

## **Assessing sources of evidence, especially online**

### **1. Why assess web sources?**

First off: *why* do you need to know how to analyze sources of evidence, web-based or otherwise? Two reasons.

1. When you're arguing, you'll want to rely on reliable sources of evidence as the firm starting points for your argument. Otherwise, your argument will fall down, like the house built on sand. Plus you may look foolish!

2. When you're listening to an argument, you'll want to figure out whether the sources that are being used are reliable. If they aren't, you won't want to trust the argument. Furthermore, if you are going to reply to the argument, you'll want to point out the unreliability in detail. Discrediting your opponent's source will be a *very* effective way to refute his/her argument.

Second: why focus on the *web*? There are many sources of information available to you, as your friendly librarian is always willing to point out. But let's face it: the World Wide Web is convenient. Plus for many current events topics it is a good place to find *some* kinds of sources—maybe even the *best* place. I'll recommend later in the course that you branch out and try other sources to find evidence for your arguments. But for now, let's look at the special difficulties of analyzing web sources.

### **2. What are the key questions you need to ask when assessing web sources?**

So: How do you assess online sources of evidence? As always in this class, if you want to build a strong argument, you need to figure out what *questions* your audience is going to ask you, and answer them before they are even voiced.

So what questions are going to be asked? When making a decision, we often rely on people who know more than us about some subject. Similarly, when presenting an argument to another, we often draw evidence from sources which that person will agree is an *expert*.

But experts can be wrong—not all experts are reliable on all issues. In particular, expert testimony can be distorted if the expert has a financial interest in the issue, or is ideologically biased.

This suggests that there are two **Big Questions** we should always ask when trying to figure out whether we should rely on an expert. Both should be familiar to you from previous classes, and from life experience generally:

**Big Question 1. How much expertise, (experience, education, training) does the person have about the subject about which s/he is communicating?** Let's call this the *Expertise Question*.

**Big Question 2. Is there good reason to believe that the person is relatively free of distorting influences, like financial gain or unalterable ideological commitments?** Let's call this the *Bias Question*.

Now, there are good reasons to suspect that "experts" we find on the internet may be particularly suspicious. Think about it this way: you yourself could publish a nice looking website, calling yourself "The Center for Advanced Studies," and announcing your "expert opinion" to the world. But on the other hand, if you don't trust *anything* you read on the Web, you're missing out on a lot of readily available and valid information. You have to find a path between total skepticism and total gullibility.

So I recommend that when analyzing the reliability of web-based information, you ask a third Big Question:

**Big Question 3. Will someone get into trouble if the information turns out to be wrong?** Will they lose face? Will their mistake hurt their reputation? Could they even maybe be sued for the false information? If you can't find out who the author of the information is, or if that author doesn't have any real-world existence you can verify, it's probably a mistake to rely on his/her information. But if there is an identifiable person or group with something to lose, then it's more likely that the information is reliable. It's like they're offering you a "money back guarantee." So let's call this the *Guarantee Question*.

### **3. Exactly how should you analyze a web source?**

For the purposes of this class, here is how I want you to go about actually analyzing the reliability of some information you find online. Your central question is to decide whether you trust *this* information from *this* source. You will need to take three steps:

- Step 1. Figure out who "owns" or "wrote" the page and website with the information you're considering.
- Step 2. Ask the three Big Questions, one by one about those people.
- Step 3. Weigh the results and come to an overall assessment of the trustworthiness of the source for this information.

Often in practice these steps get mixed up. That's OK, but when you write up your analysis for me, be sure to go through each step one by one. Note that there is a Web Source Analysis form on the course website that you can use to help you through the process.

## Step 1. Figure out who is responsible for the page and the website.

Notice that all three of the Big Questions require you to know who is responsible for the webpage and website—it's that person, persons, group or entity that you need to test for Expertise, Bias and Guarantee. Now, in most print publications, the author is named and possibly even identified further. You can be pretty certain that they exist in the real, physical world. This is not the case online. A web search may have brought you to one page in a larger website; it may not say who wrote it, on the page or indeed anywhere on the site. Further, the person who wrote the page may or may not be the same as the person responsible for the whole site. You need to ask the Big Questions about *both*.

Your first step therefore is to find out who the source is: who "owns" and is taking responsibility for the information both on the page, and on the site as a whole. By "source" I mean both individual people, like Smith, and organizations, like Iowa State University. Note that the page "owner" and the site "owner" may be *different*, for example, when a person writes an article (a page) and then it is published on the New York Times website (the site).

You probably already have some skill at finding out who is responsibility for a webpage and website. Here are some basic tips for finding out who is responsible for the information.

(a) First check the page itself carefully, top to bottom. Is there an author identified anywhere on it?

(b) If you're looking at one page in a larger website, try to find the main homepage. And from the homepage, look around to find out who the author is and what he is involved with. You can often find the homepage by taking off some of the back part of the URL. For example, if you wanted to find out who I was from my homepage, you would go from

www.public.iastate.edu/~goodwin

to

www.public.iastate.edu/

which would take you to

www.iastate.edu

So you'd see I was at ISU, and could start finding out what ISU was.

(c) Check the sidebars and bottom of the page for an "about the author" or "about this site" link. Does the page or website owner have a real-world existence that you can confirm (like at a university)? Is there a write-up describing the owner's qualifications, background and ideas?

(d) Google the owner's name and see if you can locate information about who he/she/it is.

When you write up a source analysis formally, be sure to tell me who *both* the author(s) of the webpage *and* of website are in detail—not just their names, but what sort of people/groups they are. And tell me also how you found out.

### **Step 2. Apply the assessment standards for argument, one by one.**

Once you find who the source is, the next step is to *analyze* it: break it down into "pieces" and examine the "pieces" one by one. At this point, you ask the three Big Questions: Expertise, Bias and Guarantee. You look at the website carefully, so you can point to specific details on it that support your answer. Be sure to note any conflicting information as well—the answer to any of the Big Questions is likely not a simple "yes" or "no."

### **Step 3. Weigh the results and come to an overall assessment of the trustworthiness of the source.**

Practically every source will have some strong features and also some weak features. Maybe it will be Expert and with a Guarantee, but very Biased; or unBiased, but not Expert. Or it may have features other than Expertise, Bias, or Guarantee that seem important to figuring out whether it is trustworthy. For example, it may be out of date—that could render the information untrustworthy. Or maybe the person responsible for the webpage seems trustworthy, but the website as a whole doesn't.

Your final step is to weigh all the pluses and minuses, and come to an overall assessment of the trustworthiness of the source for the particular information you want to use. Do you trust this source for this information? Would you be willing to rely on this source in a debate or not? If the other side used this source in a debate, would you challenge the authority or accept it?

Remember also that the decision you're making is whether to trust *this information* from *this source*. Sometimes you may be willing to trust *certain* things a source says, but not *others*.

In a formal source analysis, state your overall decision, and defend it briefly. Explain *why* you think the positives or negatives about this website outweigh the opposing considerations.

Practice Exercise: To test your understanding, go back to the websites linked from the first case ("The Neighbors"). Test them with the three questions. Which of those websites are more reliable about GMOs and organic agriculture? Which of them are less? Which are totally unreliable? Why?