

IDENTIFYING CREDIBLE SOURCES Q&A With Naomi Schemm, Social Sciences Librarian

With the infinite knowledge that the internet provides, it can sometimes be challenging and time-consuming to determine a source's credibility. Naomi Schemm, a social sciences librarian at Southern Methodist University, discusses some ways OSH practitioners can identify credible sources and how to communicate a source's credibility to the C-suite.

Naomi Schemm

Naomi Schemm is a social sciences librarian at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. Prior to this, she was a business librarian at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where she worked with the Occupational and Environmental Safety and Health Department. She is passionate about education, including teaching useful strategies for all to find reliable and trusted sources of information in whatever their field of study. She holds a B.A. in Education from the University of Nebraska at Kearney, and a Master of Library and Information Studies from the University of British Columbia.

PSJ: What are some ways that safety students, researchers or practitioners can identify credible sources?

Naomi: As an information professional, I see many different source evaluation methods that are all generally trying to teach how to evaluate a source for reliability. Some of them are little mnemonic devices, acronyms or something to help you remember them. And to some extent, they all are trying to do the same thing. Some of them are more useful or less useful than others, for example, some of the things that we might have been taught a decade or two ago in school. I hear from younger students, in particular, say, "If it's a dot-org site, that means it's reliable," or "If it has grammar or spelling errors, that means it's not reliable." And those signs are actually not great indicators of credible sources anymore. First, it's pretty easy to make a polished web page these days. Maybe back in 1998, it wasn't, but these days it's easy for anyone to do that. So, the quality of the web design or the grammar or spelling errors are not necessarily indicators that you're going to see on noncredible sources.

In the dot-org example, many don't know this, but now anyone can get a dot-org; it's not just for a non-profit organization. So, that's not really an indicator of a nonprofit institution. Frankly, there are many fringe groups that can be classified as nonprofits, and they could have gotten a dot-org years ago.

So those simple, quick checklist-type evaluations really aren't the most reliable ways to identify credible sources. One method that I particularly like that was developed by researchers is called the SIFT method. I use this with students quite a bit. It stands for stop, investigate, find other coverage and trace the claims back to their original context.

The first step, stop: Anytime you have a strong reaction to information, ask yourself if it is good information or bad information, if it is something you should or shouldn't trust. Stop and check your emotional reaction.

Then investigate, meaning go off this particular website and investigate what's said about the source on some other page or source. Basically, find out what you can about what other people say about this site. Are there other fact-checkers? Are there other news organizations that have done investigations that can tell you who is behind this group?

The third step is to find what other information sources may be saying about this topic. Don't take the word of this one source as gospel. See if you can find what other sources may be saying to either

collaborate, corroborate or contest with what the first source is saying.

Lastly, trace the source's original claims back to the original context. This is especially true on social media because a lot of things that you see shared there may have a provocative headline, an image that's been doctored or a quote that's been taken out of context. It can get really inflammatory and then it gets shared all over social media. So, take that quote, image or whatever and try to trace it back to the original source and see where it actually came from. Is this really the original context, or is it taken out of context?

It takes a little bit more digging, but it's basically doing what's called lateral reading or critical reading from other sources to see what's being said about this initial source. That's one particular method that I like. There are many different methods, and none of them are going to replace your critical analysis of a source. It just takes a little bit of extra time and some extra steps if you want to be really sure that you're using good, reliable information.

PSJ: What red flags should practitioners watch out for when evaluating sources?

Naomi: I think the biggest thing is to be aware of the cognitive biases and the kind of shortcuts that we all take whenever we're dealing with information. This is not a fault of any individual person because this is how our brains deal with a complex world. We have these cognitive biases or shortcuts that can make us more susceptible to information that may not be as reliable or trustworthy. Many have heard of confirmation bias. It's probably the most common one, where we're more likely to remember something if it agrees with what we've already done, thought or agree with. Some other common biases are things like trusting something more when it's shared by somebody you know. So, if your friend or family member shares it, you're more likely to trust it than if you see it in a random news article. There is also the availability bias or how frequently you hear about something. This happens a lot with news sources. For example, if the news is frequently reporting about car accidents in your neighborhood, you may think that the car accident rate must really be going up. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. But it's that what you're seeing most frequently reported on can give a bias one way or the other.

How information is presented can really bias how we perceive it. So, for example, with information that's presented in a chart or a graph or a table, some may automatically think that that's more reliable

because it looks scientific. People may be less likely to engage critically with something if it's an image, which is a reason why you see so many more images and videos of things going viral online because people may be less likely to critically engage with those visual media than with text-based information.

These are all biases that everyone falls into, and it's not anyone's fault or moral failing. It's just something that our brains do. And when you recognize that and recognize that these are things that can happen to anyone, you may need to train yourself to stop and identify when that may be happening and dig a little bit deeper to make sure you're not falling into that as much as you can.

