Assessing the reliability of information for your assignment
Session Transcript

TRAINER: OK. Hopefully my slides will just load up in a second then, and we can make a start on the session.

Thank you very much for taking the time to join us today. Today's session is going to be about assessing the reliability of information for your assignment.

So what that means, if I explain it in a bit more depth, is when you're coming to do your assignment-- or even if you're just doing some research-- and you want to find some information that you want to make sure is good, it's trustworthy, it's reliable, and useful, today's session is going to give you some skills, tips, and guidance to help you with that.

Now, I know looking through the different subjects that people do study, we've got a real mix of some-- like psychology, sociology. We had some people from the Access courses as well, and we had a number of people doing IT and some doing environmental science. So there's little tips and tricks that we can point out for you for your specific subject to help you look at things in a bit more depth and start making some good decisions about what good information is.

So the objectives of today, then is the first one-- to be able to use a framework to assess the reliability of information. And there's two frameworks that I'm going to be presenting to you today that you can use as a quick, easy, nice introduction of how to look at a piece of information and start thinking, is this reliable? Is this trustworthy? Is this useful? And so what we then want you to be able to do from there is to be able to assess the reliability of information for yourself and start assessing its usefulness as well. So how useful is it going to be for your actual assignment, perhaps, or piece of research that you are doing?

So why do we need to assess reliability? And there's a few reasons for this.

The first one-- if I put this into a bit of a bigger context is at the moment, there's a lot of talk about what's called fake news. Now, I personally, I'm not a fan of that phrase-- fake news-- because it's thrown around a lot at the moment that if you disagree with something, you just say, oh, that's fake news. And so you don't trust it. You don't believe it. It's not reliable. And I think that's too broad. It's not a good statement for that. I think a better way to think about it is about misinformation or disinformation. And just because some information isn't reliable, that doesn't mean that it isn't useful.

And as you're going through your studies, then, if I make it more specific to you, you're not probably going to come across anything that you would call fake news as such, such as some of the disinformation that's gone around about elections and stuff, unless you are doing politics. But if you're doing, say, a science-based subject, an environment-based subject, or psychology, you still need to look at information that someone's written and make a judgement on how trustworthy and reliable it is.

With the amount of information that's out there, it's good to have a quick, easy way that during your study, or your work, or just life generally, to look at something and think, is this reliable? Can I trust what I'm reading here? So that's why we teach this. That's why it's useful and hopefully applicable to yourselves.

So here's the two frameworks that I'm going to be presenting to you today. And we're going to have a little bit of an opportunity later on for you to try and apply this criteria to a couple of resources and see if you can make a judgement for yourself.

So the first one is what we call the WWW framework. And this is a nice, quick, easy way. So if you're, perhaps, just starting out on your studies, you may be doing an Access course or a level 1. This is probably a good framework for you to use. So it's who, why, and when.

And what we mean by that is, first of all, who is the author? Who has written this? Are they somebody who does seem to be an authority on the subject? Are they an academic, perhaps, or somebody who has written or published a lot on a particular topic?

Why is the next w. So why has this been written? Has this got a purpose behind it? Is it to try and inform? Is it to put across a particular point of view or an agenda? It might not be something that's particularly nefarious behind it. But an example might be that you find, perhaps, some environmental research that's being sponsored by a very large company who wants to downplay the impacts their environmental impact, such as Coca-Cola. So they might have sponsored some research to say, well, actually, the environmental impacts of our work isn't as high at all. Here's a report on it that we've published.

You might then think, well they have done this for a reason. So the information might not be entirely trustworthy. It could just be that somebody's researched something because they want to discover information, evidence, and facts around it. So thinking about the motivation, the reasons why something's being created, is a good thing to do.

And when-- and by when, we mean, is it still relevant? Is it still up-to-date? Something that's published 50 years ago in psychology, for example, might still have a lot of relevance today. But in another area, such as history, as an example, it might be that something more recently has come to light, a new piece of evidence, and so an opinion or an idea that was believed to be true 50 years ago might not be again today. So have a think about when it was published and think about, well, is it timely? Is it still relevant?

Now, you'll notice in the prompt criteria, those three things-- the who, the why, the when-- come in different areas as well. So when-- you can say that's the timeliness. The why-- so you can be thinking about the objectivity of it, like how biassed is it? Is it balanced? And the provenance as well-- and by the provenance, we mean, well, where's it come from? What's its origin? So who, again, has created this? Why is this resource being created?

