



CREDIBILITY

Unit Overview

The Credibility Unit is designed to help students reflect on three facets of credibility online: 1) how they establish their own credibility; 2) how they assess the credibility of people with whom they interact; and 3) how they assess the credibility of online information sources. The lessons raise the benefits and risks associated with the volume of information available online; the factors that make credibility difficult to portray and assess; the potential harms associated with misinformation or misinterpretations of online content; and the responsibilities associated with posting and using online information.

Key Questions

- What are the benefits and risks associated with the volume of information available online? How do you know when you can trust online information sources?
- How do you present a credible self online? What are your responsibilities when posting information about yourself, about other people, or information in different online spaces?
- How can you assess the credibility of other people based on their online profiles, blogs, and other content about them? What are your ethical responsibilities when you are an information seeker?

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of people and of information. Credible people are accurate and authentic in how they present themselves, especially their credentials, skills, and motivations. Accuracy is the hallmark of a credible information source.

The volume of information available online creates both opportunities and risks—for learning, for making informed choices, and for connecting with other people. On the opportunities side, anyone can contribute information to knowledge communities like Wikipedia, where alternative models of expertise, based on the community pooling knowledge rather than limiting knowledge to “authorities” with traditional credentials.



On the risks side, it is relatively easy to post misinformation in online spaces such as Wikipedia, or to misrepresent one's credentials and expertise in online forums. The potential harms are especially apparent in spaces such as medical forums, where the information one shares can potentially harm unknown others.

Indeed, certain properties of the Internet make it difficult to assess whether information and people can be trusted—including the potential for anonymity in many online spaces; the asynchronous nature of communication; and the absence of cues (such as tone and facial expression) that help us assess what people say offline.

Therefore, students and teachers alike need to consider responsible strategies for assessing the credibility of other people; for signaling their own credibility; and for evaluating information sources, especially knowledge communities such as Wikipedia.

Ethical Thinking Skills

Ethical thinking skills highlighted in this unit:

- Reflection on one's own online self-presentations in terms of the **roles and responsibilities** one assumes in various online and offline spaces.
- **Perspective-Taking**, to consider how different audiences (e.g., potential employers, romantic partners, friends) might respond to different self-presentations online.
- Consideration of the **potential benefits and harms to communities** of posting information or misinformation online.

New Media Literacies

New media literacies highlighted in this unit:

- **Networking**—the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information.
- **Judgment**—the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources.
- **Collective intelligence**—evidence that participants in knowledge communities pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal



Lessons

The credibility unit contains the following lessons:

- **Making Credibility Judgments Online**—This lesson introduces some of the issues associated with making credibility decisions in online environments where people don't know one another offline. Two themes addressed in this lesson are: 1) the differences between online and offline credibility assessment; and 2) the suitability of specific pieces of evidence for different kinds of assessment (e.g., skill level is a good piece of evidence for assessing competence in a game, but is a less effective piece of evidence for determining courteousness to others). In this lesson, students read a quotation from an online gamer, Eva, age 16, and are asked to consider how she makes credibility decisions about her fellow game players. Eva plays RuneScape, a Massively Multiplayer Online Game. Participants play as characters in a persistent game environment. They cooperate with players to achieve quests, such as killing game monsters. Designed by Andrea Flores (GoodPlay).
- **Should You Be in My Space?**—In this lesson, students are given a “MyPlace” profile and blog entries of a fictional acquaintance named Jeff. In pairs or in small groups, they are asked to assess the information in Jeff's profile to determine whether or not he would be a good match for three different roles: 1) roommate; 2) partner for a group project; and 3) president of the student council. Students are asked to report/discuss the main criteria within the profiles they used to make their selections in light of different concerns regarding online evidence. This activity promotes reflection on the nature of evidence for online assessment of others, considerations of the varying stakes of a given role/responsibility, and mitigating factors of online assessment (such as asynchronous communication). Designed by Andrea Flores (GoodPlay).
- **Demonstrating Credibility Online**—Whereas “Should You Be in My Space?” tasks students with assessing the credibility of someone else online, in this lesson, they are asked to think about their own “digital footprints” and the ways in which they present their own identities and credibility online. Through a role-playing exercise in which they create the online profiles of fictional characters, students will be encouraged to consider the contexts of their disclosures as well as the evidence that they present and how transparently it can be interpreted by others. Students will consider how their credibility is tied to the roles and responsibilities that they choose and are expected to fulfill both online and off. Additionally, they will be challenged to think about the special affordances of online communication (e.g., asynchronous communication, lack of transparency) that make online credibility assessment so difficult. Designed by John M. Francis (GoodPlay).



- **“Whom do you believe?”**—In this lesson, students learn about the issues involved with assessing credibility online. With much information from unknown sources online, how can you know what is credible? Instead of dismissing all information online as not credible, students can use this large amount of information to their advantage. This lesson looks at a series of videos from a variety of sources about the effects of video-game violence on youth. Through diagramming credibility networks around these videos, students learn to roughly assess credibility in the absence of total information. Designed by Nick Seaver (Project NML).
- **Wikipedia: The Group Behind the Screen**—The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to how Wikipedia works as a collective-knowledge-building system. After completing the activities in the lesson, students should understand how the credibility and reliability of information is a relative value, one that is interpreted by learning to read information on the site as, always and everywhere, part of an ongoing revision process. A process that is fueled by the Wikipedia community’s commitment to pooling information, debating what knowledge matters, and following rules for vetting competing truth claims. By reviewing entries steeped in dispute and debate, students are taught to look “behind the screen” and pay attention to the social surround of information found on the site, and, through so doing, to gain a disposition and critical vocabulary for using and contributing to Wikipedia responsibly. Designed by Katie Clinton, Neal Grigsby, Henry Jenkins, Jenna McWilliams, Erin Reilly, Lana Swartz, and Jessica Tatlock (Project NML).