PSJ: What questions should OSH professionals consider to help determine a source's reliability?

Naomi: First, I always tell people to look at who the author is. What are their credentials, expertise or experience that makes them an expert in this field? Obviously, I'm coming from academia, but expertise doesn't have to be an advanced degree. Sometimes this author has worked in the field for a long time or has niche experience with an unusual type of facility or chemical or something like that. But basically, do some digging into who the author is and why you should trust that person.

A little bit broader than the author is looking at who the publisher is and what source is publishing this information. Is this a source that's known for publishing high-quality information in the OSH field, or is this an organization you've never heard of? If there is evidence that this is drawing from a research study or something like that, look at their methodology. How did they design the study? Most people have probably seen examples of studies that were poorly designed and then results can be manipulated, depending on the design of the study. For example, things like small sample sizes or changing the measurements or dosages. Look carefully at how the researchers created and designed the study.

Also, look at the funding of the study. There have been examples in many industries of studies funded by organizations with a financial stake in the outcome. For a hypothetical example, maybe there's a study about how eggs are much more healthy for you than oatmeal for breakfast. Then, it comes out that this was funded by an egg marketing organization or something like that. There are examples where you dig a little bit into the funding of the research and see that it was funded by an industry association that maybe has a vested interest in seeing results that go one way or the other. However, this does not automatically invalidate the results. There

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Train yourself to do what you can to try to be a more responsible citizen in terms of finding and evaluating information. We can all do our part to try to make for a more informed public.

can still be good studies done in those areas. That's something you should know about if you are evaluating their results.

How recent the information is can be important too. Recency is not everything; some older information can still be very reliable. But looking for the most recent information if possible is a good practice.

PSJ: What advice can you give safety professionals who may need to convince the C-suite or other stakeholders of a source's credibility?

Naomi: In a business context, you often need to emphasize the impact on the bottom line, and in safety, the impact on people's lives and livelihoods. Business executives know that good business information is valuable, and that's the reason there is so much information on the internet that businesses, quite frankly, have to pay thousands of dollars for subscriptions to have access to that really solid information. So, you can show that you have access and use those reliable sources of information, maybe some of the names that an executive might even recognize, whether it's a publisher, journal or study; sometimes that type of name recognition can be helpful.

It's also important to recognize and express to your higher-ups and stakeholders what you know and what you don't know. In safety challenges, every scenario can be just a little bit different. So, often you can't find research that is exactly what you're trying to apply to your workplace or to your situation. Maybe there's a similar facility that had a similar challenge or a facility that had somewhat similar materials or behavior issues. I think it's all right to be very transparent about what we do know and what we don't know. And sometimes, people are scared to say that and acknowledge that, for example, this area hasn't really been studied and we don't know how it would turn out in this slightly different situation. But acknowledge that based on the best

information we have, which is X, Y and Z sources that were in similar situations, this is our most likely conclusion about the outcome in our environment. So, acknowledging what you do know and what you don't know or what still needs to be studied can actually also increase your credibility in some ways—being able to show stakeholders that you're making this recommendation based on the best authority we have at the moment.

PSJ: How can safety professionals or students find a diverse variety of credible safety sources?

Naomi: In library work, we always think about whose voices are not being represented in whatever type of literature or information we are reading. It can be who is less likely to be published in this type of journal or magazine, whether that's women or a minority or someone who has really niche interest or experience in a particular field. Think more broadly about what you can do to seek out those perspectives. Maybe it's something like turning to your in-person network and asking around for someone who knows someone who works in this field. Maybe it's going into some alternative sources such as social media or looking at social media thought leaders to ask who is talking about this study and who is talking about this area that you're not seeing in the traditional publishing avenues.

There are many different ways to share information these days; that's the wonder of the internet. It doesn't have to be only in traditional academic publishing outlets. There can be influential and credible sources in various outlets. So, being willing to think a little more broadly about where you might find those is something I certainly encourage people to do.

PSJ: Do you have anything else to add?

Naomi: It's very easy to despair about the lack of critical thinking these days or the lack of people being able to entertain diverse perspectives in our modern society. And I want to emphasize that the problems of misinformation, disinformation and less reliable information are not new. This is not something that only came up in the last decade, even though it might seem like that to us. There has been bad information out there for as long as there has been information. It's a systemic problem, and we're never going to solve it by any one individual decision or by the decisions that any one of us makes. But at the same time, we can recognize our own biases and weaknesses. Train yourself to do what you can to try to be a more responsible citizen in terms of finding and evaluating information and maybe sharing that with your friend or family member who maybe hasn't heard about these strategies. We can all do our part to try to make for a more informed public. **PSJ**

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