DIGITAL RULES RESOURCE CENTER

Using Social Media as a Research Tool

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Introduction

Social media is not just a way to communicate with friends. It is a primary source of news as well. According to the Pew Research Center, most Americans get their news from social media. In fact, the largest news publisher in the world is Facebook. But unlike traditional news sources, social media, as a verifiable resource for school work, can be a tricky and fluid place to conduct research. Tricky because it is not designed to deliver researched, objective and validated information – it is designed to be a subjective space for personal, social exchanges. And fluid because it is a real time source, changing and adding new information second by second. But it's precisely because of these fluid, personal qualities that, for certain types of research, social media yields the most informative intelligence. Here are some tips and resources to help you use social media to find information safely and efficiently.

Following Hashtags

Hashtags are words or phrases preceded by the pound sign or hash symbol to make them more searchable by topic. They help categorize different subjects and can be useful in finding trending information and doing research.

- Search very specific hashtags. For example, if you're researching a country, don't just put #croatia, put the city or landmark like #zagreb or #rabisland.
- Search more than one hashtag to narrow your search. For example, use #croatia and #music together when researching music in that area.
- By putting the hashtags right in a Google Search, you can look across multiple social media platforms at once.
- Some sites to help you identify and follow hashtags include #tagdef (https://tagdef.com/en/) and Hashtags.org, which is the leading directory on hashtags and has a dictionary.

List of Social Media Platforms, Pros and Cons

Platform	LinkedIn	Reddit	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	Discord
PROS	You can follow companies and topics easily. LinkedIn is more professional and you're less likely to run into fake content.	You can find deep discussions on many topics that are easily searchable.	Easy to search people and hashtags; information is often public.	Not anonymous and can be a place to interview and find sources.	Can search through hashtags and, like Twitter, follow people without them giving approval (unless their account is set to Private).	Conversations happen on Snapchat not in other places. Stories are a place to discover first-hand what influencers and celebrities are up to.	Can find a variety of different groups and people who may be willing to chat anonymously; has a search function; messages on Discord are not deleted unless you delete them

CONS	LinkedIn may not be the best place when researching trending news or pop culture.	The anonymity of Reddit encourages trolling and cyberbullying.	Lots of bots and fake content.	There is a lack of privacy on Facebook and lots of misleading content.	Search function not as easy to use; Stories content disappears; harder to find the primary source/website.	Search function is not the easiest to use and content disappears.	Harder to screen shot and some groups are invite-only.
WHEN TO USE	When researching businesses, companies, nonprofits and professionals.	Great topics to search on Reddit are tech, geek, news, and trending topics.	Finding up-to-date life or trending content; good to use for following the news.	When wanting to get interviews or discover news. Facebook is a news aggregator, not a news creator - it's recommended you go to the publication, once discovered here.	Following celebrities or other figures, particularly in Stories; researching trends or companies.	When chatting anonymously or privately.	Researching gaming trends; chatting anonymously; like Reddit, you can find specific topics to follow, but unlike Reddit you can talk in real time

Social Media in Foreign Countries

Globally everyone does not have equal access to the Internet. Companies with more authoritarian governments restrict access to websites and apps. They may do this for several reasons: to restrict news from outside, spread propaganda, favor some news sources and platforms over others; and monitor their citizens. Laws on online privacy, freedom of speech and digital access vary from country to country. China leads the world in digital authoritarianism, and bans or restricts the most sites. These are the countries with the lowest scores on the Freedom on the Net 2018 report and what they block.

China	Russia	Turkey	Venezuela	Thailand
Google	WeChat	Wikipedia	Parts of Twitter	Parts of Facebook
Facebook	LinkedIn	Parts of Twitter	Parts of Facebook	Blocks VPNs
YouTube	Zello	Parts of Facebook	Parts of YouTube	Parts of YouTube
Twitter	Telegram	Blocks VPNs	Parts of Periscope	
Instagram	Blocks VPNs			
Pinterest				

What's popular in the United States is not necessarily popular in other countries. Here are some popular social media platforms used in other countries:

- **LINE** - Free instant communication app most popular in Japan, but used throughout Asia
- **Viber** - This app offers a higher level of security for voice and text communication, and is particularly popular in Israel, Russia and Japan.
- **WeChat**- WeChat is the social media platform used mostly in China and offers messaging, mobile payments and more
- **SkyRock**- This popular social media site in France allows users to create their own profiles and blogs.

