

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 to spot websites that aren't trustworthy by looking at one of the most famous hoax websites of all time: An effort to save the endangered Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus!

Save the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus website: <http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/>

Hoax Spotting Strategy

Your Response

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 on the website that you are exploring, 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 web page that just don't make sense. Record your discoveries in the *Your Response* column of this handout.

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! This means that legitimate writers link to any source that they reference in their work.

Knowing that they've got to build the confidence of readers, online content creators will always supply you with the sources for their information—and online readers always need to 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 were true by including links to evidence?

Lesson 3: Links don't automatically equal credibility

While links are a good sign that the author of a website 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 a link is going to take you to.

Good website authors will always include links to a diverse range of websites. Anytime that EVERY link in an online article takes you to the same site, the 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 that 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 these collections 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, the chances are good that the author of the site you are exploring is a responsible thinker. If they seem biased or comical, the chances are good that you 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 web page. 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 really read the fine print on any website. In fact, we rarely even 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.

And 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 themselves from being tricked online just HAS to 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 that 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 that are 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 websites that can't be trusted, put those skills to the test by visiting another popular hoax website: Dog Island, Free Forever (<http://www.thedogisland.com/>)