Online Research Tips & Best Practices from Paley Education

The Paley Center for Media is an archive of over 160,000 different programs from radio, TV, and internet broadcasting history. With an archive this vast, it would be an understatement to say that research is a big part of what we do. In addition to research in our own archive, we also spend a great deal of time using online sources to round out our work. We're delighted to share some of our expertise.

Online research is always a tricky endeavor. How can you tell that a source is legitimate, accurate, and fact-checked? It takes practice to become a research expert but here are some tips to help you get started.

In many ways, Google (and other search engines) are already designed to help you find what you're looking for. A classic keyword search is usually your first attempt at online research. That means typing words or phrases into the search bar. But what if you're looking for something more specific? Try a boolean search! That means adding words like "and" "not "or" to your search terms get more relevant results.

Example keyword search: "earth day"
Example boolean search: "earth day" AND "politics"

Now that you've started entering search terms and getting results, how can you tell the sources are reputable? First, take a look at the URL! It's always a good sign when the site is a .gov, .org, or .edu. That's not to say that you should avoid .com entirely - there is plenty of legitimate journalism that uses .com because they make money from sales and ad revenue. In the case of using a .com as a source, just make sure that you avoid the "Editorial" and/or "Opinion" pieces that might contain bias (unless you are making a point about bias) and any Advertising section (look closely - sometimes it can be tricky to spot an advertisement - be suspicious of anything labelled "sponsored" or "paid for by"). Here are some journalistic sources we generally trust:

Not For Profit
https://www.factcheck.org/
https://www.npr.org/
https://www.pbs.org/
https://www.propublica.org/

For Profit
https://www.latimes.com/
https://www.bostonglobe.com/
https://www.nytimes.com/
https://www.washingtonpost.com/
https://www.wsj.com/

A quick word on Wikipedia! Wikipedia is a fantastic research resource but it should NEVER be your only source. Always make sure you have a second source backing up what you find on Wikipedia! And don't be afraid to click around in an article's references - it's a great way to confirm the veracity of the article.

Generally speaking, there are certain types of content to just avoid when doing online research. Examples of this are social media, online communities (such as Reddit), and personal blogs/websites. These types of sites have very little oversight, no editorial standards, and no fact-checking.

Last but not least, your local library and librarian are always great resources for research assistance. As an example, check out these roundups from the NYPL:

https://www.nypl.org/about/remote-resources

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