

Research and Quality Sources

Sometimes, students are a little bit lost in terms of what I mean when I say research. Before the Internet became a huge part of our lives, the answer was easy: go to a library and find out what experts think.

However, the digital revolution has changed this... sort of. Here's a short guide to how you should think about research and the quality of the sources of information you use.

Avoid the Junk

Unfortunately, as I said in class, 90-95% of the internet is garbage. That's not an official estimate, that's just a useful way of thinking about it. The internet is basically what happens when anyone with a computer becomes able to publish any random thing they think, believe, or want others to believe.

Social Media Websites are notorious for this problem. Studies have found, for example, that:

- “Fake” news reports circulate 16x faster than “real” news reports on Facebook. Fake news spreads fast, while real news limps behind.
- The “algorithm” on Youtube and Facebook seem to push increasingly “extreme” material to users. This is not because Youtube and Facebook want you to become a political radical, but because more extreme information will make you stay on their webpage longer, see more ads, and make these companies more money.
- Twitter is a website where “hot takes” about issues circulate at high speed. It is possible to be kicked off Twitter for spreading misinformation, but it needs to be extreme. Meanwhile, Twitter is actively used by various governments who use bot farms to create public opinion—often really *stupid* public opinion.

Other social network sites—like Tumblr, Instagram, 지식인, Quora, TikTok, and more—have similar problems.

This doesn't mean you can't find good sources of information on these sites. There are smart, thoughtful experts on all of these platforms who are sharing real, reliable information. But it can be hard to tell who is or isn't reliable, and it can also be hard to find the good stuff since there's so much junk, personal opinion, and nonsense all over these platforms. In general, “I saw it on [social media site]” is basically the same as saying, “I didn't bother to research this topic. I know nothing verifiable about it.”

It Was in the News!

If social media platforms are untrustworthy because they exist to make money—not to promote truth—then we need to ask ourselves how much we can trust news media sources. Most newspapers, TV news outlets, and news magazines have a well-known political bias: everyone in Korea knows that the Chosun Ilbo leans conservative, and the Hankyoreh leans progressive, for example. This is also true internationally: The New York Times is centrist/right-of-center; the Toronto Star is very conservative; Mother Jones is very progressive.

The danger—for us, as academic writers—is less about the obviously political stuff in newspapers, TV news, and news magazines. The real danger is more about the subtly political stuff, the *distortions* that creep in, the facts or context that gets left out of reporting. Sometimes context or omitted facts completely change a story.

A simple example: every once in a while, the South Korean news media widely reported that “foreigner crime” is “quickly rising.” They almost never bother to mention that the crime rate among foreign residents in Korea remains, on average, *far* lower than the national average. Similarly, none of the many articles about electric kickboards that were published over the last few years bothered to show the statistics for deaths in car accidents, scooter accidents, tractor accidents, and even bicycle accidents... but more people die from each of those other methods of transportation than electric kickboards.

The other thing about news is that journalists don’t always understand what they’re writing about. Talk to any scientist and you’ll learn all about how terrible mainstream science reporting actually is: most mainstream news reports on scientific discoveries get more wrong than they get right. Journalists aren’t experts, and the topics they have to write about are complex and difficult. They also need to write about them in a very simplified way, using not too many difficult words and not too many words in total.

But also: newspapers are businesses. Newspapers are owned by companies that have an agenda. Newspapers need to sell advertising—which is why newspapers have sports sections and lifestyle sections. These translate to pressures on newspapers to report the news a certain way, to leave certain things out.

Newspapers are a way of finding out what people are talking about, but they’re a terrible way of finding reliable information in context that will help you understand an issue.

What about Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is *great* if you know nothing about a topic, and want to quickly learn about it. It can be a *wonderful* resource for that. Everyone uses it for that, even the professors who used to warn students, “Well, don’t trust it too much, because anyone can edit Wikipedia.”

However... those professors were right to ask students not to trust Wikipedia too much, and they still are. The quality of Wikipedia is much higher than it was, but it’s also not a problem free-source of information. Edit wars have happened in the past: if you look into the edit archives for the page on Dokdo, you’ll find a long history of very politically motivated edits. Wikipedia is supposed to be an impartial source of facts, not a place for opinions: when people disagree, Wikipedia’s job is to note the disagreement. Many pages on various topics have, in the past, been political and social battlegrounds.

Similarly, there have been many cases of people who cynically edited Wikipedia to serve their own personal agenda—whether to attack their professional rivals, make themselves look good, or whatever.

So yes, it’s still a good idea to not trust Wikipedia too much.

The good thing about Wikipedia is that editors are required to show their sources: if you scroll down to the bottom of a Wikipedia page, you’ll find a list of sources. This is one indicator that you’re dealing with a source that cares about facts: you can go “check their sources” and learn more.

It Was In a Book!

Books vary in quality, obviously. Some science books are full of nonsense. Some history books present a very distorted version of events. Other books might contain a lot of references, but misrepresent the meaning of the material they draw from those sources.

If you want to find out how trustworthy a book is, here are a few things you can do:

- **Read some critical reviews of the book.** It's especially helpful to search for a "critical review" of the book. This will get you reviews by people—sometimes even experts—who disagree with the book and will point out the problems they saw in it.
- **Read about the author of the book.** Is the person considered as an expert on the topic of the book? Albert Einstein's opinions about physics deserve consideration, but his opinions about classical music or the best apple pie recipe are just his personal opinions.
- **Check the references section of the book.** Having a lot of references doesn't *always* mean the author is serious about truth and facts: some authors have long references sections in the backs of their books because they want to *seem* like they're more trustworthy than they are. (Malcolm Gladwell is a notorious example of a writer who isn't trustworthy but provides a lot of references.) However, having references means the person at least bothered to provide the tools for people to check their sources of information. At the very least, if there is no references section, you need to be wary. (Unless the book uses some other system to show references, like footnotes.)
- **Look at the publisher.** Of course some great nonfiction books are published by commercial publishers, but books that are published by university presses are more likely to be academically credible sources of information.
- **Look at the date of the book.** Information turnover is a real thing, and books become dated by new research, discoveries, and breakthroughs. In some fields, information can become outdated anywhere from two to ten years after it's published.

Academic-Quality Sources

The best sources for information are still to be found “in the library” or, at least, through a university library’s website.

The reason academic sources are more trustworthy—in theory—is because academics are not working for money. When you publish academic articles and books, the economics is reputation economics: you don’t make much money, but you do earn the respect of other experts in your field. If you use bad data, mislead your readers, or distort facts, you also pay the price mostly in a loss of respect. This is not the sort of thing experts do, so you lose your right to be considered an expert.

Therefore, your best sources of academic-quality information:

1. Recent **books by experts** in the field.
2. Recent **journal articles**, published in respected journals on the subject.

That doesn’t mean you should always trust everything in an academic book or article. Google “replication crisis” or read some old science journals. Knowledge changes and develops over time, and some of what we thought was true is discovered not to be true. But you’re still better off with an academic source than anything else.