# Deciding what to trust online

## 1. Introduction

The Internet puts a great deal of information at your disposal, some of it useful and informative, some of it misleading and some of it just plain wacky. The difficulty can be in deciding what to trust.

### Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should have developed some criteria for judging the accuracy and reliability of information you find online.

## 2. Google express

Watch the video

The video has captions and a transcript is available on the YouTube site. To access the transcript or to make the video larger, click the YouTube logo to be taken through to the YouTube page the video lives on.  This will open in a new window. The transcript is available on this page from the ellipsis ('three dots') menu.
What is your reaction?

## 3. When is trust important?

The video is a spoof, created by Google for April Fool's Day. It is professionally produced with a persuasive voice-over, and the first 15 seconds are just about plausible. As more details are revealed, the scenario becomes increasingly unlikely.

However, sometimes things are not so clear-cut and even after watching or viewing you are unsure whether to believe what you read.

Read each of the following three scenarios and decide how important it is in each case to know that your information source is trustworthy.

### Buying a new washing machine

Your old washing machine has broken down and you need to find a new one, but your budget is tight. You visit some price comparison websites and decide to buy a new machine through a site you have not come across previously, but which offers the lowest price.

## Deciding where to stay for a long weekend

You are planning a special weekend away with some old friends and want to find a nice, reasonably priced hotel. One of the group googles the name of the town you are staying in and finds a hotel which describes itself in glowing terms. In the photos on the website it looks spacious and luxurious. However, reviews are mixed.

## Finding information for your studies

You are researching the Australian bushfires in Autumn 2019 for your assignment. You know from previous experience that the most reliable information is generally found in Library online journals. The problem is that little has been published in the academic literature so far. You find some promising-looking websites. However, you are not sure about the sources used.

# 4. Trustometer

You could think of the decision-making process as a kind of barometer which changes in response to a variable set of factors - your 'trustometer', if you like.

Thinking about each of the scenarios in the previous section, how would you go about deciding whether to trust any of the online information sources referred to? How might this vary in different cases?

Often you are taking a calculated risk when deciding whether or not to trust an online source of information. What you decide to do will depend on how much time you have available and what is at stake.

## Our thoughts

For example, in the case of choosing a washing machine, the old one may have broken down three weeks ago, you have several children who constantly need clean clothes and your budget is very limited. In this case you may decide to buy the cheapest machine available which can be delivered quickly.

When choosing a hotel for a weekend away with friends, you may feel cautious about the image presented by the hotel itself. The opinion of your friend might carry as much weight as the subjective reviews on the website.

When writing an academic essay, you will probably want to spend time verifying information you find on the open web, and ask the advice of your tutor if it proves difficult to get hold of reliable sources on the topic you have chosen. You will lose marks for including sources which turn out not to be accurate and credible.

## 5. Evaluation Criteria

In this activity you have looked at some examples of different situations when you might look for information on the web. You have had a go at coming up with your own criteria for evaluating information sources. Below is a summary of some key points to bear in mind. How far does it reflect your own views?

### Who:

How much do you know about the person or organisation providing the information? What sort of authority do they have for any statements or opinions they put forward? How do they back up opinions or facts? What sort of language do they use? Language that is either emotionally charged or vague can be a danger sign.

### Why:

Can you detect any bias or agenda? Who has put the information there? Do the authors state clearly the viewpoint they are taking? Can you detect any vested interests? (you may need to dig deep to uncover these).

### When:

Can you find out when the source was last updated?

A quick way of judging the quality and relevance of a source is to use the **WWW** framework. It is particularly useful if you have a large number of results and want to first filter them to weed out any that are not relevant.

## 6. Summary

The Internet puts a great deal of information at your disposal, some of it useful and informative, some of it misleading and some of it just plain wacky.
This activity should have helped you develop some criteria for judging the accuracy and reliability of information you find online.

## Next Steps

If you want to, try evaluating the Google video in this activity, using the WWW framework. If you get the opportunity, compare your 'trustometer' with someone else and see how far you agree. You may wish to return to your criteria at regular intervals and re-evaluate in the light of experience.