

Unit 4 Criticize

Sharpening Your Media Literacy Senses

In a place called Cottingley, England, in 1917, two young girls took some pictures of themselves near a stream at the bottom of a garden. The pictures showed the girls playing with fairies. When the famous author of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, found out about them, he wrote an article claiming that the pictures were proof of supernatural phenomena. In today's words, one could say that the pictures went "viral," and Doyle's endorsement gave the pictures "credibility." For several years, the girls maintained that the pictures were genuine. Only after almost seventy years did the girls finally admit that the whole thing was made up. While this story is an interesting anecdote of fake news involving a famous author, it may be a cautionary tale demonstrating the importance of media literacy in the digital age.

Single-Source Reading

In the past, knowledge was passed down directly by the spoken word. The credibility of the speaker, not what was said, was the measure of trustworthiness. When the printing press introduced books as a means of knowledge transfer and written materials became more prevalent, readers had to develop new critical evaluation skills. However, they were often limited to a single source to evaluate the writer's credibility, arguments, and logic. This type of analysis can be described as "vertical reading."

Vertical reading involves relying on the text to determine the reliability or validity of information. In school, students learn to examine an author's credibility, their logic, and their references based on only their text. Having read a book, for example, a reader can review if the arguments presented in the text are supported by enough evidence, look at who the author or the publisher is, or check the references cited in the text. However, technology has changed the landscape in which people write and publish, making it necessary to change reading strategies.

Since technology in 1917 was nowhere near as advanced as it is today, it's understandable that a few pictures could convince a famous author as well as the general public of the existence of fairies. Does advanced technology prevent people from being fooled now? In fact, it may make it even easier to get tricked. Many people today fall victim to hoaxes or accept false claims because they don't know how to verify information.

This begs the question: How is it possible to verify such vast amounts of information? On the Internet, finding information is relatively easy, but verifying or validating it is not. In the past, there were publishing standards that authors had to meet. Today, the Internet removes the barriers to publishing for millions of people; however, it also makes it harder for readers to find reliable and valid information. In this environment, media literacy is more important than ever.

Multiple-Source Reading

Vertical reading is still useful, but new strategies must be adopted to navigate the vast online world. One of these strategies is called "lateral reading," which involves verifying information while reading by checking as many sources as you can. This is useful because only one source is not enough. Checking information from multiple sources with various types of content, such as text, images, and videos, is helpful to verify something you have read and gain insight.

You Are in Control

For example, suppose a student reads an article on a popular online news site about the health of a population of people. Having come across some statistics about the number of people who are hospitalized due to poor diet, she can employ the lateral reading strategy by simply opening up another tab in her browser and accessing different sources to verify the numbers. In fact, she can open up as many new tabs as she wants to verify any type of information being presented, such as statistics in charts and tables, or general assertions. She can look up information from other popular news sites or go directly to a scientific journal article to read from the primary source of information.

Readers employing digital lateral reading can take advantage of the volume of information on the Internet to check the credibility of an author's claims. They can utilize Internet browser tools that help review many sites simultaneously. Many people and companies currently use this reading strategy because it allows them to more easily cross-check data, distinguish opinions from facts, and evaluate claims efficiently.

As a way to maintain credibility, some companies hire "fact-checkers" to evaluate their writers' claims before publishing anything. These fact-checkers use lateral reading as a quick means to survey what has already been written. For example, imagine a news agency that wants to publish a story on its website about a merger between two corporations. Fact-checkers will cross-check information from a variety of sources to ensure that the facts are accurate. In fact, in recent research surveys, having utilized this strategy, participants were found to have a broader understanding of any kind of information than participants who had used less optimal strategies like vertical reading.

Vertical reading is not a perfect strategy and neither is lateral reading, but lateral reading takes greater advantage of modern technology than vertical reading. To fully appreciate this strategy, a reader in the digital world makes evaluating all forms of information a habit. No matter how neutral an author or publication claims to be, the burden of evaluation falls upon the reader to survey as much information as possible to determine the credibility of the data or the claims. We need to understand that the world, and therefore information itself, is constantly evolving: information does not remain still, so neither should the reader. For this reason, lateral reading is a continuous, repetitive process. Instead of approaching media from the perspective of a mere consumer of information, readers must learn to actively and dynamically engage with it while trying to make sense of it.