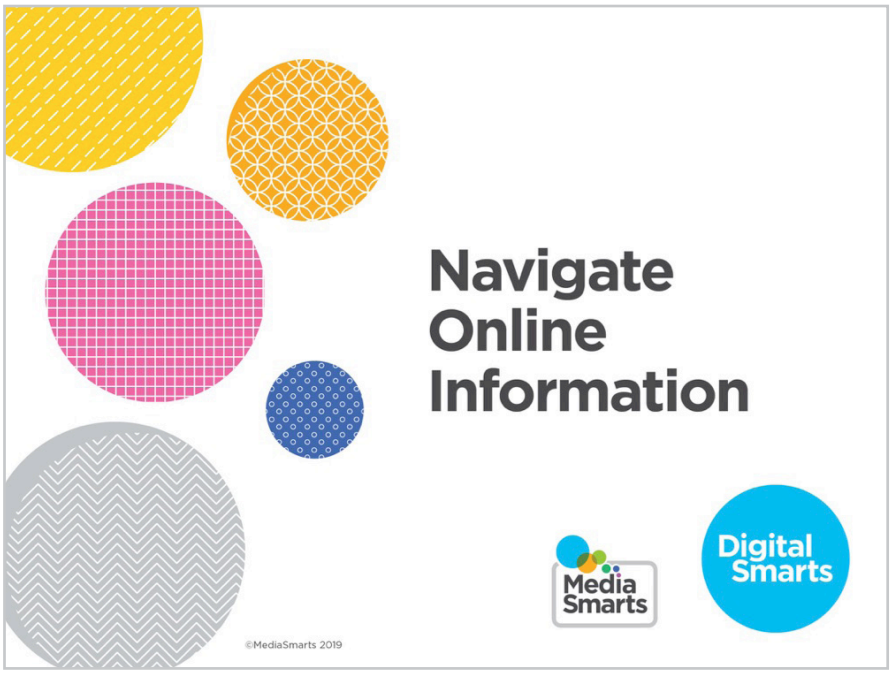
Digital Smarts

Workshop Script



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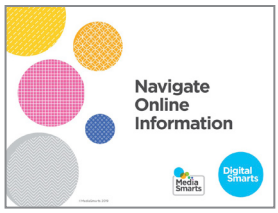
Media Smarts

YWCA CANADA
A TURNING POINT FOR WOMEN
UN POINT TOURNANT POUR LES FEMMES



1. Welcome to our session on navigating online information.

We're going to have some time for questions at the end, but I'd also like to invite you to just raise your hand any time you have a question along the way.

2. Before we get started, I'd like you to think for a minute about what you're hoping to learn in this workshop.

You don't have to answer out loud. Just think about – What are some kinds of information you look for online? What are some things you have trouble finding?

What would you like to learn more about when it comes to finding things online?

3. The internet is an amazing source of information. Almost anything you might want or need to know is out there.

The problem is that there's so much information, it can be hard to find what you're looking for.

It can also be hard to tell whether or not you can trust what you've found.

The good news is that it's not hard to learn some simple things that will make both of those things a lot easier.

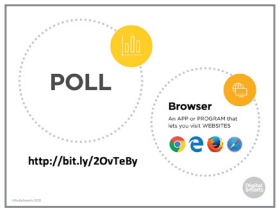
4. At the end of this workshop, you will know how to:

Find good information on search engines like Google;

Use different sources of information like Wikipedia;

Judge whether what you see on social networks or sites like YouTube is reliable;

And choose the best online source for different kinds of information.



5. Before we get started, let's do a quick poll to find out how much you already know.

You can answer the first question by raising your hand — how many people here are using devices, such as phones or computers, that you brought with you?

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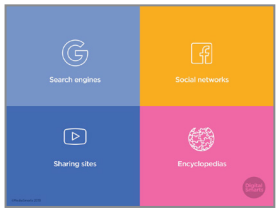
How many people are using devices that you haven't used before?

If you've got a device you already know how to use, start it up and use your browser to go to the website on the screen. Once you're there you can do the poll. It should only take a few minutes.

If you haven't used your device before, look for one of the browser logos you see on the screen. Then you can put in the web address to go to the poll.

