

INFORMATION AND MEDIA LITERACY

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In this module students should learn:

1. How to develop and locate self-improvement skills
2. How to recognize ads
3. How to evaluate information sources
4. How to search for information
5. How to differentiate types of information and websites
6. The basics of online banking
7. The basics of online shopping
8. The basics of information seeking for producers

Many cultural theorists, beginning in the mid-to-late 1970s, have labelled our modern era as the Information Age. According to these theorists, this era of human history is defined by the shift from an industrial economy to one where information and computerization is the primary global commodity (Birkinshaw, n.d.). We see the effects of the information age in our lives, as we are inundated with floods of information from a variety of sources daily. As technology has evolved, access to new forms of technology and the use of paywalls within information sources have created walls around “good” information that people must pass through to gain access. This problem has created a division between those who can afford “information” and those who cannot. On the flip side, there is simultaneously an over-abundance of information that individuals must be able to evaluate and filter to arrive at valuable information. The ability to filter and evaluate information is an incredibly important skill for everyone to develop in our modern world.

Self-Improvement Skills

The internet has radically altered the way education looks in the 21st century. No longer do you need to enroll in a physical class to learn how to become a beekeeper or the basics of woodworking. The internet is like a vast library that you can use as a tool to learn various skills from the comfort of your home. There are many ways to access information that can enable you to become an expert in any field! In this lesson, students should learn about the various methods they can use to learn about self-improvement or to learn new skills. This lesson should teach the students about the various types of learning materials that they can use and find on the internet such as online courses, video tutorials (YouTube), articles, podcasts, and webinars. It may be useful to introduce students to the method they may want to employ when trying to learn a new skill such as searching the term on Google (or Wikipedia) to get some basic information then using that knowledge to begin searching for more specific tutorial style information in their specialized interest field.

Recognizing Ads

Pop-ups and advertisements have become increasingly prevalent on the internet. These advertisements often target senior citizens and those who may not be as tech-savvy to recognize the advertisement as such. Advertisements can be found on nearly all websites including reputable sites. The creators of advertisements on the internet often try to blend their content into the website so that it can be hard to tell the difference from a paid advertisement and the content of the website. Therefore, it is important for users of the internet to be able to recognize advertisements from other sources of information. In this section, we should introduce students to some of the methods that they can use to recognize ads including looking for words that identify advertisements (“paid content,” “advertisement,” and “sponsored”), looking for visually distinct content that does not fit the website layout, checking for branding or logos, identifying commonly used sidebar banners, identifying promotional language and sponsored content. Students should also learn about the methods and measures that they can take to check to see if they were linked to sponsored content such as checking the URL to make sure that it matches their intended destination and how to use browser extension ad-blocking tools. Use the lesson plan “Can You Spot the Ad?” as a tool to develop this skill with the students.

Evaluating Information

Fake news and disinformation campaigns have increasingly become identified problems in the 21st century. The circulation of fake news and misinformation is not a new phenomenon, rather it has been a reported issue since the invention of the printing press, but, with the rise of social media and the ability for anyone to create content on the internet, this topic has returned to the public discourse of our age. According to a Pew Research Center report from 2020, social media ranks second as the most used form of media for news and information, citing that 18 percent of American adults use it as their primary access point (Pew Research Center). Due to these changes in the primary avenues for receiving information, it is important that we learn how to evaluate the sources and the information that we are intaking from the internet. When looking at any source of information, we need to step back and consider a few factors: the currency of the information, its relevance, the authority of the author, the accuracy, and the purpose of the information. It is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the validity of information on the internet, so it is imperative that we begin to think critically about information and news that we intake, using these criteria as a guide to evaluate information. The following is a list of a few more detailed tips that can help us evaluate any information that we intake:

- Consider the source. Go beyond the specific article to look closely at the website, its mission, and if there’s contact information provided.
- Read past the headline. Many headlines are designed as “click bait” to entice readers to feel an emotional pull toward the article before reading the content. Always read beyond the headline.
- Investigate the author’s credentials. Look up the author through a web search. Are they a credible source? Do they represent an organization? What is their professional expertise?
- Investigate the links and sources supporting the article. Click on links and make sure the sources support the story in the way the author says they do. Consider if these additional sources are reliable.
- Check the date. Sometimes headlines become popular long after an event has passed. Look for recent sources to make sure you’re getting the most up-to-date information.
- Consider the possibility of the item being satire. Check the purpose of the site and author to see if they’re writing to provide satire, commentary, or entertainment. If a story seems too outlandish, it might be satire.
- Consider if it is a promotional source. Is the purpose of the story or the website where it was published to sell something?
- Check your own biases.
- Search to see if the information is widely reported by other sources. The greater number of reliable sources reporting the same facts, the more likely something is to be true.

