Spotting Websites You Just Can't Trust

Now that you've learned to use Google's Wonder Wheel to sort through information connected to the controversial topic that we're studying in class, it is important that you understand that *you can't automatically trust everything that you find online*—especially when you're studying a topic that can get people all riled up! In today's world, people are using the Internet to share their opinions and to try to persuade readers to think a certain way.

As a researcher, though, it is your job to find facts and to avoid being fooled by people who aren't telling you the whole truth. This activity will help you spot websites that aren't trustworthy by looking at one of the most famous hoax websites of all time—http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/—an effort to save the endangered Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus!

Lesson 1: Common Sense Matters

One of the best defenses against falling for half-truths told online is your own common sense! If something just doesn't sound right, you should automatically be suspicious!

The first thing that should catch your attention on the Save the Tree Octopus website is the very animal it is claiming to protect! Have you ever heard of an octopus living in a tree? Right—and your common sense should automatically make you doubt the rest of the information shared on this page.

Spend a few minutes working with a partner to gather other statements from this website that just don't make sense. Record your discoveries here.

Lesson 2: Look for Links

The sad fact of the digital age is that anyone can write anything at anytime online, whether it is true or not. Knowing that they've got to build the confidence of readers, legitimate online content creators supply you with sources for their information; and online readers should explore multiple sources before deciding what is worth believing.

Working with a partner, look for links in this website. Has the author included any? Where would you expect to see more links added if this were a reliable website? Are there any claims made in the text that responsible writers would prove true by including links to evidence?

Lesson 3: Links Don't Automatically Equal Credibility

While links are a good sign that a website's author might be telling the truth, the presence of links doesn't automatically mean that a site can be trusted. Links—just like anything online—can be faked, too!

To quickly check how reliable links really are, hover over them individually and look in the gray navigation bar at the bottom of your Web browser. You will see the Web address of the site that the link would take you to.

Good website authors will always include links to a diverse range of websites. When *every* link in an online article takes you to the same site, chances are good that you shouldn't trust the information being shared.

Working with a partner, explore the Sasquatch link in the "Why It's Endangered" section and the Demonstration by Students link in the "How You Can Help" section of this website.

What makes them suspicious?

Lesson 4: Always Look for Additional Resources

On almost every website dealing with controversial issues, you'll be able to find a collection of links to additional resources. Sometimes these resources will connect to research reports covering the topic you are studying. Other times, they will connect to groups that share similar perspectives or viewpoints as the author of the website that you are currently exploring.

Most of the time, you'll be able to find this collection of links in the sidebar of a website. They can also be found under pages titled "Related Links" or "Additional Resources." To judge the reliability of a website, always explore these additional sources. If they seem reliable, chances are good that the website's author is a responsible thinker. If they seem biased or comical, you probably shouldn't trust the information you're currently exploring!

Working with a partner, explore the "Links to a Better Tomorrow" section of the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus website. What do you notice? Do the sites included seem to connect to reliable sources? How do you know?

List three or four of the most questionable resources included in this link collection and explain what makes them worthy of skepticism.

Lesson 5: Look at the Fine Print

Let's face it, few of us ever notice the small links titled "Disclaimers," "Terms of Service," "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQs), or "Contact Us" buried in the header or the footer of most sites. That's a recipe for disaster considering that this often-hidden content is usually the only place where hoaxsters bother to tell the truth. Anyone looking to protect him- or herself from being tricked online must take the time to poke through the fine print.

Working with a partner, explore both the green FAQ tab found at the bottom of the content section of the website *and* the FAQ link found in the gray footer of the entire webpage. List some of the comical statements included on both of these pages that prove the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus is nothing but a funny prank that this author is pulling on readers.

Lesson 6: Look Out for Loaded Words

Whenever you are exploring websites about controversial topics, you are bound to come across words and phrases packed with emotion. Getting involved is urgent, and sitting on the sidelines is a crime. Tragedies happen every day, and we can't wait a minute longer to act. Devastation is possible. Carelessness is a cause.

While these kinds of emotionally loaded words and phrases don't automatically mean that the author is lying, they are a sign of bias. Authors who use loaded words and phrases have a strong opinion that they just can't hide—and that means they may willingly fail to tell readers how others feel about the issue. When you see loaded words and phrases, it is important to do a bit more digging so that you learn "the whole truth" about an issue.

Working with a partner, read through the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus website. Do you see any loaded words or phrases? Are there places where the author lets his emotions about this issue show?

Now that you've had a chance to explore the strategies for spotting untrustworthy websites, put those skills to the test by visiting another popular hoax website: Free Forever, Dog Island (www.thedogisland.com).