I'll come around and help make sure everyone is able to get to the poll. If you finish ahead of other people, you can help one of your neighbours.

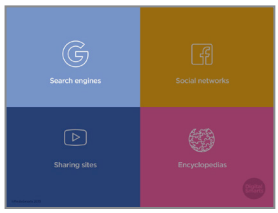


6. We mostly get online information from four kinds of places. First, *search engines* like Google.

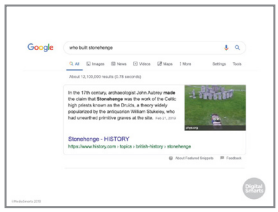
Social networks like Facebook.

Sharing sites like YouTube or Pinterest.

And encyclopedias like Wikipedia.



7. Search engines like Google, Bing or DuckDuckGo are usually our first stop when we're looking for online information. They shouldn't be your last stop.



8. That's because the results you get aren't organized by which are most accurate. They're sorted by which are most *relevant* to your question.

Sometimes the result Google thinks is the most relevant is wrong or misleading. For example, the top result for the question "who built Stonehenge" is a link to a good article, but the part of the article that's highlighted here is describing an old, wrong theory.

As well, the top results of any search are often ads that people have paid for you to see.

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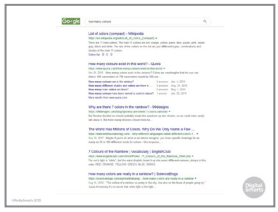
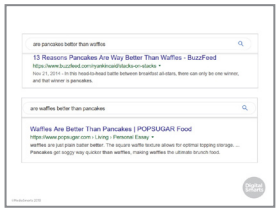
9. What answers you get from a search engine depends a lot on what question you ask. Even small differences in the question can make a big difference.

If we ask "how many colours are there" the top answer is ten million. If we ask "how many colours are there in the rainbow," it's just seven.



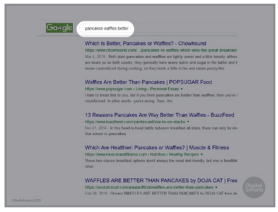
10. So don't think of Google as a way of getting *one* answer. Skip the box at the top and take a look at the links and samples further down instead.

A search engine gives you links to other sources, but it's up to you to choose which ones are up-to-date and reliable.

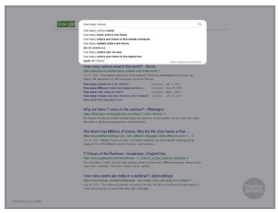


11. Because search engines give you the results they think are the most relevant to you, you need to be careful how you word your searches.

If you ask if pancakes are better than waffles, for example, you'll get results that say that. If your search asks for the opposite, you'll get opposite results.

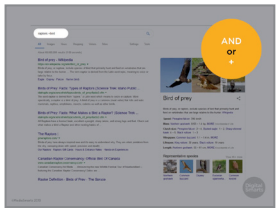


12. Instead, word your search as plainly as possible so that it's not weighted towards one side or the other.



13. For the same reason, you mostly shouldn't use the suggested searches that Google offers once you start typing.

That's because those are based on *everybody else*'s searches of similar topics.



14. There are also some things you can add to your search terms to make them more specific. You can use the word AND (all capital letters) or the plus sign to show that results have to include two or more terms.

If you wanted to get information about raptor birds and not the Toronto Raptors, you can search for raptors AND bird.

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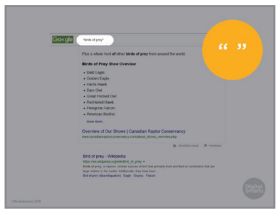
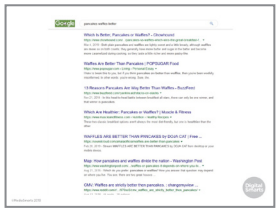


15. You can also put words or phrases in quotation marks.

Putting a word in quotation marks means that it *has* to be in every search result.

Putting a phrase in quotation marks means that the search engine will look for those words in that order.

So instead of searching for “raptors,” you might get better results searching for “birds of prey.”



16. Once you’ve got a set of results, don’t just click on the top one. Remember, the order doesn’t tell you anything about how useful or reliable they are.

