

Welcome to podcast six which I've called Put Your Critical Hat On.

In our podcasts so far we've been very library focused, introducing you to key tools and services offered by the library. Today we want to expand our conversation about information and we'll be exploring ways for you to re-engage with your information world. Beginning University is a really good time to take a fresh look at your relationship with information and the web particularly. If you're an undergraduate student starting out today you need to develop information skills that are far superior to generations of students coming before you in the data driven and complex information world in which we now live.

You'll need to be skilled in gathering evaluating and curating information from vast and expanding oceans of information which are being generated by the digital world and which are also heavily polluted with misinformation. You'll need to learn new navigation and evaluation skills if you're to be engaged and successful on your student journey and beyond that to be successful in your working life too. It's important to recognize that in our rushed and busy lives when we search for information it is so tempting to take the path of least resistance and look for quick and easy answers.

But when looking for information for scholarly purposes and later for professional purposes too it's crucial that you are confident about the quality and appropriateness of the information you source or create. This can take more time and involve deeper exploration and more complex questioning than we're used to in our daily interactions with information. And we must be prepared to take a different and reenergised approach. So however confident you are about your ability to make judgments about information in daily life it will be really valuable for you to take a step back and think about your current approach and consider whether your strategies and knowledge of the information world are fit for purpose as you begin your journey into higher education.

We are all becoming very aware of the issue of fake news and the spreading of misinformation for political or financial gain but our mistrust and criticality is often limited to online news and potential scams rather than information from all sources. There's also a danger that the prevalence of fake news is making us immune to the seriousness of the issues around misinformation and as students and citizens there's a need to apply healthy and renewed scepticism to all information and to be able to distinguish between high and low quality sources both online and in print.

It's also becoming increasingly difficult to make quick judgments about information we encounter and to be confident of the origins of it. Sources are not always as obviously distinguishable as they would have been in a non-digital world. And we're also often fed information according to our online behaviour and in the last decade you may have heard of some of the scandals and news stories focused on online privacy and on the malicious use of personal data such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2016 and the Edward Snowden global surveillance revelations of 2013. But the results of more data being harvested whether via web browsers, social media or smart technology is that we are increasingly fed information according to the data harvested about our behaviour.

And this so called personalization impacts hugely on our information ecosystem. It can potentially make our online world increasingly narrower by impacting on our search by creating a phenomenon known as filter bubbles where your search results are based on your previous search history. So your search results may be different than your friends' when searching for the same thing. The term Filter Bubble was first coined by Eli Pariser in his book of the same name in 2011 and you can find this book in the library if you want to find out more. Filter bubbles can also lead to polarization of viewpoints as our online worlds increasingly reflect our own opinions and values. This is also sometimes known as an echo chamber and this in turn leads to more extremes and can be harmful to democracy.

You can find out more information about filter bubbles and strategies for dealing with the digital world in our Digital Me Study Hub resource. Just do a web search for 'Study Hub FXPlus' to find it. But the business of evaluating online information is particularly tricky and as digital scholars it can be easy to get confused about what you're looking at and where it's from when searching on the free web and that's why it's important to make use of our library sources which have often been quality checked already.

We have a huge electronic library with e-books, journal articles, news and multimedia content but we don't have access to everything and there are times when it is appropriate to use the free Web for your research especially when you're just starting out with your research for an assignment and you need to get a feel for your topic. But also for things you can't find in academic databases and for multimedia or popular content that we don't have access to. But once you're out there on the free web you do need to put your critical hat on and question things in a way that you might not usually do when you're using the web for your personal searching.

You might easily be able to identify that an online article you come across is of low quality due to some obvious indicators such as poor spelling and grammar, lots of advertisements, poor quality images and no reference to any evidence or anybody else's ideas or work. But misinformation can sometimes be perfectly formed. So conversely good grammar presentation and references are not always a guarantee of quality. But there's lots of other ways to help you make up your mind. And so to find out some of the ways to evaluate information and some of the indicators of quality I'm now going to talk to our head of research Christina Lake.

And in part two of this podcast I will be interviewing Christina Lake to focus on tips for evaluating information.