Welcome to Research 101: Credibility is Contextual

The credibility or trustworthiness of an information source depends on where it came from, who it was made for, and how you use it—we call this the context. Effective researchers understand that the level of credibility and quality needed from a source will vary based on the context.

Researchers use many different benchmarks or criteria to evaluate their sources. Some information needs are immediate and low-stakes, such as the day’s weather report before going on a picnic. An in-depth meteorological report is not necessary in this case. However, if you were writing a dissertation on weather models and climate change, you would need a more authoritative source.

Credibility indicates the degree of trust that researchers give to a source. Effective researchers understand that non-traditional sources may yield valuable information. Yes, a scholarly article is often a credible source, but other information sources may also add value to your research. For example, a blog post or tweet from a well-established organization or expert in your subject area may offer insight into a new study. However, it is always important to remain skeptical about a source and assess where it came from, what the purpose of the work was, and the context in which the information is presented.

Let’s look at an example. You’re researching the Obama administration’s policy on immigration. You come across a tweet from the @WhiteHouse twitter feed that provides great insight into your research question. Let’s take a look at how it was created:

Who is creating the source? The President of the United States…or at least the president’s staff
Why are they sharing the information? to communicate with the American public, and maybe to persuade followers to take the same approach
What is the process to get it published? clearing it with the Communications office, entering the text and posting online.

So the format itself (a tweet) is not what matters here, but understanding the context, why and how it was published means that you know the information came from a reliable source. However, if the tweet had come from @WhiteCastle it might not be as credible or relevant to your topic.

As you continue your research, you will notice that the quality and usefulness of a given piece of information is partly determined by how and why it was made. An author’s reasons for researching, writing, and publishing a work, either physical or digital, can vary greatly. The quality of the information reflects this diversity. As you assess the credibility of a source, keep these issues in mind.

To recap:
- Credibility of a source depends on the context in which it was published.
- It is important to evaluate each of your sources and,
- Non-traditional sources (such as websites and tweets) may be credible sources of information, BUT it depends on your purpose.