Instead, scan the list and decide which one seems likely to be the best. Sometimes you’ll know already that some sources are better than others: if you’re more interested in which are healthier, for instance, you’ll know right away that the result from “Muscle and Fitness” is probably the best. You probably don’t have to click on the song by “Doja Cat” to know it’s not what you’re looking for.

17. Once you’ve chosen which one you think is *probably* going to be the best choice, open it in a new tab.

A tab is like a window except you can see them lined up along your screen and can click from one to another easily.

It’s good to open search results in a new tab because if you decide one result isn’t the best one, you can easily go back to your search results. It also makes it easier to compare two different results.

To open a link in a new tab on a PC, click with the right mouse button so that this window appears and click on “Open Link in New Tab.”

On a Mac, hold town Command before clicking a link.

On an Android or iOS device, hold your finger down on the link for a few seconds until a window appears with “Open in new tab” and tap it.

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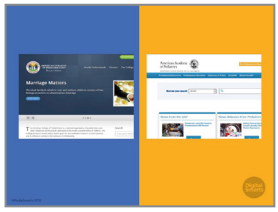
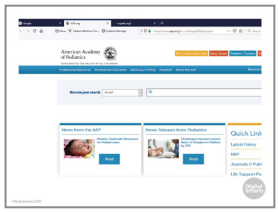


18. A lot of the time, though, just looking at a website won't tell you whether or not you can trust it.

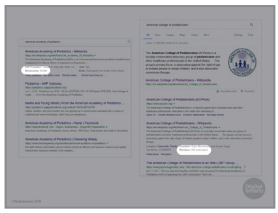
There's no way easy to tell whether the American Academy of Pediatrics site is more or less reliable than the American College of Pediatricians, for example.

Sometimes that doesn't matter. If you need to know how late the library is open, you know you can trust the library's website. But if you're looking up something more complicated, you need to double-check.



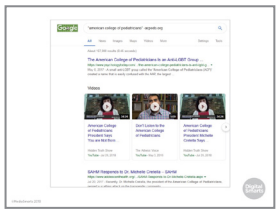
19. This is where opening our sources in tabs is helpful. It's easy for someone online to say anything they want about themselves, so we want to know what *other* people have to say about them.

We can open all the sources we want to double-check in new tabs—



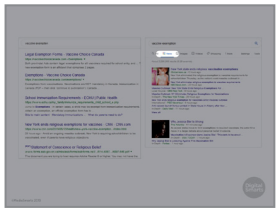
20. — then move back to Google and do a search on each of them.

Doing a search for each of these groups, for example, shows us that the AAP has sixty-four thousand members, while the ACP has 500. Even if we don't read the details of why the ACP split off from the AAP we can see that one represents a lot more doctors.



21. Sometimes when we do a search on a source, most of the results are that source's own website.

To be able to find out what other people say about it, we can use some of the search tricks we learned earlier. To do a search on the American College of Pediatricians that doesn't include their website, we can add a minus sign and then the web address. We can also put "American College of Pediatricians" in quotes to get more relevant results.



22. You can also sometimes get better results by using a specialist search engine.

Some of these are part of bigger search engines. Google has separate engines for Images, Shopping, Maps and News. The News search is very useful because unlike the main search, Google limits what sources can be included. It's not a hundred percent reliable, but for a lot of topics it's more reliable than regular Google.

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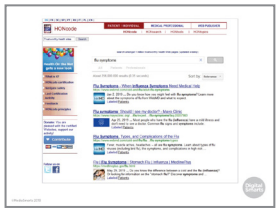
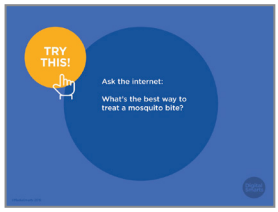
For example, if we do a search for “vaccine exemption” in the main Google tab, two of the top results are a misleading source that’s spreading misinformation about vaccinations.

If we do the same search in the News tab we get news stories from mostly reliable sources.



23. There are also totally separate search engines like HonSearch, which only searches sites that have reliable health information. These can do a lot of the work of filtering out bad results for you.

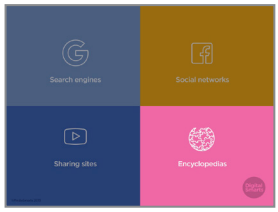
24. Let’s do a quick quiz to check that you understood everything we just talked about. It’ll work the same way as the poll you did a few minutes ago.



