

Summary of “Six questions that will tell you what media to trust”

By Tom Rosenstiel October 22, 2013 **American Press Institute**

How do you know what to trust?

Ask these six questions to decide whether something is trustworthy. They will make you a more critical thinker and save you from being misled.

1. Type: What kind of content is this?

A news story? Opinion piece? An ad or “native advertising” produced by a company? A reaction to someone else’s content?

Part of knowing what you’re looking at involves knowing who produced the content.

A news organization? A think tank? A political group? A corporation?

Looking at a graphic? a tweet? If you don’t know the organization, look it up online.

Another thing to know is where the organization gets its money. A non-profit? An advocacy group?

Where did that money come from? If that isn’t clear, that’s a problem.

Does the content have an obvious political slant? Hard to tell from a single story? See whether all the stories seem to reinforce the views of one party. Scan the stories quickly. You will know it when you see it, even if each story itself seems fairly straightforward.

2. Source: Who and what are the sources cited and why should I believe them?

News content usually cites sources for the information provided. Is it an official? A politician?

If it’s research, what organization produced it? What background is offered?

Ask yourself: what level of knowledge do they have? How close it is to being first hand? How do they know? If it’s not clear, you should be more skeptical.

Sourceless News: Is typical if it was a public event for all to see.

The Journalist As Witness: The journalist or author could also be an eyewitness.

Credentialed Experts: Author or journalist with obvious expertise or credentials.

Proximity of Knowledge: When we move to content that cites other sources, one question is how close is the source to the event. If they are an official source, such as police spokesperson, they are likely second- or third-hand witnesses, but they may be basing what they say on multiple first hand witnesses.

The key question is, how do they know? If it’s not clear, you should be more skeptical.

Distance in Time: how far in the past did this event occur before the witness was asked to recall it?

Sometimes journalists simply fail to identify the source for some statistic or assertion to save time or because they forget.

Once you have identified who the sources are, ask one other thing: Do they have a bias?

3. Evidence: What's the evidence and how was it vetted?

Evidence is the proof that the sources offer. Trust the material that offers more evidence, is more specific and more transparent about the proof being offered.

What did the author do to verify this evidence?

If it says “scientists agree,” that isn’t all that specific — interviewed 15 scientists and they all agreed, or scientists examined 10 years of peer-reviewed scholarly research, more than 10,000 pieces of research, that is even more evidence.

Look for signs of a method of verification — if the method is explicit—that is a sign of more credible work.

Looking for these signs isn’t as hard as it might sound. **Simply start looking for more specific evidence and more transparency about the proof.**

4. Interpretation: Is the main point of the piece proven by the evidence?

Ask whether this main point makes sense, and whether the conclusions are supported by the evidence offered. **Is there another explanation? Are the conclusions logically based on evidence? Going too far? Too many conclusions not supported by the evidence?**

Don’t assume that because two events occurred the first one must have caused the second one. It could be a coincidence. This is a common mistake that people make from looking at data.

Here’s what to look for:

- First, *evidence to prove the case*. The **more evidence the better**.
- Second, *expect that the other side(s) are given a good hearing*. **If the alternative views are weakly presented, be skeptical.**
- Third, *what is unknown, unanswered, unclear, should be acknowledged*. **The best news accounts admit they need to know more by acknowledging where the weak spots are.**
- Fourth, *the best news providers and publishers let us know when new information comes along that contradicts or fills in what was thought before*. **They show that sense of responsibility by letting you know when a better view has come along.**

5. Completeness: What’s missing?

Most content should lead to more questions. **Be a critical, questioning consumer. Ask yourself what you don’t understand about a subject.**

If something was missing and the story explained why—this couldn’t be answered yet—that is a good thing.

The point of any news content is not just to tell you something. It should be to create understanding and also to help you to react or take action. So sometimes what might be missing from a story or segment or piece of content is what you can do about it.

6. Knowledge: Am I learning every day what I need?

This last question is to ask, **are you checking yourself to see if you are spending your media time well.**

Think about yesterday. What did you learn about? What did you read about? Jot down what news you consumed for a couple days. Maybe it came through social media. Or conversation.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to see if you are learning what you think you should.

- What are some things you hear people talking about that you wished you understood better? Where could you go to learn?
- Could I explain this situation to someone?
- Look at top stories on a website or a newspaper front page? How many of them are you familiar with? Do you think you should understand them?

This process of critical thinking about media is something we all do. These six questions are the same ones that editors and producers in the media world use to edit stories and make up web pages.

In the age when we are all both editors and consumers, we all need to know them.

NOTE: This summary was not done by the author of the article. You are encouraged to read the whole article currently found at <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/six-critical-questions-can-use-evaluate-media-content/>