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Now, I want to have a little look at these-- skip that slide; I think I've described most of that already, actually; I'll leave it up while I do talk a bit more, though. Starting to think about how you can actually apply these and use these in your studies in an actual context. And the first way that I want to do that is to share with you a particular article that I want you to look at.

So I'm going to open up a pod, and there's a few things in here that I just want to point out to you. The first one is this poster that we've got here, How to Spot Fake News. There's a copy of that, that you can download from the files pod here. I appreciate it is covering up a bit of the slide, and I will move it out of the way in a second. Don't worry about that. But if you want a copy of that picture, you can download it there, and I'll be making this pod available at the end.

Now I'm just going to hide that away. So we'll bring it back at the end. There's a couple of web links I want to share with you.

The first one that we've got here is an article on a Neanderthal mother and a den of-- I can never say this one correctly-- Denisovan father. Now, this is an article that was published quite recently, and what I'd like you to do is to access this article for me. And the way we're going to do this is you can click on the article in the Web Links box and then click the Browse To button that appears, and it will take you to the website. I'm also going to put that article into the chat box for you as well as a link.

And what I'd like you to do is to go to this article. And what I'm going to do then is together, we're going to go through this article, and we're going to start picking out some information from it that we can use with the prompt criteria and this poster, the IFLA poster here, How to Spot Fake News. And we can start assessing the reliability of that information.

So this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to ask you very quickly. Then I'm going to change my screen slightly. You've got the links in the chat box. If you can click on that, I'm going to share my screen as well. And I'm going to navigate to the website.

It may ask you to log in, by the way, which isn't a problem. If it does ask you to log in, please do. But just while it loads up, if you can give me a quick yes in the chat box if you are able to see on your screen that I'm sharing, but also if you'd brought it up for yourself, brilliant. So we can all hopefully see the same thing. I appreciate you might be swapping back and forth.

Now, the prompt criteria, then, that we're going to have a look at, and we're going to look in a bit more depth, is, first of all, looking at the presentation. So all together, and we're going to have a look at this. We're going to have a look at the presentation. So you can either look on my screen that I'm sharing as I scroll through, or you can be looking for yourself.

And what I'd like you to do is put in the chat box. Having a look at it, does this look professionally presented? Does this look of an academic quality? That the information that

it's showing does seem to have some thorough research done into it? If you could put a comment in the chat box what your thoughts might be.

Yes. Gary's pointing out my Freudian slip there with the fake news. Brilliant.

But have a look at the thing. So that's something you can make an initial judgement of. Some times, you'll find, you look at something, you'll be like, oh, there's spelling mistakes here, or something's incorrectly presented.

So let's start having a think about the relevance, which is the next thing on the prompts. Now, the relevance is to do with, is it relating to your studies that you're doing at the moment? Now, I appreciate not everyone's going to be looking at the genome of the offspring of a Neanderthal mother and a Denisovan father. But if you were, this is something, then, that you need to think about. Is this relevant? Is this informing my study?

The next one along, then, is objectivity. So does this seem to be balanced? Now, without reading too much into it, there's a few things that you can start looking at and start trying to pick out.

Does it anywhere in the article say that they've got any other vested interests, acknowledgements, or anything that might bias or influence the research in any way? And good areas to look at that is you might find Acknowledgments or Review Information-- how many authors there are. If there is a wide selection of authors, then you can start making the inference, or such assumption, or judgement, that they're bringing in a lot of diverse people's opinions.

So you can look through and then start making a judgement. Do you think this is objective? Is this balanced?

So without having to read a huge amount of it, give me a quick verdict in the chat box for yourself. What do you think? Do you think this is a nicely-balanced piece of research, from just a quick scroll and a look through it? What thoughts do you have, perhaps?

Yeah. There's some good comments, saying it looks really professionally laid out for the first point. There was somebody did point out as well, there's lots of authors-- from Rosie. And that's a good point, because it is thinking, then-- it has been peer reviewed as well, which is a brilliant thing to point out that we will go back to in a second. So Beryl's made a really good point there. Diverse views from Joyce, yeah.

There's a lot of authors in this, so you can start thinking, actually, there's going to be quite a lot of input, quite a lot of diversity, and a good collaborative effort to it. And Eugene makes a very good point following up on that.

So what we can then be thinking about is the method. And by the method, it might be the methodology. So again, you can be looking on your own copy. I'm going to scroll up to the

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top one, if you're still looking at the share screen. We can scroll through, and can maybe pick anything up on their actual methodology, perhaps.

So here we go-- Methods. There's a whole section here, then, where they're talking about their methods. So they're being transparent about what they're done.