25. Let’s give what you’ve learned so far a try. Using some of the things we’ve just looked at, find out what is the best way to treat a mosquito bite.

I’ll come around and help anyone who’s having problems.

Now turn to the person next to you and compare notes. How easy was it to find what you thought was a good answer? How reliable do you think it is? What makes you think that?



26. Wikipedia is the most well-known online encyclopedia.

There are some old-style encyclopedias online, like Britannica dot com, but most online encyclopedias are made by their users, like Wikipedia is.

27. Wikipedia is good for getting basic information about things you don’t know that much about. If you want to find out what most people think about a website or a group, Wikipedia is a good place to go.

It’s not as good for things that are happening right now, like news stories. It’s also not as useful for topics that not many people are interested in.

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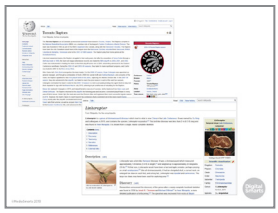
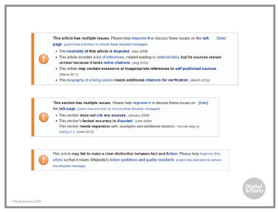


28. Wikipedia articles are written by volunteers. How good a Wikipedia article depends on how much work those volunteers have put into it.

The article on the Toronto Raptors, for example, is many times longer than the one on the little-known dinosaur Linheraptor.

That doesn't mean that the article on Linheraptor isn't accurate, but it does mean it has a lot less information and that if somebody added something that wasn't right it would take longer for other users to spot it and change it back.



29. When Wikipedia users notice something wrong with an article but aren't able to fix it right away, they warn readers by adding a cleanup message.

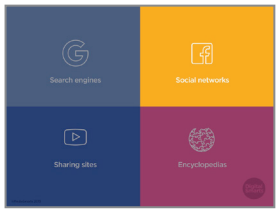
Cleanup messages don't necessarily mean an article is unreliable, but they are a sign that you need to check other sources to be sure.

30. Wikipedia also has volunteer editors who give a rating to each article.

The ratings range from "Stub," meaning an article that just has a few details, to "Featured Article", which means it's one of the best articles on Wikipedia.

You can see the rating by clicking on the "Talk" tab at the top of the article. This will also show you what the people who are working on the article are saying about it. It helps to know if there's an argument going on about some of the facts in the article.

Like a cleanup message, a low rating doesn't always mean an article is bad, but it does mean you need to keep looking.



31. A lot of times, when we get information or hear about news it's not because we went looking for it—it's because it came to us on social networks like Facebook or Instagram.

32. These are good sources for personal news about friends and family, and as a way of finding out about news when it happens, but not a good way to get the whole story.

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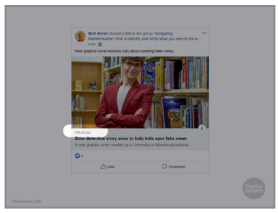


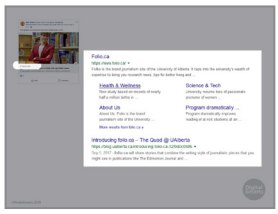
33. That's because we don't usually get enough information to decide whether or not a story is reliable.

In this post, where the story came from—a website called folio.ca—is just about the least visible part.

Not surprisingly, most of us decide whether or not to believe something based on who shared it with us or whether it "feels" right.

34. That means that we can't assume anything we see on social media is true *or* false unless we check it out.

Even if we can tell that the source is reliable, like with these stories from Forbes and the CBC, we need to click through and read them to see that the first one is more than a year old and the second is more of an opinion piece than a news story.



35. If we *don't* recognize the source as being reliable, we have to do the same thing we did with Google: do a search to see what we can find out about them.

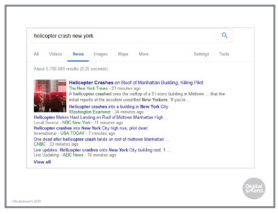
There isn't a lot of information about folio.ca online, but the official University of Alberta site tells us that its purpose is to "share expertise from the University of Alberta."

