**Consider the Source - Fact versus Fiction in a Post-truth World**

Thank you by Jeff Uhlich

We are all consumers of information. Actively or passively, we are bombarded by more information than we can ever hope to digest. One study by researchers at the University of California-San Diego put some numbers to it. Lead researcher Roger Bon believes that we are inundated daily with the equivalent of 34 gigabytes of information (and that was a few years ago). Television, radio, the 24-hour cable news cycle, and print media are all still with us while the internet, social media, and search engine optimization delivers each of us a personalized feed of ‘news’.

We live in the ‘attention economy’. Warren Buffet’s partner Charlie Munger famously said ‘Never, ever, think about something else when you should be thinking about the power of incentives.’ In all mass media and on the internet, the incentives are all about your eyeballs. To get and to hold your attention is the objective. It isn't about delivering truth or wisdom, it's about keeping you glued to a platform or a website so that while you're there you can view and perhaps watch or click on an ad that's been served up to you based on your personal cookie trail, search history, and Facebook likes.

It's been said that since 2016 that we live in a 'post-truth' World. The term post-truth refers to a situation where people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs rather than one based on facts. The term was Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2016 after the US Presidential campaign and the Brexit referendum. It relates to a deliberate distortion of the truth and a manipulation of beliefs and emotions with the objective of influencing public opinion.

For all of us, it comes down to our information literacy and our ability to think critically. So much of the information we receive is directed *at* us; we didn't explicitly seek it out, it just arrived in our inbox, or in a social media feed or a Youtube page based on some arcane algorithm that calculates the likelihood of us clicking on the link. A click means money.

But we can't just passively lap up whatever is served our way. Just as we are responsible for the quality of the food we consume, we are also responsible for the quality of the information we take in. How, though? How can we improve the quality of what we ingest?

First, we have to consider the source. Did this email, social media post, Youtube video, etc. arrive in front of me because of something I've actively been looking for or has it been served up to me based on an algorithm's idea of what would set me off?

Is the source credible? And what is a credible source anyway? For me, there's a vast landscape of legitimate perspectives out there. We live in an age of abundance. But the internet has spawned an entirely new information industry - a blogosphere wherein almost anyone, almost anywhere can set up a website and start publishing content. In the attention economy they are compensated for clicks, that's how they make money. But not all of them are journalists. Not all of them adhere to journalistic standards for sourcing or corroboration. They can say whatever they want however they want.

In Harry G. Frankfurt's really good essay and later book On Bullshit he distinguishes BS from other forms of deception such as lying. Unlike lying, where the deceiver is aware of the truth and deliberately conceals it, a bull shitter is indifferent to the truth and is primarily concerned with communicating their desired message or impression. The purpose, he argues, is to impress others, to manipulate situations, or to achieve a particular outcome. This is certainly the case for many websites masquerading as 'news'. And it's been shown to be true in many social media information campaigns.

People are rightly critical of 'mainstream' media organizations for some egregious coverage of World events. And the lines have blurred as more and more 'opinion' has been added to fill airtime in an insatiable 24-hour news cycle. Journalism as a profession has been undermined. But journalists still have important roles to play in fact-checking, sourcing, corroboration, and speaking truth to power. Journalists working for actual news organizations who misrepresent, misquote, or lie about a story lose their jobs and the credibility of the publication suffers. But few such consequences exist for other websites and bloggers. It's just on to the next story.

So how do you tell if a source is credible? Here are just a few ideas:

First, ask why are you getting this? Is it from a source you know and trust? And what are they selling? If there’s no obvious product, they’re after your eyeballs. They want your attention. Don’t give it so easily.

Do some basic research before you accept what you read. A good place to start is Wikipedia. Enter the name of the source you're considering and see what comes up. Wikipedia is a crowd sourced encyclopedia of information that can be updated dynamically by its users. If something is changed by a party that has a vested interest in misrepresenting the truth, other parties can make adjustments. Through this sometimes messy process, a fairly accurate picture emerges. It's not perfect. A Google search is okay but remember, with Google you get ads first and companies will pay to get something served up to you. That's not how it works in Wikipedia.

If you want to check out a media source, try Media Bias Factcheck <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/> which is a website built in 2015 that curates and ranks over 6,000 different media sources. They can help to distinguish between a reputable journalistic organization and a clickbait driven conspiracy monger.

Allsides.com is another site that studies and surveys media outlets to determine where they sit on the ideological spectrum. One nice feature is that for a topical issue they will link to coverage from all sides - one click on the link will show you what the left, the right, and the centre are saying.

Artifact.news is a recently released app you can download for iOS or Android. It provides a personalized news feed powered by artificial intelligence that you can tune to your preferences. It curates sources of news and doesn't serve up garbage.

And the next time you see a particularly inflammatory article or blogpost that really gets your blood boiling about the latest thing that scamp Klaus Schwab and the WEF have done to further enslave our minds and make us all drive electric cars against our will, surf on over to [snopes.com](http://snopes.com) where you can search out the latest fact checked conspiracy theory or urban myth. Snopes will tell you if it's true. Or not.

 We are all drinking from an information firehose, constantly being triggered or outraged. But we have to be more critical consumers of information. We have to choose what we ingest and we have to build the ability to discern good sources from bad.

Be careful out there.