So if someone's being transparent about how they've done something, what kind of judgments, then, do you think you can make on that? What kinds of things come to mind?

There's some people are looking at the foundations behind it. Yeah. They're not hiding anything. There's a brilliant point that Claire's made there. You can reproduce it for yourself. So this is very true within scientific ones but also in historical research as well and in other area's that if they are clear of how they've found, discovered, or researched information, you can try it for yourself and see if you get the same results.

So some really good points people are making. It's very correct. It's some genuine research. They're being open. They're being up front. They're not hiding something. They're saying, this is how we did it. And if you want to, you can go and try again. And Alexandra makes a good point. You can look at their methodology, any statistics that they've presented.

So the provenance, then, in terms of where it's come from and why it's come from-- why is this article being written? And what's the reason this is being done, do you think? Why has this been published? What is it's purpose? So why is this here? What kind of thoughts do people have about that?

So a few people are typing. We'll see what answers people come up with. But if we think about the provenance, about why this is here, why is this being written? Why have these authors come together? And why have they put these ideas down on paper, published them, and shared them?

That's true. Gary makes a good point that presenting it as transparent doesn't always mean that, that's why you would read it in a bit more detail, and you can start making some judgments for yourself. The more that you understand about research methods, you can start thinking, well is this the right method that they could have used?

OK. So there's some people who think that the whole purpose of this is to further our understanding of a topic. This is some new information that had come to light very recently, and so it's sharing this to inform and add to a discussion. So Alexandra, I think, summed that up quite nicely. This is a new discovery that would inform further study. And-- well, yeah. Beryl's saying, yeah, they've discovered something, and there's some kind of value to that.

So the last point then, because I'm very aware of time, is timeliness, then. So the timeliness-- so when was this published?

So there's usually information you can pick out from this. See if you can look at your own copy, perhaps. I can see it on mine. I don't know how clear it is on yours. But we can see at the bottom here when this was actually published. And that's the 6th September 2018.

So looking at the date, then, do we think this is still relevant? Or do we think in this time frame, something might have changed or happened? Or do we think this is pretty up-to-date?

Yeah. Yeah. Brilliant. I'd agree too. This is pretty hot off the press. This is pretty relevant. This is pretty new. And I think this is where you can start using your judgement for the timeliness, and reliability, and usefulness, is that there might have been something in a similar topic published 10, 20 years ago that you might discover, and you think, well, actually this is being published now. Does that add to that? Does it reinforce what's been previously written? Or is it adding a whole new level of understanding?

Now, I'm going to go back to my slides, and hopefully everyone's able to follow me with that. So give me a quick yes in the chat box if you don't mind if you're able to see my slides again. All right. Brilliant. I can move forward then.

So this article here-- I'm going to bring up these, because this is what we've just talked about, then. So the presentation of it. So this is a scientific research covering the subject of human genomes. The language is clear. It's coherent. It's of a good academic level.

It's relevant if that's what you're studying. Obviously, for some people it might be a quick cure for insomnia. But if it is something you are interested in, I'm sure it might be quite riveting a read.

The objectivity of it-- so they're presenting the outcome of testing with no bias. They've got a clear methodology so that people are able to check and reproduce, which is what-- oh, we've got a problem with the slides. Sorry, I'll let Ute handle that. And let me know, I'll keep an eye on it. I think everyone else is able to, though. Sorry.

And so the method again-- so where they excluded some data, included things. So there's a clear reasoning behind the judgments that they've made. But the good point was made earlier that, yes, it might initially look transparent and open, but it is good just to have that quick read through it just to double check.

So the provenance as well-- we had it pointed out in the chat box that we've got the Max-- I'm not going to pronounce this correctly, but I'll have a go-- Flank Institute, and the University of Oxford, the Russian Academy of Science. So you've got people from different backgrounds who have got particular expertises who have worked on this all together.

And again, as we said at the end, the timeliness of the article. It's recent. It's up-to-date, so it's current.

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So hold on this one here, because this is what I want to do now. I want to give you another article, and I want you to think about the prompt criteria again.

So this time, in this box, it's the article here-- an article on an update to a research in homoeopathy. I'm going to put the weblink in the chat box as well just in case you have any issues with the pod.

And this is what I'd like you to do, because we've gone through that one together, working together on it. I'm going to give you about five, six minutes to have a look at this article now-- An Update in Research on Homoeopathy. And what I'd like you to do then, is have a read through that. I don't need you to look at it all in detail, but thinking about the prompt criteria.

