

Being digital

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: The YouTube Collection

Read this transcript of a video currently being shown on YouTube. Think about your reactions as you read through.

Video description	Narration
Introductory montage of people watching and listening to YouTube clips	Since our founding in 2005, we at YouTube have continually strived to bring you the best possible video experience on the Internet – but that is all about to change. Our latest innovation gives you a way to literally hold YouTube in your hand. Introducing the YouTube Collection – on DVD. It's the complete YouTube experience, completely off line.

Video description	Narration
<p>Woman unpacking a series of successively smaller boxes from a giant box in her front room</p>	<p>Joining YouTube videos has never been easier. With the YouTube Collection, DVDs have been conveniently organised into a system of nested modules. Simply navigate through the modules, until you find the DVD of your choice.</p>
<p>Videos being watched on a television</p>	<p>Each DVD menu is populated with video thumbnails. Just like on YouTube.com, you can select your playback resolution – and yes, Full Screen mode is available if desired.</p>
<p>Boy opening and using an 'Interactivity Kit', filling in feedback form, and choosing red and green thumbs cutout</p>	<p>The YouTube Collection doesn't require the Internet, but you don't lose interactivity. Just fill out the 'Comment Form' and place it in one of the self-addressed stamped envelopes. Don't forget to throw in a green 'Thumbs Up' or a red 'Thumbs Down'.</p>
<p>Video creators reading and responding to feedback</p>	<p>Your feedback will be sent directly to the creator of that particular video, so you can maintain the dialogue that you're used to.</p>
<p>Montage of YouTube videos on a television</p>	<p>The YouTube Collection isn't just a sampling of YouTube – it's all of YouTube ... every YouTube video uploaded ever.</p>

Video description	Narration
Fleet of trucks delivering pallets of large boxes to a suburban residence, and unloading them.	As soon as you sign up, we'll dispatch a fleet of 175 YouTube trucks to your home. Your nested video modules will arrive securely shrink-wrapped on pre-categorised pallets.
Pack mule delivering boxes of DVDs to a location on a steep hill.	If you live on a steep grade, or area with low overpasses, your DVDs will be delivered by pack mule.
Boxes being delivered to a residence.	Since approximately an hour of video is uploaded to YouTube every second, you'll receive a new truck-load every week.
Gift wrapped giant box being delivered to an elderly relative	And, if you sign up now, we'll give the entire DVD library to a friend or relative of your choice ... totally free.
Scroll-down of fictional YouTube webpage.	Visit youtube.com/theyoutubecollection . Order now and select from a number of free add-ons ...
Young man looking at a laser disc	... including trending videos on laser disc ...

Video description	Narration
Vinyl record being placed on a player	... royalty-free soundtracks on vinyl ...
Elderly lady adding video to a large collection on a shelving unit.	... or weather-proof exterior DVD shelving for when your collection gets too large for the inside of your home.
Young woman relaxing amidst a whole pile of boxes, DVD cases and vinyl records	Order the YouTube Collection on DVD. Simple, economical, convenient.
Spinning disc resting on the YouTube Collection logo.	A whole new way to enjoy the videos you love.

3: When is trust important

The transcript you have just read comes from a spoof video, created by Google for April Fools 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 through the three scenarios below. For each one, decide how important it would be to know that your information source is trustworthy?

Scenario 1: 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, such as Appliances Online, and decide to buy a new machine through a site you have not come across previously, but which offers the lowest price.

Scenario 2: 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.

Scenario 3: Finding information for your studies

You are researching the 2012 Romanian protests 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: Your trustometer

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

Make some notes for yourself.

(You will find feedback for this question in Appendix 1 on page 9.)

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?

- **Need:** What is your need or requirement in this particular situation? Think about what you are planning to do with the information. How important is it that the source is trustworthy?
- **Agenda:** 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.)
- **Credibility:** 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.

These criteria can be summarised with the acronym NAC. You may wish to note other criteria you feel are important.

(You will find a list of important questions to use when evaluating online content in Appendix 2 on page 9.)

Use the **NAC** criteria to evaluate the YouTube video transcript you read at the beginning of this activity. If you get the opportunity, compare your 'trustometer' with someone else and see how far you agree. Return to your criteria at regular intervals and re-evaluate in the light of experience.

References

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YouTube (2012) The YouTube Collection: The Magic of You Tube in Your Hands, available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_UmWdcTrrc (accessed 13th September 2012)

Appendix 1: Answers and feedback

Your trustometer (page 6)

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.

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.

Appendix 2: Additional resource

Evaluation criteria: Questions to ask of online information

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.

You might want to print this page, and use it as a handy reference.

Need

- How important is it that the source is trustworthy?
- Think about what you are planning to do with any information you find.

Agenda

- 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.)

Credibility

- 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.