

Learning Resource

Online Media - Fact or Fiction

Can you believe everything you see or read on the internet?

"If it's on the internet (or in the paper or magazine or on TV), it must be true, right?"

This statement is often used in a joking way; however, it appears that many people simply take what they see or hear via media, whatever the vehicle, as truth.

How credible is the information found on the internet? "Students, like adults, are too easily hypnotized by the computer's power to summon endless arrays of facts—information without context, data without values, knowledge without perspective" (Gilliam, 2003).

"Truth in advertising" has always been an issue, so much so that the Federal Trade Commission enforces a federal law that monitors what "...consumers see or hear an advertisement, whether it's on the internet, radio or television, or anywhere else.... The law says that ads must be truthful, not misleading, and, when appropriate, backed by scientific evidence" (FTC, n.d.).

But the manipulation of data, including pictures, videos, and sound, via the current capabilities of technology has further undermined the credibility of the vast amounts of information shared, particularly via the internet.

Photoshopping

Ads for miracle diets, makeup, hair restoration, etc. often present "before and after" pictures. Some of these may be legitimate changes. But there are electronic tools available that can alter photos.

Morphing has also been legitimately used (and understood by the viewers) to superimpose parts of two different people into one for dramatic presentation (not for deception). A few years ago, DirectTV used advertisements that placed Rob Lowe's head on another person's body. There are numerous tutorials and YouTube videos that show how this is done.

For example, using just a couple of pictures and Microsoft's Word program, you can create an image of a black cat on the back of a buffalo.



Black Cat

Source: Janet Zimmer.



Buffalo Statue

Source: Janet Zimmer.



Black Cat on Buffalo

Source: Janet Zimmer.

However, it must be kept in mind that if you download an image, you do not automatically have permission to edit it. Morphing, airbrushing, or any other means used to alter a photo or image is illegal if the original creator has not given permission for the alteration.

Sound Manipulation

Would manipulating the soundtrack that makes a singer pitch-perfect be considered misrepresentation of the singer's true talent? What about duets that combine the voices of live and deceased singers? Truth or misrepresentation? Background music in a movie or TV show certainly can change or alter the viewer's perception of the action taking place. How aware are you of the music being played in a movie or TV show and how it might be elevating a sense of dread, fear, romance, peace?

More serious consequences could result from manipulation of sound to change the impact of the news, i.e., adding sound that misrepresents the actual situation occurring, such as introducing sounds of conflict (yelling, loud noises, even explosions) in what is a peaceful demonstration. Even the tone of the news announcer can change the perceptions of the listeners.

The Associated Press has published a "News Values and Principles" document related to truth in audio:

AP's audio actualities must always tell the truth. We do not alter or manipulate the content of a newsmaker actuality in any way. Voice reports by AP correspondents may be edited to remove pauses or stumbles.

With the permission of a manager, overly long pauses by news subjects may be shortened.

The AP does permit the use of the subtle, standard audio processing methods of normalization of levels, general volume adjustments, equalization to make the sound clearer, noise reduction to reduce extraneous sounds such as telephone line noise, and fading in and out of the start and end of sound bites—provided the use of these methods does not conceal, obscure, remove or otherwise alter the content, or any portion of the content, of the audio. When an employee has questions about the use of such methods or the AP's requirements and limitations on audio editing, he or she should contact the desk supervisor prior to the transmission of any audio. (AP News Values and Principles, n.d.)

The Internet

If you type any topic, question, or key word into a search engine, how much of what is presented to you via the various websites that are listed can be considered true? It is not possible to give a definitive answer to this question. The result certainly depends on what you asked, and what type of websites are being used to provide the answer.

Because anyone can create a website and share thoughts and opinions, here are some things to keep in mind when evaluating the information you read or retrieve from the internet (Roos, 2009):

- Examine the web address itself. Does it end in .gov or .edu? Does it include a person's name? With nothing more than a URL, you already have a good indication of the source of the material.
- If the online material is an article, does it include the author's name and publication date? Search the author's name and find out more about his or her experience and expertise. If the article is old, consider whether it covers the kind of information that changes quickly.
- If you don't recognize the name of the website from an offline publication—newspaper, magazine or TV show—read the site's "about" section to find out more. Look for clear signs of bias or commercial interests.
- Above all, say the librarians of the University of California at Berkeley, you should approach all online information with "healthy skepticism." Use the same analytical tools you would use to examine any other form of media. In other words, consider the source.

References

Associated Press. (n.d.). AP news values and principles. Retrieved from www.ap.org/company/News-Values

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