How do I know what news and information is reliable?

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In a world of alternative facts and post-truths, where anyone can easily become an author or share his opinion online, how do you know if what you’re reading is true? How do you avoid being tricked by hyperbole or faulty information? Wouldn't it be nice if there was one place you could go for completely objective news? Unfortunately, experts have long debated the troubles with obtaining objective news. ¹ Along with those complicating factors, the rapid pace and wide breadth of news dissemination today means we have to rely more on our own abilities to filter news and information; at times, we may need to become some version of fact-checkers ourselves. How well you can do this depends partly on your level of information literacy.

So, how information literate are you?

- Do you get your news from a wide range of legitimate and well-established sources, including sources that present differing viewpoints from your own?
- How much do you read or watch before forming an opinion about the information presented? (Do you need to read or watch it all?)
- Do you consider whether the information comes as a piece of reporting, opinion, or punditry, and assimilate it accordingly? Do you trace surprising information back to its source, to make sure you’re not making assumptions or taken in by bias, clickbait, or even satire?
- Do you look for attributions and references to multiple sources in a news article?
- Do you check the reliability of all the information that you see? Do you do it every time? (Do you have to do it every time?)
- Do you know the CRAAP test, and apply it?
- What role do publishers, editors, and peer-reviewers play in bringing us news and information?
- Does everyone have to apply information literacy techniques to the news an information they discover?

In general, information literacy can help you evaluate the reliability of information you see on Twitter or Facebook or cable news or mainstream news or right/left wing news or academic journals or, well, any news or information source you may use in academic research but also in your personal life.

To answer one of our questions above: yes, everyone has to apply the methods of evaluating information, even librarians. In fact, in an effort to pull together resources on “alternative facts” for our library guide on choosing news sources, we had to use information literacy skills to filter out bogus information; you can read more about this below. As for the answers to those other questions? We’ll revisit those towards the end of this article as well as elsewhere on the “The News You Choose” LibGuide.

How do we define “alternative facts”? An example of how to apply information literacy principles to analyze the reliability of information

In the course of researching for this guide, we attempted to find a definition of the phrase “alternative facts.” A White House spokesperson had used the phrase “alternative facts” as an explanation for why the 2017 presidential inauguration attendance estimates reported by the press did not match those touted by the White House. Because of its relevance to news validity, that phrase (along with terms like “fake news” and “post-truth”) had bearing on this guide and our discussion of evaluating news and information. So, we set out to find a definition of the term “alternative facts.”

Our first inclination, when looking for a definition, is to turn to a dictionary. The second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (which we have in Beeghly Library at Ref PE 1625 .O87 1989) includes 20 volumes with approximately 1000 pages of definitions in tiny print in each volume. But it does not include a definition for “alternative fact.”

However, new words are added to the English language all the time, and our print dictionary has a publication date of 1989. Lucky for us, we can check an even more up-to-date version of the Oxford English Dictionary through the OWU Libraries’ online subscription. Guess what we find there? No entry for “alternative fact.”

We could, of course, search for the definition of “alternative” and the definition of “fact” and see if we could reconcile the two into one definition. But, as a phrase, “alternative fact” does not exist in this large English-language dictionary.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary’s website, they update the dictionary every three months. As of today, the latest update occurred in December 2016, and therefore before Kellyanne Conway’s use of the phrase in regards to the White House Press Secretary’s claims about the 2017 presidential inauguration attendance. So maybe the editors at Oxford just haven’t added that phrase yet, and it will appear in a future update. (The next one is scheduled

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3 Available at http://library.owu.edu/az.php?a=o.

for March 2017.) In fact, maybe future me and current you can already look up the phrase. But, at this time, it does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as an already existing word.

So, for now, if we want to find a definition, we need something that updates more frequently. How about Wikipedia?

Above you’ll see a screenshot of suggested search results for “alternative fact” on the main page of Wikipedia. Note that, at this time, we have two primary options for Wikipedia entries on this topic: “alternative facts” and “alternative facts (law).”

