

Recitation 9: Evaluating Sources

Objective

Following up the lecture on source evaluation, this recitation is an opportunity for students to struggle with the concepts in groups and develop the ability to think about sources on the spot. This is vital for the capstone lesson of the course: Deconstruction.

Organization

Take attendance

News Quiz

Recap Lecture

Five rules for evaluating sources—IMVAIN

1. **Independent** sources are better than self-interested sources
2. **Multiple** sources are better than a single source
3. Sources who **Verify** are better than sources who assert
4. **Authoritative** and **Informed** sources are better than uninformed sources
5. **Named** sources are better than unnamed sources

Also be sure to revisit Context and Transparency, as students tend to struggle with these concepts. Transparency (until we get deeper into it in the next lesson) is What We Know and How We Know It; What We Don't Know and Why We Don't. It is drawing back the curtain on the process to let news consumers know how a report is assembled.

Discussion

Discussion of current events.

Ask students what stories they've been following, and how those stories have developed over time (this could stem from the news quiz and the Provisional Truth assignment). Ask follow-up questions to get students to discuss how and why the stories changed over time.

Anderson Cooper verification exercise

Students were assigned to read Cooper's chapter in preparation for class. (If not, it's short enough for students to read in class.) Key to this discussion are the main concepts of the Truth & Verification and Evaluating Sources lectures:

- Provisional truth



- Direct and indirect evidence
- Sourcing guidelines (IMVAIN)

If necessary, give students 15 minutes to go through on their own the steps Cooper takes to verify the story. It might be useful, time permitting, to have them work in groups and then compare their lists.

Then go step by step with the class and review the eight steps Cooper took to try and verify the story of the missing children. It works to begin the discussion by asking students how Cooper was alerted to rumors about kidnapped children. His producer in New York says that “everybody” is talking about it. Who is “everybody”? What kind of source is this? Where do you go from there?

1. Hires Chris, the local reporter, and they review local press accounts
2. Goes to the police, who tell Cooper they’ve received reports of only two missing children
3. Visits the missing children’s aunt, who tells Cooper “I believe they’re alive”
4. Goes to the resort where the children were last seen and interviews the resort manager
5. Finds the motorcycle driver (the man accused in the press of kidnapping the children)
6. Interviews the hospital administrator, who tells Cooper the children are dead
7. Takes the children’s picture to the second hospital and morgue
8. Visits the mass grave

In each case, determine whether:

- The information gathered is direct or indirect
- Evaluate the different sources. Are the police a credible source? Why or why not? The aunt? The resort manager? Alleged kidnapper? Hospital administrator?
- Does Cooper have enough information at that point to determine conclusively the well-being of the missing children?
- If not, what can be reported? And what do we still want to know?

Additional Exercise

Some instructors use the “Secret Sponsors” article in class to discuss how difficult it can be to pin down the sources of certain kinds of information. As students learn in lecture, sometimes the verification process breaks down simply because it’s difficult. This article is an example of that.

Additional Exercise

Break students into small groups. Give each group a rough sketch of a fictional story. E.g., there’s a rumor that rats infest the campus food service kitchen. Have each group come up with a list of (3-5) sources they would want to track down in order to write a credible report. Have them also write down why each source is reliable. Have each group share what they came up with. Or if there’s time, give each group a different story, and then rotate stories and see if different groups come up with different lists and explanations. It might be fun to have them come up with bad sources—who would be an unhelpful source? As students suggest sources, put up roadblocks in their way: “*You can’t trust an administrator because they’ll try to hide the problem! They’re self-interested!*” “*How does your witness*

know it was a rat and not that day's special?" "Maybe the student who claimed to see the rat was drunk!"

Announcements