Using these tips for evaluating information sources, we may still fall prey to fake news and misinformation, but using these tips can help keep us better informed and greatly limit the likelihood of believing fake news and false narratives.

Types of Information

As we have seen with the rise of fake news and misinformation, all information is not the same. Another skill that we must develop and foster is understanding the various types of information that we can interact with on the internet. Identifying the type of information that we are reading or watching on the internet can help us further evaluate the quality of information. One step that can help us identify the type of information is by examining and understanding website domain names and URL structures. The term “top-level domain” is used to describe the ending of URLs, example the “.com” in “google.com” is the top-level domain. Identifying the commonly used top-level domains can help us identify the type of information that we should be receiving from that site (this is a general rule – there are always exceptions to these rules). In this section, with the aid of lesson plan “Searching for Digital Information,” we help students identify and understand the basic differences between the commonly used top-level domains. This section should also help students begin to consider where they should be looking for certain types of information. For example, Facebook (Meta) is a social media platform where anyone with an account can post any information that they please, and we can deduce that while this may be the site to go to be social and interact with others, it may not be the best site to go to when looking for accurate information concerning news, politics, or world events.

Online Banking

Online banking is an incredible tool that has revolutionized how many people control and manage their finances. Online banking has many perks; it is easy to use once you get your account registered and set up, it is easy to visualize your spending, pay bills, and deposit checks all without having to leave your home. One common fear that many people, especially senior citizens, have with regards to online banking is its safety and security. While we will never be able to convince people to use online banking services, we can provide them with information that can help them make that decision on their own. Millions of people use online banking services daily, and experts ensure that online banking is more secure and more advanced than it ever has been (AARP). Alongside the built-in security features, online banking also offers the ability to monitor your account 24/7, which increases your awareness of your account and allows you to quickly spot any fraudulent activity, making it much easier than going to a brick-and-mortar bank.

Online Shopping

The retail shopping industry is another industry that has been radically altered by the widespread usage of the internet and online shopping. In this section, students should learn the benefits of online shopping as well as some safeguards to help protect themselves while shopping online. Online shopping can be an incredibly valuable tool for senior citizens who may have mobility or health challenges, or any other persons with a disability, that make going to physical stores to shop a challenge. Online shopping also can help save time and money as you can easily compare prices between different online vendors to find the best deal for the product that you are looking for. It is important to also understand some of the risks that can come alongside online shopping such as scams, credit card security, etc.. One way of protecting yourself while shopping is to critically evaluate the website that you are buying products from. There are many methods that you can use to help determine the safety of a particular website: use a search engine to research the website before making a purchase, checking the Better Business Bureau for that company, and make sure the URL includes “https://” before inputting any payment information. The majority of online shopping sites are safe, but there are scammers and thieves who prey upon a lack of caution; therefore, if you question the site or you have not heard of it before, it may be best to avoid.

Information Seeking for Producers

The internet can be a great source of information that can aid farmers and any other type of producers. This section should inform students about the types of information that they can find and resources that they can use on the internet to help them be more successful in whatever industry they are working in. This information could include relevant information about crops, the use of social media to connect to other producers within their particular industry, information about upcoming events in the community, setting up an online shop to sell products, and financial information that can help with their field of production. It is important to tailor this section to the specific needs of whoever you are speaking with. Oftentimes, the flood of information and sources can be overwhelming, so giving ideas for how the internet and the resources on the internet can be wielded for personal benefit can be incredibly helpful for people to navigate the plethora of resources that are available to them. Be sure to also inform them of the resources that are available to them via the University of Tennessee Extension office websites.

Conclusion

Wading through the ever-increasing river of information on the internet can be a source of anxiety for many individuals. It can often be hard to know who to trust and what is true and what is false in our digital age. Misinformation can cause great harm both to ourselves and to others. Therefore, it is important that we begin to protect ourselves against the threats of misinformation by learning the basics of information evaluation and media literacy. Understanding some basic digital literacy and information evaluation skills will not only help us to avoid falling victims to scams, but it will also provide you with tools to more effectively use the internet for your own advantage and personal development.

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