- **Weibo**- Similar to Twitter, this site is very popular in China.
- **VK**- VK is a popular social media and messaging site in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Resources for Fact Checking

Anytime you're online, you'll encounter lots of false claims and fake accounts. Here are some websites that can help you fact check:

- **Allsides** - Presents multiple views www.allsides.com
- **American Fact Finder** - Run by the US Census Bureau https://factfinder.census.gov
- **Snopes** - Definitive fact checker on all sorts of claims https://www.snopes.com
- **Hoax-Slayer** - Checks rumors and scams www.hoax-slayer.net
- **Information is Beautiful** - Visualizations of information on a variety of topics www.informationisbeautiful.net
- **Politifact** - Run by the *Tampa Bay Times*, rates accuracy of political claims www.politifact.com

#SpottheBot - Real Person or Bot?

There is an increasing amount of Internet traffic that is fake. Fake websites, fake profiles, bots and more make up (according to some estimates) over half of Internet traffic. On social media, you may be talking to an artificial intelligence (AI), not a person. These bots can **look** like a person but there's no human behind them. The advice that follows is adapted from Digital Forensics Lab.

Questions to ask when distinguishing between AI and human:
1. Does it make sense?
2. Does it stay on topic?
3. Is it attributed?
4. Were there any pauses or delays in the video stream?

Other tricks to figure out if it's a bot or not include:
- Do a reverse image search on the profile picture. Open Google Image and click 'Search by image.' Then upload an image and click 'Open' or 'Choose.'
- Be suspicious of accounts with no profile picture.
- Look at when the account was created. If it's very new and immediately got very active, be wary.
- For more tips on spotting bots follow the hashtag #spotthebot.

Safety Tips for Using Social Media as Research

Stay safe on social media. Along with bots, there are individuals out there looking to take advantage of others. They may just be bored and want to give someone a hard time or they may want to extort money or favors.

Here are some tips to stay safe online:
- Ask to Facetime or Skype an individual you are talking to a lot online. If they refuse, be suspicious. They may not be who they are claiming.
- Never give out personal information online. This includes your full name, phone number, address or email.
- Turn off location settings. Most apps default to using location settings and your GPS. Turn them off to stay private.
- Turn off settings where others can tag you on photos, post on your Timeline, or tag you on Tweets or other posts.
- Check your settings. Every social media platform is different. Here are some tips for popular platforms:
  - **Discord**: Be wary of large public forums and change your settings so only contacts can message you.
  - **Facebook**: Set your profile and posts to private. You can also go back and change all your past posts to Private.

- o **Instagram**: Set your profile to private for the most privacy. Otherwise you can also turn off "Activity Status" so others can't see you're online and set "Comment Controls" to block comments and hide offensive comments.
- o **Snapchat**: Change your Settings under "Contact Me" to only "My Friends" and change the "View My Story" setting to "My Friends" or create a custom list. Also, disable the "See Me in Quick Add" feature.
- o **Twitter**: Consider protecting your Tweets under Settings so your Tweets are only visible to followers.

Conclusion

In the past, the difficulties in research was not having enough information. Now the problem is there too much. Students must not only know where to find information, but vet it. Researching on social media further complicates this new researching paradigm. It involves evaluating materials that aren't reviewed by professionals. Researching on social media requires critical thinking to understand not only the source of the information, but the motivations of the creator. This is not easy, but the first step is to turn inward. When you know yourself and your own biases, and when you know some of the layers that need to be peeled back in order to get at the reality of the source, you can begin to discern fact and fiction.

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