
Exploring Reliability Across Different Worlds

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In our daily lives, we find ourselves immersed in an ocean of information. With smartphones and computers at our fingertips, we have unprecedented access to information from around the world through the internet. However, have you ever considered how this sea of information has transformed and the growing challenge to its reliability?

Over a remarkably short period, access to information through the Internet has become incredibly convenient, greatly enhancing learning, research, and communication. Information sharing has increased with social media platforms standing out as rapid channels for spreading information. Videos captured by individuals and social media posts can instantly spread across the globe. Furthermore, global media increasingly reference these user-generated contents, amplifying the speed of dissemination. Consequently, they have become more immediate sources of information for important events and urgent situations than traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio. These experiences led me to believe that the world's information was right at our fingertips.

However, the experiences from my summer study abroad in the United States this year provided me with a fresh perspective and fundamentally altered my perception of the world of information. In the sociology class I attended, YouTube videos were used as part of the course materials, and pre-class preparation was required. One day, a Chinese friend from the same class expressed frustration that these materials would become inaccessible upon her return to China. Initially, I didn't understand the significance, but I soon learned that the Chinese government imposes strict restrictions on information access, limiting access to many international web services. Google Search, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and other services we routinely use in Japan are all blocked. According to Freedom House's report, conditions for internet users in China remained profoundly oppressive and confirmed the country's status as the world's worst abuser of internet freedom for the eighth consecutive year in their 2022 assessment. These restrictions result in delayed information dissemination and reduced timeliness, making it challenging to access specific information. These facts indicate that there exists a significantly different world of information from what I had believed so far. Realizing the presence of varied information environments, I began to explore how information is transmitted and affected by constraints, with a particular focus on the critical issue of information reliability.

In an unconstrained environment, information spreads widely, allowing anyone to disseminate it. However, the reliability of information becomes a significant concern as it is often shared without confirming its accuracy or source, increasing the risk of the spread of fake news and misinformation. For example, misinformation that consuming highly concentrated alcohol could disinfect the body and kill the virus was spread in different parts of the world in 2020. Following this, approximately 800 people died, while 5,876 were hospitalized after drinking methanol as a cure for the coronavirus. So, why did such an event occur? Research published in *Nature* by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reveals that fake news spreads faster and more widely when it's false. The study provides several approaches to quantify this phenomenon. For example, false news stories have a 70 percent higher likelihood of being retweeted than true stories. It also takes approximately six times longer for true stories to reach 1,500 people in comparison to false stories reaching the same number of people. If something is too strange, we immediately realize it's a fake. However, when some truth is mixed in, we tend to perceive it all as the truth. Therefore, it is evident that fact-checking and source verification are imperative to maintain information reliability.

In environments with restricted information access, government constraints influence information reliability. With governments imposing limitations on information and restricting access to specific sources, information is tightly controlled, and information that doesn't align with the government's position or regulations is suppressed. This constraint leads to a decrease in information reliability and the suppression of certain perspectives and information. However, this environment has nurtured valuable skills. I observed these abilities during a collaborative assignment with a Chinese classmate. As I compiled information based on sources I found, she consistently scrutinized the information, questioning who wrote it, when, and for what purpose. She had developed the ability to evaluate information reliability, given the presence of government information control in her country. This indicates that as internet regulations tighten, people become more cautious in verifying information and seeking reliable sources.

In this way, constrained and unconstrained environments each have distinct aspects regarding the flow and reliability of information. However, one commonality between these environments is the necessity to always question and verify information. Confirming the source, credibility, and accuracy of information and considering whether the information holds real value is crucial in our decision-making processes. Through this exploration, I became acutely aware of the risk of unquestioningly utilizing information.

In conclusion, the lesson I've learned is that in the sea of information, we need to take on the role of new-age captains. Captains gather the necessary information for a safe journey, making decisions about the ship's course and speed. In the realm of information, we must be vigilant, verify, and choose the right course. Moreover, we should not only passively consume information but also realize that we can actively shape information and influence others. To fulfill this new captain's role, we must explore new tools and approaches to ensure information reliability. Improving digital literacy, seeking

transparency in information sources, and supporting credible information sources are efforts that can enhance information reliability and improve the entire information environment. By embracing this role, we can navigate the sea of information more safely and meaningfully and make proper decisions.

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