

Bias and reliability

We use the internet to find information. However, finding information that is reliable and free of bias is as important as finding the information itself.

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The internet contains a wealth of information. This information can be used to learn about new things or to verify facts.

However, much of the information on the internet is either biased in some way or incorrect.

Information that is biased or incorrect loses its value. When information has no value, it is of no use to us. **We need to be able to distinguish between information that is valuable (of use to us) and that which is not.**

What is bias?

Biased information is information that is written from a particular perspective or point of view.

When we write, we often – either purposefully or accidentally – introduce bias. Information that contains bias may be:

- personal opinion
- a statement that has no factual basis
- prejudiced in favour of or against a person, product, situation or idea

Examples

Look at the following examples of information about a film:

- “I think this film is the best animated film of all time.” This statement is clearly personal opinion, and as such should be treated with caution. Someone else might say the film is poor.
- “In twenty years’ time, people will say this film is the best animated film ever.” There is no factual basis to this statement. How can the person who wrote it know what people will think in the future?
- “Like all animated films, this one is great!” This information contains prejudice – the writer clearly has a passion for animation. Someone who does not like animation may say all animated films are poor.

In each case, bias has distorted the information about the film.



What is reliability?

Incorrect information is information that is wrong, out of date or inaccurate.

Websites may contain information that is incorrect for any of these reasons:

- **wrong** – the facts stated are incorrect
- **out of date** – the facts may have been correct when the website was produced, but are no longer correct
- **inaccurate** – the facts may be largely correct, but may contain some errors

When information is correct, it is 'reliable'. Reliable information has value. **The less reliable the information, the less valuable it is.**

Recognising bias and unreliability

Why is it important to watch for bias?

Biased information also loses its value. Information of little value may:

- mislead us
- misinform us
- cause us to make an incorrect deduction
- cause us to make a poor decision

Suppose we used the internet to research the health benefits of cleaning our teeth. One website, owned and produced by a dental company, might tell us that we need to clean our teeth ten times every day. Another website, written by an individual, might state that cleaning our teeth is a waste of time. By following the advice from the first one, we might spend more money than we need to on teeth-cleaning products and damage our teeth by cleaning them too much. By following the advice from the other, we might suffer from poor dental hygiene.

Factors to consider

Biased information is influenced by a point of view. When analysing information for bias, there are certain factors to look for:

- **Source – who has produced the information?** Information from an authoritative, well-known organisation or person is likely to have value. Information from wikis and blogs may be less valuable because they are not authoritative – anyone can update a wiki or write a blog. As such, they may contain bias or inaccuracies. Remember, though, that a company may overstate claims about their products or services, whilst understating those of their competitors.
- **Opinion or fact – does the website state facts or opinions?** Opinions are points of view, not facts. Whilst opinions should be considered and may be interesting, as information they have less value than facts.
- **Statements without facts – does the website contain statements that cannot be backed up by facts?** Such statements are opinions, and have little value.
- **Date of publication – when was the website last updated?** Websites that have not been updated for a long time may no longer be accurate.