So what I can do is go back to the previous slide to help you with this. Oh, I've skipped one too many. I can leave that up for you. And I want you to have a look for yourself, then. And what I'd like you to do is rather than sharing anything in the chat box at this point, if you want to make some notes, or if you've got a good memory, and you can come back to it, have a look at this article on Homoeopathy. And start thinking about the prompt criteria, and then we're going to start discussing, then, how reliable and trustworthy we think this information is.

So this is an opportunity as well, now, where I am going to say if anyone does have any questions that they really want to ask, please do. But I'm going to say five, six minutes. We'll see how we get on. Let's have a go at having a look at this article and seeing what judgments we can make.

And again, please put any questions in the chat box if you're unsure about what you're doing, if you can't access the article, or if there's anything that you do want to bring up that we've already covered at this point.

Again, when you click on the link, it might ask you to log in for yourself again. So that's just your username and password for the OU.

As I said, I don't expect you to read the whole of this article. I think you're just having a look at the presentation, the relevance, the objectivity of it. Like we did with the last one, we didn't read a huge amount of information from it. We're just picking out and looking for key headings, key bits of information. And we are starting to think, starting to use this criteria to make a judgement.

What I will do in a couple of minutes is start inviting people to offer some opinions on this and see what they thought of it.

I assume from the silence in the chat box there aren't any questions or issues at that point. You're all busy and away having a look through it and making some judgments on it.

What I will say, then, I reckon we've got about 3 and 1/2 more minutes. If people want to start putting in some initial thoughts, some ideas on it, any judgments would be. So please do start having some comments in the chat box. Start having a think about what kind of things you're pulling out.

What do you think of the presentation? What about the relevance? The objectivity? Have they used any methods? What's the provenance of this? What's the purpose of this? Has this person got a particular agenda? Is it still timely and relevant, or can, perhaps, anyone think of any information that might have been done before or since?

Yeah. So there's some good points coming up here. OK. So Carrie says his judgement might not be impartial as he is with Richard Dawkins on the validity of it. That's fair enough. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. As long as it's based on some good research facts, then you're entitled to your opinion.

So we're pulling out-- some people are putting the date. That's very good. So this is seven years old now. So in terms of medical development, that's not that up-to-date.

There's also people saying that it doesn't seemed very well laid out. The references that are in it-- it's very heavily reliant.

Can anyone think of anything about what information they've selected? Does it seem to be balanced? Do we think they're being balanced with this?

Yeah. Gary does make a good point with this that they seem to have cherry picked particular information that's backing up and reinforcing what they said.

With the evidence that he's picked out as well, is there any clear information on the methods that they might have used or how they've reached their conclusions?

No sign of methods? So we can't even reproduce for ourselves. We might be able to go and find some of the specific examples, but we feel like what they've done is cherry picked some particular ones that they know will support their point of view.

Now, the very, very first paragraph in this, did anyone pick anything out from the very first paragraph that might reveal something about the author that really does make us start to question this?

A couple more minutes, and then we will be moving on. But have a think about the very first opening paragraph.

So I think it's quite interesting. Because in the opening paragraph, if I recall correctly-- I've not got it in front of me-- they're basically saying that for those of us such as themselves, the author, like seeing this type of evidence and everything, it's showing a particular bias that the author themself has got an interest in this already. It opposes detractors from it. It's already

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presenting it as in - this is a particular truth I believe in, and here's the evidence for it without showing a particular balance.

And the good news-- yeah. There's an emotive language to it as well, and that's a good point. That this person's used a kind of emotive language to make-- oh, well, it's good news, so there's an immediate positive association with it. Where actually, when you start looking at it like we have, we can seriously start questioning how reliable is.

Now I'm going to put a very quick poll up then, and I'll ask you this question. So how reliable do we think it is, then? Do we think it's very reliable, reliable, we're unsure, not very reliable, or completely unreliable? What do people think on this?

There's a lot of votes coming in. So what I'm going to do is-- I'm not going to broadcast the results just yet, because I don't want people to lean towards what might be the most popular. So I'm going to hide the results temporarily, and I want people to not think, oh, someone else has already voted this, so I'll go for that.

And I think we've got most people have put in votes. There's a few that quite haven't, but that's not a problem. And I will reveal them again.

And we've got completely unreliable or not very reliable. And I think, yeah. I'm going to go with not very reliable. I don't think we can completely disregard this. I think when you start examining the evidence, there might be some little nuggets that are trustworthy or perhaps reliable in certain contexts. But I wouldn't entirely dismiss it out of hand. It's just a case of being sceptical and having that healthy level of scepticism around it.

