CRITICAL READING: Logical Assessment of Links

In this class you will find links to online news blogs. These links play an important part of our ethical analyses of cases. We must understand that a link on the internet is never to be understood as definitive of a case. The link is merely a pointer to a case. The cases we will look at are events that happened, and the links I give you point to those events, but you should do more research to find out more about those events.

To best understand how to research links, we will first distinguish links by type of link, aka types of sites. These types may have some overlap, but give us a general idea of the links I give you and how they differ from other Internet links.

TYPES OF LINKS:

1. PUBLIC (government) RESOURCES

Prior to our current federal administration, the Internet has, from it's first appearance, been a repository for government data. In the early days of the "World Wide Web" (1990s) to find the best resources one looked for **gophers**: plain text sources, no graphics, but rich in data.
Take a look at http://gopher.floodgap.com/overbite/
You would find science data such as NASA findings, weather data, demographics, law enforcement data, library bibliographic records, and university research results. This internet would more accurately be called a web of intranets: a network of connected government bodies that shared some databases with each other, while keeping some data in-house only. These Intranets were at all levels, from federal to state and city databases being shared.

The simplest example is public libraries. Libraries had access to much state information and some federal information such as statistics, public historical data, etc. Libraries in turn made their digital catalogues and other bibliographies available to universities, law enforcement, NASA scientists, etc. Public libraries did not share their circulation databases (which included user names, addresses and books borrowed) with other government agencies. In most cases, libraries would not share circulation data with law enforcement even if law enforcement had a warrant.

Today, at the state level, and in some remaining federal agencies, government resources come with html, and some graphics. In the past 6 months, some online databases have been removed by the current administration, and those resources are now being made public through archiving projects by concerned private citizens and organizations. Despite this setback, we can still say that there are and continue to be Internet resources which are online database repositories made available to the public by a host of government agencies and public or private organizations.
Resources here means **facts, information**; sometimes computational, sometimes raw data.

2. COMMERCIAL RESOURCES

Bank records, university publications, ebooks, emusic, etc.
Commercial resources are links you can go to and access for a fee, often through downloads. Bank records are accessed by other businesses and by government agencies. Our most obvious commercial resource is, of course, Amazon. As early as 2000, libraries were using the Amazon

catalogue to search for books instead of using the Library of Congress. Amazon's book catalog search is free, but woefully inferior to Worldcat which is not available for free.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES
Organizations such as EFF, ACLU, SPCA, Sierra Club, Wikimedia Foundation and many others provide data. Some of this data must be understood to be slanted in one direction, and any information must be viewed with a critical eye to separating clearly objective info in their databases from their advocacy: use the facts but be careful not to blindly accept the message. This must be done because, increasingly, other groups are co-opting the organizational resource model as an excellent way to misinform. Always question the source by researching its origins. A group operating for 10 years or less must be further researched.

4. APPS
Any software you must download in order to perform activities would be an "app". Included here would be browsers, cloud repositories, online gaming, etc. Except for browsers which are free, apps almost invariably come with a fee or with heavy use of ads.

5. COMMERCIAL PLATFORMS
Sites where you pay to launch your business, usually comes with a full package including web design wizards. Only a few such platforms are free. Canvas is a commercial platform.

6. PERSONAL PLATFORMS
Sites where you can go to voice your views, share your news, etc.: Twitter, Facebook, etc. These sites have increasingly been used by businesses and commercial entities too. Every business has a Facebook page now.

NEWS LINKS, WHAT TYPE ARE THEY?

There is overlap in some of these types. For example, where would we put Yelp? It seems to be both a personal platform and a commercial or organizational resource because you get to search for reviews. Indeed, personal platforms usually come with a searchable database of users' published voice.

NEWS LINKS ARE NOT PLATFORMS:
News links can be personal platforms, but they should not be. Personal platforms are not reliable sources of any news except news ***about*** the person posting. Any link or site shared by a person or business using a personal platform or business platform should never be considered as an indication of facts except as facts about the interests etc. of the business or person that shares that news. Government use of platforms such as Facebook should first be double-checked on the government agency's website to determine its provenance.

NEWS LINKS ARE RESOURCES
News links I give you are searchable databases of news. So news links can be either commercial resources or organizational resources. Some news links can be government news sources, such as university news, NASA news, but such links are usually subject specific and not tech news, so I don't link to those news sites.

