

Library Research for Geography and Environmental Studies Students

Tutorial 6: Credibility of Sources

How do you know a source you're using is trustworthy?

We've previously discussed peer reviewed articles.

They're a trustworthy source of information because they've been vetted through the peer review process.

But what about material that doesn't fall into this clearly defined category?

What about documents like newspaper articles? Government reports? Government websites? Reports that come from research institutes or think tanks? And what about information you get from social media?

To answer this, we'll need to discuss the concept of the credibility of a piece of information.

Here we're talking about the confidence that we have that the information source that we're using is accurate and reliable in the claims it makes.

Credibility also depends on the context of an information source.

In other words, where it came from, who created it, who it was created for, and how it will be used.

Your local mechanic may be a great source of information on how to fix a problem you're having with your car.

They're authoritative in this sense because they have experience fixing cars, and so have credibility in this area.

They might also be a licensed car mechanic, giving them extra credibility.

They are likely not an authoritative, credible source regarding the impact of automobile traffic patterns on local air quality.

It's outside their field of expertise.

You would probably want to consult a variety of experts, and sources, to answer this latter question.

When it comes to information, while peer reviewed sources are considered credible and high value, other non-traditional sources can add value to a study.

For example, newspaper articles can add historical and local context to a topic if none exists.

Government statistics and reports are generally viewed as reliable sources of data and are often used by researchers for analysis and later publication in a peer reviewed article.

Also a tweet or other social media posting by an experienced researcher can provide insight on a topic that might not have been investigated to this point.

But, going back to our car problem, that same experienced researcher, posting to social media about a solution to the problem, doesn't necessarily have any more credibility on that topic than anyone else.

It's not their field of expertise.

It's important when evaluating the credibility of any piece information to take a critical perspective.

This basically means asking questions about the information you're using.

A good rule of thumb is to ask the five W's of journalism: Who, What, When, Where, and Why?

In this case, we might ask:

Who is the author of the information?

Are they an expert in their field?

What are their credentials or expertise?

When was the information published? Is it current?

Where did the author get their information?

Why was it published? To inform, to persuade someone about a political position, to sell something?

Depending on the answers to these questions, we might think of information being more or less credible along a scale of credibility.

Lastly, it's important to consider bias when looking at information.

Bias, according to a dictionary definition, is a "tendency to favour or dislike a person or thing, especially as a result of a preconceived opinion..."

Bias can refer to "...any preference or attitude that affects outlook or behaviour, especially by inhibiting impartial consideration or judgement."

Bias can lead to an inaccurate or unfair presentation of information.

Bias may be intentional.

For example, a group may provide funding for research, which in turn may influence the results of a study.

Bias may also be unintentional, as when a researcher's point of view prevents them from seeing multiple sides of an issue.

That's why it's important when you're consulting an information source on a topic to examine it closely for potential bias.

Ask as you read: are all sides of an issue clearly laid out?

Is the study you're using funded by an organization with ties to a professional lobby group?

This is especially important when looking at research from think tanks or organizations outside the traditional academic sphere.

Examples of non-credible sources include Wikipedia, a news post on a social media site like Facebook where you don't know the author or source of information, or an online forum like Reddit where anyone can post content.

For your academic assignments and writing, you don't want to use those biased sources or sources that aren't credible unless your assignments explicitly say it is alright.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thanks for watching.