Are you intrigued by the idea that there may be a legal definition of “alternative facts”? That seems more reliable than a general or political definition. And, after all, the person most credited with publicly using the term, at this point in history, has had legal training.\(^5\) So maybe this term has merit, and a definition outside of Conway’s use. Let’s take a look.

The Wikipedia page defines the term, but guess what? When you look at the history of the page, you see that it was first created on January 25, 2017.\(^6\) Any idea when Conway first famously used the phrase “alternative facts”? January 22, 2017.\(^7\) So, according to this Wikipedia page’s history, that’s three days before Wikipedia user Z22 first authored the entry giving us the so-called legal definition of the phrase “alternative facts” on the website. Well, who is Z22? We don’t know, except that he claims to write computer code for a living, and has received some “awesome” credentials for his work on Wikipedia, according to his user page on the site.

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\(^7\) Todd, 2017.
So, is there actually a legal concept of “alternative facts,” or is Z22 creating bogus information? Looking at other legal dictionaries, the phrase “alternative fact” does not appear. Neither *Black’s Law Dictionary* (in Beeghly Library at Ref KF 156 .B53 2009) nor *West’s Encyclopedia of American Law* (in Beeghly Library at Ref KF 154 .W47 2004) include it in their tomes. This does not mean that the phrase does not appear in a legal dictionary somewhere. But it is two against one that, historically, this phrase has no common usage nor definition. Who’s right: Z22 or a couple of legal dictionaries?

Who and what you believe will test your ability to filter information and your information literacy skills. To filter through news and information, you need to first read (or watch) and comprehend it in its entirety, and then ask yourself these questions:

1. What is the **motivation** for the author or speaker or website? What are his/her **credentials**? Has the author or speaker exhibited **bias** in the past, including cherry-picking facts, taking quotes out of context, claiming partisanship or showing preference or loyalty to a person or idea, often having to correct statements at a later date, receiving payment or other support from a biased person or organization, not acknowledging nor being able to repudiate alternative viewpoints, and etc? Basically: can you trust what s/he’s telling you? Now use the finer points in the CRAAP test to further **evaluate currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose** and help weed out unreliable information.\(^8\)

2. Can the author or speaker point to **other independent and reliable resources to verify** his/her information? Is there any **attribution** for the facts (data, policy, etc) that s/he presents, especially those that are not commonly known? If s/he can point to other sources, do those sources also pass these tests of reliability?

3. What **contradictory sources** exist that would suggest it is not verifiable information? (And how do those contradicting authors or speakers stand up to these other tests of reliability?) If you read something that sounds surprising or too good to be true, follow

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\(^8\) Available at https://www.csuchico.edu/lins/handouts/eval_websites.pdf.
your instincts and look for contradictory sources in addition to considering the author’s or publication’s reliability. If you see something reported by only one source, then that is another time when you need to be sure to look for other sources that either corroborate or contradict that source.

4. What is the **publication process** that brought me this information? Especially, is there an editor or peer-review process that the article must go through before it can be published? Are the editors or peer-reviewers experts in the field? Have these experts generally held themselves to nonpartisan, ethical treatment of the topic in the past? How does the publication, in general, fare against the other tests of reliability?

In short, the more reliable the publication process, the less you have to worry about applying the other filters because it has already been done for you. That is why we can cast the library’s dictionaries (e.g. *Oxford*, *West’s* and *Black’s*) as more reliable sources of information than Wikipedia: they have already been vetted.

So, let’s go back briefly to our Wikipedia entry on “alternative facts (law)” begun by Z22 just a few weeks ago. To their credit, Wikipedia does warn us that this entry may not be reliable, including mentions of advocacy and lobbying groups, lack of real information, and generally not meeting their “quality standards.”

And you can find other Wikipedia users contesting the page when you view its history.
But none of that means that this resource on “alternative facts (law)” doesn’t exist, and that you couldn’t cite it in your research. Unless, of course, you know better.

In a world of post-truth, alternative facts, and fake news we all must be wary of information that does not meet high standards. Anyone can be an author on the internet, but not everyone is reliable. You knew this already. Now you know how to better filter through the news and information you’re exposed to every day to find more reliable information.