NEWS LINKS AS COMMERCIAL RESOURCES
News links that are **commercial resources** are usually news publishers such as newspapers or news magazines with a web version of their news, such as New York Times,

etc. Sources such as Tech Crunch, CNET News, and PC World have a slant in favor of technology and must be read with a critical eye. Yahoo News has had some major credibility problems in the last couple of years, so read those sources carefully.

But as long as you can trace the provenance of a news link to reputable publishing sources such as these, then the link should be given much credence, but you must still do as much secondary research as possible, and you must still read carefully for problems.

NEWS LINKS AS ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Organizational resources almost invariably entail a bias. For example EFF is slanted in tone to meet EFF's agenda of electronic freedom. This agenda is laudable, but we must be careful to distinguish facts EFF presents from their judgment about what those facts mean. I will only rarely link to organizational resources' news sites. However, **very often the commercial news sources I will link to present news that is originally published by organizational news sources. For this reason, all news links must be carefully read for problems of objectivity**.

PLATFORM VS. PUBLISHER

Again, we must note that a platform and a publisher are two distinct types of internet news sources.

Platforms are internet tools that allow you to publish your personal views and activities (personal platforms) or business interests (commercial platforms) as news.

Publishers are commercial, governmental or organizational entities that decide what news they will publish and what they will not publish, and then edit all news they do publish.

Platforms are not the place to glean news. Only publishers have some level of accountability, although many (EU especially) are trying to hold platform sites to a high level of accountability.

LOOKS LIKE A DUCK?

Readers are becoming a bit more savvy and know better than to accept just any news claim on a platform such as Facebook, so we now find links in sources such as Facebook that look like they are coming from legitimate publishers and not your Uncle Joe; when in fact they are not coming from a news publisher. They are truly fake news.

The lesson we must all take from these distinctions is that we must be vigilant in our reading of news links. We must read them with a critical eye. Below are important problems in news reporting that we must become accustomed to discovering as we read.

PROBLEMS IN UNDERSTANDING NEWS

BACKGROUND PROBLEMS

PROVENANCE

Provenance is the historical origin of a link. Provenance is a term from art. Art dealers, museums and art historians try to trace the origin of a piece of art in order to determine if it is a genuine art work or a forgery. Art forgery is a lucrative business. Establishing the provenance of art is thus important. Analogously, fake news has become a powerful political commodity. To establish the provenance of a news link you must trace the origin

or the source of the link. If the link claims to be from, for example, SJSU; then go to SJSU's website and find it there too. If the provenance of a link is an unknown or is obscure and you can find no provenance, then that news is best judged to be fake news.

MISSING HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A whole host of links on a news story can be making assertions that are partial truths, and this can often be traced to the source of all of those sources. However, even close research of provenance and checking of facts can be missing background information that must be considered and that can be vital to the case.

For example, in April 2017, Germany revisited a December 2015 policy concerning radicalization via Facebook and other social platforms. The original December 2015 policy called for Facebook and other tech giants to not allow radicalization to be posted to Facebook at all, and threatened fines for allowing "hate speech" which is illegal in Germany. The April 2017 links reporting this news referred to censoring Neo-nazis and cyberbullying. Nowhere in any April 2017 news links was there mention of the November 13th 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, and the following 2 weeks where other EU nations were angry at Germany's open door refugee policy. Without connecting the series of events leading up to the early December 2015 policy, students assumed that Germany's policy only dealt with potential victims of cyberbullying and immigrants as potential victims of Neo-nazi hate. But potential victims of ISIS terrorist attacks were also very relevant to the case.

Reading the relevant documents in German would show that the 2015 policy lists either just "criminal speech" or specifies the policy was meant to stop terrorism and hate speech and fake news, in that order. Having some prior background knowledge of the case events would have been essential to understanding Germany's policy.

Background history of events must be researched, at least a couple of weeks before the event in the case.

How did all the news sources miss this? It's an interesting political story. One German cabinet minister, very liberal, spoke to German reporters who then passed the story on. Other less liberal cabinet ministers were stressing censorship to stop terrorism, but they were not picked up by international news sources in April 2017. To get the story straight you would have to revisit the 2015 policy and event.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT UNIDENTIFIED TERMS

Given enough background knowledge of the context of events of the case, unidentified terms are less likely to be misinterpreted.

An example is on the third quiz: Links, vs. Cases, the **Reddit Case**

The link does not give enough definition of a *National Security Letter*, and the link makes it sound like Reddit received one request for all of its users, or at least that is what students assumed. An NSL is not a blanket request. A specific individual must be named. Decades ago there was no strict policy, and some blanket requests were issued. But such blanket requests were judged to be unconstitutional and are illegal.