So I'm going to end that poll now and hide it. Because a question I want to pose now-- I'm just going to skip through that slide again-- is just because something isn't trustworthy or reliable, does that mean it's not useful?

Because one of the things that I found interesting with people talking about some of the hacking that's happened or use of information to influence opinion, and fake news in elections, and all things like that, people say, well, it's fake news, so we can entirely dismiss it. And I don't think that's fair or true because sometimes, if you're asking the right question, even if the information isn't reliable, it can still be useful.

And I think an idea of this is if you were to say, oh, well, things that were being put out, perhaps, by these hacking groups during the elections to discredit people, that's not reliable, so it's not useful. Well, actually, it's useful for finding out what opposition to particular people, ideologies, political parties, or countries might be thinking, might be doing, or might be trying to achieve. So it all depends on your question. So just because you come across something you think, I can't trust this, it still might be, depending on what your question is, useful.

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So the three, four questions you can ask here is does the content inform your studies? Is it adding to a broader view that you're trying to build up of a particular topic? Does it help you answer a specific question?

Again, that depends on what your question is. And is it giving you a way to develop your research? That sometimes when you find certain articles, you can have a look if they do have references, and you can start to build up your research further and investigate particular opinions, particular arguments, or ideas within a topic. And this can be particularly true within something like, say, sociology, or psychology, or any area where you can have quite polarised or dissenting views.

And ultimately, the last question is probably quite a fair one. Does it help you build a balanced picture? Because if you are going to be a good, rigorous academic in your studies and in your life, you're looking to try and examine both sides. And yes, it's OK to pick a side, but as long as you've examined both, you've explained the evidence, and you can link it to what your conclusion ultimately is.

Now, I appreciate we've only got one minute left, and I don't want to rush things, so I do want to reach a little bit of a conclusion and have some opportunities for questions for people if they do want to stay at the end.

But if you think you might need more training-- because today's session is all about what you do once you've found information. So if you need some more information on how to do some referencing, how to use Library Search, or find specific information to a topic for your assignment, we do run other sessions on this which can be all accessed and are advertised through the site that you accessed today's session on.

If you need some just more help generally, we have our library help desk where we're available 24/7. So 9 AM to 5 PM, Monday to Friday, it is staffed by people here in Milton Keynes, librarians here to answer your questions. Outside of those hours, we work with some librarians in North America who will try their best to answer their questions. If they aren't able to, they'll refer it back to us, and we'll get back to you usually within 48 hours.

So please be aware that we're not expecting you to go out of here an expert. There's the opportunity for you to have a bit more help and support if you do have any questions.

Now here's my last slide just before I do finish up, and this is for feedback on today's session. There's a link on the slide, which is the blue underlined which says feedback form. If you do have the opportunity, please do click on that and provide some feedback on how you found today's session.

What I'm also going to do is I'm going to share this pod here. And what this has got in here is some information that you might want to download to use after the session as well. So we've got a copy of the How to Spot Fake News poster if you want that to hand when you are

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going through your studies. We've got a copy of the slides and also a handout as well that goes along with this session, reminding you of some of the information that we've covered here today.

So this is what I want you to think about, then, and take away from today's session. The prompt criteria-- how do you apply it? How can you start applying it and start making this overall judgement like you managed to do with the article on Homoeopathy?

Start thinking as well about just because something isn't reliable, does that mean it's not useful? And then start to think about how you can start bringing this into your studies. And even in a wider situation, such as just reading the newspaper in the morning, perhaps, or looking through some news on a mobile phone app.

Now, I appreciate people-- we have run two minutes over, and I do apologise for that. I know people may have to catch a train, perhaps, or get back to work, or some other pressing matters. That is not a problem. What I'm going to do now, then, is I'm going to stick around for perhaps 10 minutes or so. And if people do have any questions, or if they want to try something a bit more for themselves and get some feedback on it, please do now.

So I'm not going to be offended if you do want to say bye and head off from the session. Thank you very much for your attendance. And if you do have a chance, please leave some feedback. If you do want to stick around, ask a few questions, me and Ute are going to be here for a few more minutes, and we'll try our best to answer them.

So again, thanks for your attendance this afternoon.

And you're welcome, Catherine, but it's Greg, not Cary. But that's not the worst I've been called, so don't worry about it.

Yeah. I can certainly go back to the fake news slide again for you. That's not a problem.

Oh, I think I've skipped one too many. Sorry. I'll minimise that box as well for you so it's not blocking the view.

Oh. Fair enough, then Gary, I think we're sympathetic with each other but for the opposite reason.