How to evaluate information credibility?

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As part of your studies, you will frequently be required to prepare reports or presentations on given topics. To do so, you will need to base your work on bibliographical resources such as books, newspaper articles, research papers or websites. However, not all sources are equal in terms of quality but also of credibility. For example, some may contain false information, while other may try to influence your opinion without providing a fair analysis of the topic.

This document aims to give you some tips on how to evaluate the credibility of an information or a source. This has become especially important with the current concerns about "fake news," i.e., false information that was purposely and massively published on social media to manipulate readers, with political motives. This short guide is based on the following resources:

- How do I know if a source is credible? by Rasmussen College,
- How to check your sources for credibility by EasyBib,
- Evaluating resources by UC Berkeley,
- Evaluating information by CSU Chico,
- Identifying reliable sources by Wikipedia.

As a general rule, when evaluating the credibility of some information or resource, you should be especially careful of the following elements:

1. **Authority: who is the author?**

   - Does the author have adequate credentials (qualifications)? This includes degrees, the field they are in, as well as current and past jobs.
   - If the document is written by an organization, identify whether it is a company, a professional organization, a governmental organization, or a non governmental organization. Except independent institutions who are usually expected to remain neutral, most other organizations will tend to favor their own financial or political interests.
   - Has the information be reviewed independently? This is the case of academic journals, where publications are evaluated by independent researchers using a peer review process.
   - In case of doubts, Google the name of the author and see what else he/she has written, or what people are saying about his/her work. Investigating how an author is funded can also be revealing, although it is often difficult to achieve.

2. **Bias: does the author try to influence your opinion?**

   - What is the goal of the author: inform, teach, entertain, sell, or influence? In other words, is it information, facts, opinion, or propaganda?
   - Is the information presented objective and impartial? Although no document is perfectly impartial[1], it should at least consider several points of view.

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[1] We all have our own political opinions. For example, newspapers typically have a general political orientation.

- A wide variety of techniques can be used to manipulate readers. Being aware of the most common ones can help you identify them when they are used. It is however important to try to distinguish *disinformation*, i.e., a deliberate lie to mislead, from *misinformation*, i.e., a honest mistake.
- If you think a source or an information is biased, you may still use it, but keep this fact in mind when refering to it. Additionally, look for contradictory information to balance your point of view.

3. **Quality: does it look professional?**

   - Is the provided information or data accurate? Do other reliable sources confirm it?
   - Are the sources clearly cited? Are they primary or secondary sources?
   - Is the tone of the text neutral or emotional?
   - Are spelling, grammar, style, and structure appropriate?

4. **Currency: when was it written?**

   - Is the presented information outdated?
   - If so, does it matter?

Contrary to most sources, Wikipedia should be considered as what it is, an encyclopedia:

- It is neither a primary or a secondary source, but a tertiary source. This means that it "consists of information which is a distillation and collection of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are original materials on which other research is based, while secondary sources are interpretations and evaluations of primary sources."

- In itself, Wikipedia is not a reliable source as it can be edited by anybody, which can lead to many issues, such as vandalism. This is especially the case for controversial topics. See Wikipedia's own dedicated article on this topic.

- This does not mean that you should not use Wikipedia. I actually recommend it for discovering a new topic, understanding its basics and obtaining other (primary or secondary) references. It can also be very useful for factual topics, such as mathematics or physics.