Given enough background knowledge of the context of events of a case, unidentified terms are less likely to be misinterpreted. The rule of thumb is to assert nothing unless you know for sure.

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

VAGUENESS

Lack of specificity **when more specific terms are needed**. When someone says "so many people, so many people are upset about Google's new policy", how many is that exactly? 2000? 200,000? 2,000,000? Vagueness is often used to mislead or avoid full disclosure. Possibly, might, and almost, often, and usually are often vague terms. But it depends on the context. If, in a burning someone yells "fire", that is pretty vague. Fire where exactly? How strong a fire? These questions would likely be dangerous and silly at a time when people need to calmly hurry out of the building. But later, forensic investigators will need to ask and answer those questions. vagueness does depend on context.

Example:

The Reddit link states: "The public has become aware of only a handful of some 300,000 NSLs handed out over the last decade, and those became public only after the recipients launched legal battles opposing them." There are a problem of vagueness of the word "handful". Does the reporter mean what the word actually says, which is that less than the count on one hand of cases have been reported, so around 5 cases? But couldn't the reporter check her facts and find out if this number is 4 or 5 or 3? More problematic is that people often use the word "handful" more loosely, meaning a relatively small number and this could be 20 or 60, 500, 1000, etc. Was this vagueness a real problem? The reporter meant "around 5" and should have said so. Why so few, around 5 out of 300,000? Because the NSL comes with a gag order, meaning companies cannot even mention the NSL, much less sue. EFF fought this by leaving the company (NSL recipient) as anonymous in lawsuits. But still, the NSL gag order has been ruled legal and there have been **almost no** ('almost no' is vague too!) news of NSLs reaching the public because the companies receiving NSLs are threatened that they cannot speak to anyone about the gag order because it would threaten the safety of Americans.

AMBIGUITY

More than one meaning to a term and the one intended is not clearly the one meaning intended.

EXAMPLE: We have a winner in the category of ambiguous terms: **backdoors**. CS majors, especially those specializing in security products, will chuckle at that. Decrypting, providing encryption keys, are often equated with a backdoor, and can be said to be a backdoor, but also, some unintended or intended flaw in coding is usually what is meant by a backdoor. Feds here and governments in foreign countries are often asking for tech companies to give them backdoors. Encryption keys present their own sets of problems, but governments would love the other kind of backdoor, the inroad into the code through a door or flaw or exploit in the code. But if there is such a flaw, intended or not; that flaw is an opening for any hacker anywhere on the planet. Computer scientists keep saying this to governments, that any hacker could hack; but either the governments don't understand this or don't care, because they keep asking.

The governments keep asking for backdoors without specifying which kind of backdoor they think would be ethically okay. I have only noticed some US government sources actually specifying exactly what they mean by a backdoor, decrypting keys. Foreign governments seem content with stating the ambiguity. But this is an overwhelmingly important issue, and anyone asking for a backdoor had better be clear about what it is they are asking for.

So, for example, in discussing a case about backdoors, you'd be looking for any clarification of exactly what is meant in the case.

UNIDENTIFIED TERMS

Terms that usually refer to abstract concepts or to named organizations or laws. These are named without explanation and the reader assumes they know what that reference is, but in fact they do not.

Look up:

- the reporter
- all people (and some places) named in a case
- get the exact wording of any laws
- find the meaning of any concepts that you could not write out the definition.

This is all just to be very clear of all your facts.

PROBLEMS WITH DEGREE OF ASSERTION OF FACT:

MODALITY:

Modality is a term from formal logic relating to how strong an assertion is. It qualifies the assertion. I say the sky is blue. This is a simple assertion of fact. If I say the sky might be blue, I am giving my assertion a degree, as possible but not definite. There is nothing wrong with stating modality, rather, the problem arises from assuming degree of assertion is the same as a plain assertion of fact. Here are terms of modality to watch for:

PROBABLE

Probably means more than 50% chance that x will happen, is true, etc. This is not the same as saying that x is true. Probably is such a strong degree of assertion that it might be something to consider pertinent to the case. A few terms indicating probability are likely usually, almost certainly . FYI: probability can be less than 50%, but probably means more than 50%

POSSIBLE

Possibly often implies less than 50% although it can mean more than 50%. Some terms of possibility are maybe, may, might, possible, sometimes, and often. Often is a vague term. When someone says Don often tweets, does that mean daily, weekly, once a month? Go back over these notes and see how often I use the word often. Vagueness too can serve a purpose. When you don't want to say "most of the time" and you want to say "more than just sometimes", often fits that .

