and transparent to all.” For example, the Sunlight Foundation makes government information available through its “Hall of Justice” web page (hallofjustice.sunlightfoundation.com), which provides access to state and national data sets relating to criminal justice. The Sunlight Foundation is supported by gifts from private individuals and foundations.

Launched: 2006

Home page: sunlightfoundation.com

About: sunlightfoundation.com/about

Snopes

Also known as the “Urban Legends Reference Pages,” Snopes addresses urban legends, Internet rumors, and stories of dubious origin. The sole source of income for Snopes comes from advertisements that appear on the website.

Launched: 1994

Home page: www.snopes.com

About: www.snopes.com/about-snopes

TruthOrFiction

TruthOrFiction describes itself as “a non-partisan website where Internet users can quickly and easily get information about e-rumors, warnings, offers, requests for help, myths, hoaxes, virus warnings, and humorous or inspirational stories that are circulated by email.” TruthOrFiction tends not to focus on current events.

Launched: 1999

Home page: www.truthorfiction.com

About: www.truthorfiction.com/about-us

World Factbook

Created and maintained by the US Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook “provides information on the history, people, government, economy, geography, communications, transportation, military, and transnational issues for 267 world entities.” World Factbook also includes numerous political and geographic maps covering the entire world.

Founded: 1962

Home page: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/index.html>

About: www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/docs/history.html

WHEN CHECKING MATTERS MOST

Recapping some points made in previous chapters, there are certain situations when making use of information watchdogs like the ones listed here is especially well advised:

- When you encounter information that plays on your emotions by making you feel especially angry, happy, fearful, vindicated, and so on.
- When you encounter information promoting conclusions that are especially outrageous, unconventional, or iconoclastic. Any information that “defies all the experts” or “changes everything” merits careful scrutiny before it can be accepted as credible.
- When the stakes are high—as when there is much to be lost if the information turns out to be noncredible—it is especially important to make sure that information is credible.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

For any information resource, but especially for those that claim to fact-check other information resources, it is worth finding out what you can about the source of funding. In the online world, you can often find information about funding sources on a site's "About" page. Any credible information resource will be up front about its sources of funding. Typically, funding for information resources comes from one or more of the following sources:

Advertisements

When an information resource is funded by advertisements, the important question to ask is, "What influence, if any, do advertisers have on the information content?" While the ideal is for advertisers to have no influence at all, that ideal is easier met in theory than in practice. For example, if an information resource carries advertisements from fast-food restaurants, can it be fully truthful when it comes to reporting anything that is critical of the fast food industry? Maybe yes. Maybe no. In either case, the question about the relationship between advertisers and credibility still needs to be asked.

Gifts

Many online information resources avoid, or at least minimize, the problem of accepting advertising dollars by instead financing their operations through gifts from individuals and foundations. While it is unlikely that an individual who contributes a few dollars a year to a favorite information resource is in a position to influence content, a wealthy individual or deep-pockets foundation that provides significant support may expect something in return. The potential influence of large gifts raises similar concerns to those raised by advertising revenue. For example, the Full Fact website described earlier is funded in part by billionaire George Soros, a major supporter of Democratic Party candidates in US elections. While it is possible for funders to take a hands-off approach that leaves content decisions to independent editors and writers, the possible influence of major donors on sites like Full Fact must certainly be taken into consideration when evaluating their credibility and impartiality.

Government Funding

It should come as no surprise that governments are quite capable of lying. This means that it is perfectly reasonable to ask if politics could influence the

content of government-supported information resources. World Factbook (mentioned earlier) is a perfect example, seeing that it is funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency—an organization with a long history of playing fast and loose with the truth. In its defense, because World Factbook presents nonclassified information that is largely statistical in nature (such as population, economic, and geographic data), its sponsorship by a clandestine intelligence organization is not as problematic as if World Factbook were presenting subjective information that is more susceptible to politically motivated manipulation. An important distinction to make when evaluating government-supported information resources is the difference between information resources produced by government agencies in fulfillment of their official missions (such as the information provided by the Census Bureau or the National Institutes of Health) versus overtly political sources of government information (such as the web pages of elected officials). While the former may or may not be influenced by political considerations, the latter are, by their very nature, entirely political.

FIGHTING THE SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS

A number of initiatives have been launched in recent years to fight the spread of noncredible information, many surfacing in the wake of the furor over fake news that erupted in the latter half of 2016. While it is unlikely that such efforts can entirely eliminate fake news, the question remains, "Do these initiatives have the potential to push back on the problem of fake news and, more broadly, the spread of information that is simply not credible?"

Emerging Efforts

One example of emerging efforts to fight fake news is the April 2017 pledge of the philanthropic investment firm Omidyar Network to donate \$100 million over three years for the purpose of "supporting independent media, tackling misinformation and hate speech, and looking at ways in which technology can help repair relationships between citizens and government."² Similarly, and at approximately the same time, Jimmy Wells, the founder of *Wikipedia*, announced plans to launch Wikitribune, a project to pair experienced journalists with volunteer amateurs for the purpose of creating a credible, factually based, ad-free source for news.³

Social Media

A number of social media outlets (see figure 8.1) have taken blame for their role as conduits of fake news. In response to criticism from individuals, politicians, and (perhaps most persuasively) major advertisers, such social media outlets as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have promised to take steps to reduce fake news on social media:

- Shortly after the US elections of 2016, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg promised that Facebook would institute measures to combat the proliferation of fake news.⁴
- In 2017, both Google and Bing began adding “fact check” tags to stories that have been judged truthful by multiple news publishers and fact-checking organizations.⁵
- Also in 2017, Twitter began looking for ways to allow its users to flag fake news.⁶

Whether these or other efforts will succeed remains to be seen. Both Google and Facebook failed a major test of their abilities to fight fake news in October 2017 when they posted fake news regarding the Las Vegas Strip shooting alongside reports from credible information sources.⁷ Realistically, social media outlets face formidable financial and practical hurdles if they are to fight fake news. Besides staying afloat financially, any social media outlets wishing to stem the proliferation of fake news must confront the complexity and nuance of what does or does not constitute fake news while avoiding actions that reflect either partisanship or censorship.

AI Solutions?

Could technology, in the form of machine learning tools or straight-up artificial intelligence (AI), solve the problem of separating credible information from noncredible information? Some are trying that approach. In November 2016, Google provided funding to Full Fact (described earlier) to develop automated fact-checking software.⁸ In August 2017 journalists began trying out the Full Fact fact-checking software, quickly discovering it to be somewhat fallible in the early stage of its development.⁹ While it is likely that automated fact-checking software will improve over time, there are strong arguments that artificial intelligence will never become good enough at negotiating the



FIGURE 8.1
Popular social media outlets. *istock/543077374*

nuances of language, data, and opinion to fully automate the task of evaluating information.¹⁰

RECAP

Information watchdogs can be helpful to anyone seeking to evaluate information. However, they are not a cure-all for fake news and noncredible information, and the same caveats apply to information watchdogs as apply to the information sources they strive to evaluate. Awareness of fake news has led to the emergence of new initiatives to push back against fake news as well

as attempts to use advanced technology to help people identify noncredible information. The newness of such efforts, coupled with the complexity of evaluating information, means that their ultimate success or failure remains to be seen.