CONDITIONAL

When a news report says "If this thing happens then this other thing will happen" (if x, then y) this is crucial logic to coding, but it is not a simple assertion of fact. rather, if x then y is a conditional: y will happen on the condition that x happens. This conditional is not even strong enough to be an assertion of cause and effect. x and y might both be caused by some event z and x only always happens before y. The point to remember is that when you see "on the condition that" or "if", these qualifications do not necessarily give statements of fact about the case events but instead suggest conditions related to the events. These suggestions must be questioned because they might be mere opinion.

It is important to realize that these statements of conditions relevant to the event can be valid considerations as can statements of possibility and of probability. We are looking for degrees of assertion in order to stress the difference between conditionality and clear statements of fact.
Example:
In one case Amazon refused to give up Echo data. A man was found dead in a hot tub. Police requested Echo data because they found the Echo next to the hot tub. The homeowner claimed the victim must have accidentally drowned. A clear statement would be that "Joe was found dead in his friends' hot tub'. " That is a statement of fact. It might be false, but it is a simple or clear statement of fact. If the reporter goes on to say "Joe's bruises suggested to police that Joe was probably murdered," that is not the same as saying Joe was murdered. The terms suggested and probably are a sign that you should only assume with caution. I inked to the case as Murder Echoes, but you need to read carefully to establish that. There did seem to be enough evidence of a murder, not 100%, but enough for police to request that Echo data. "Should Amazon comply?", that was the ethical question.

SPECULATIVE
Speculation is possibility or conditionality that does not provide strong relevance to the actual events of the case. Terms of speculation such as "suppose that", or "if x", etc., that are far out, and a side issue are best ignored.
Example:
The final exam is an interesting case of coding bots to shop randomly on the dark net, meant and used as an art exhibit. The link to this case provides speculations from a Washington state professor that considers if robots should be ethically responsible for their actions. But we are not sure how to set limits to ethical responsibility of humans, we certainly have no ability to judge the ethical responsibility of AI "beings". At this point, we can barely get a robot to stay upright. Stick with the facts of the case and ignore all speculations like this. It might be fun science fiction but this robot druggie case is complicated and interesting enough if you look only at the facts of what the artists and coders did and how and why they did it.
You get to speculate on the Engels midterm essay. You can have science fiction fun there. In discussion cases we will analyze, use the links to get facts. Ignore science fiction speculations.

TONE : EMOTIONAL FORCE
Emotional force added to facts are often unavoidable and understandable as expressions of outrage and anger at injustice, but such emotional force must not be accepted as relevant to the facts stated. Too often, tone of anger or disdain or humor substitute for plain statements of facts. News reporting that stresses emotional tone colors our reading of the facts. We must make the effort to ignore the tone and we must go an extra step in ascertaining the facts through more research, because when reporters use emotional tone in reporting the news, their objectivity must be questioned.

All of these problems should be considered when reading links. This sounds like too much to pay attention to? Following some simple steps will focus our attention on problems in links.

These steps below will be followed in the Discussion Result for the Discussion topic "UNDERSTANDING LINKS" :

7 STEPS

1. Establish Provenance
2. Identify unknown terms or people or groups reporter has not explained
3. Note any vagueness or ambiguity
4. Note any speculation
5. Find one month background history of the event
6. Note tone
7. Note terms of probability, possibility, and conditionality

After you practice applying the steps, thereafter when you read an online news article, you give it a preliminary dry reading, then go back over it looking for vagueness, tone and words signaling possibility and conditionality, etc, then do 5 minutes research. Do more than 5 minutes research if you find many problems.

CAUTION IN WRITING ARGUMENTS:

It is good to always be as clear as you can. But **sometimes clarity can depend on using words like "sometimes" rather than making statements that are too strong and so, not believable.** Sometimes ambiguity, conditionality, and vagueness are good things to have.

This is especially true of applying the ethical theory of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism usually features degrees of possibility, probability and conditionality. Utilitarianism usually predicts overall good and harm in a case; assessing what would likely happen. Only when we have the final outcome of a case clear before us is utilitarianism more closely related to only statements of fact.

So, on the one-hand, you look while reading case links, for any clues to degree of assertion, and when writing your own arguments, be sure to stress your own degrees of assertion. Be clear where you have a fact, and use if, might, and probably where you are making educated guesses.

Be patient with me folks, this assignment is new and if you have any questions about these Critical Reading notes be sure to ask. I expect I will need to revise these notes, and those revisions will come from your help in asking questions about the notes.