That tells us that while you might not want to make it your *only* source—since it only has stories that connect to the university in some way— the stories it does publish are probably going to be accurate.

36. Another way to check a news story that comes to you from social media is to search for it on Google News.

That'll show you whether other news sources are covering it. If they're not, it might be a sign the original story isn't true.

This tweet about a helicopter crash says its source is the Associated Press, but it doesn't give a link to the story.



37. When we do a Google News search we see that several reliable sources have confirmed that news as being true.

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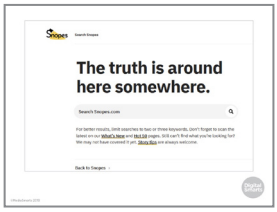
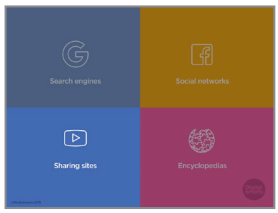


38. Because social networks are all about sharing, we also have to be careful about what *we* share.

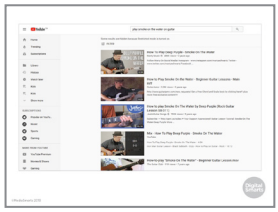
After all, our friends and family trust us and count on us to share good information.

Make sure you double-check before sharing anything on social networks. Besides the other steps we've looked at, you can also use fact-checking sites like Snopes to see if anybody has debunked a story before you share it.

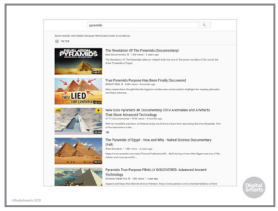
You can search Snopes the same way you search Google, by using operators like AND in your search and putting phrases in quotation marks to make your search more specific.



39. Another place a lot of people get information is from sharing sites like YouTube and Pinterest.



40. These are great for how-to videos and other practical information like guitar tutorials and recipes —



41. — but not very good for anything more complicated, like news or health information.

Because anybody can post things on these sites, some topics may have more bad information than good.

If you look up "pyramids" on Google or Wikipedia, for example, you'll mostly get good information. The same search on YouTube mostly gives you videos promoting theories that nobody who studies the topic believes.

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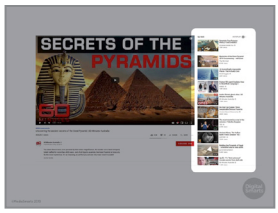


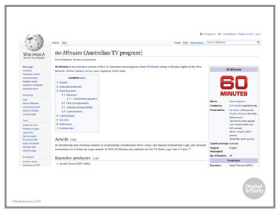
42. Even if you pick a good source, like this video from Sixty Minutes Australia, you'll probably see bad sources in the "Up Next" bar.

That's because these sites suggest things that a computer program thinks you'll want to see or watch. They decide that partly based on what you've clicked on before, and like social networks they mostly try to keep you interested long enough to see advertisements—that's how they make money.

And those computer programs have learned that people watch extreme and scary videos for longer than ones with good information.

43. The best way to use sites like YouTube and Pinterest is to search them instead of surfing them. Don't click on anything that's "Up Next" or "Recommended"— use them like a search engine and double-check the source, just like you would with Google.

You can't be sure that "Sixty Minutes Australia" is reliable just from the name—anyone can call themselves anything on the Internet —



44. — but double-checking shows you that it's been around since 1996 and has won a number of awards, so it's probably a good enough source.

45. Let's do another quick quiz to make sure you understood all that.

46. Let's do something to test everything we've learned today.

Imagine you want to know what breed of dog is best suited to a house with small children in it. Take a few minutes and try to answer that question on Google, Wikipedia, YouTube and Facebook.

I'll come around and help anyone who's having problems. If you're not on Facebook I can log you into our account.

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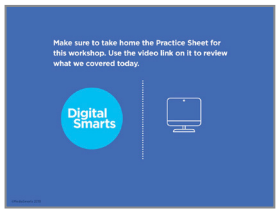
(The login is mjohnson@mediasmarts.ca *and the password is* f!l!keb@N2n@5k)

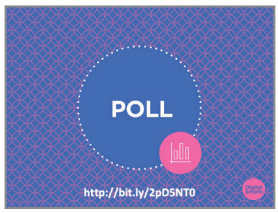
Now turn to the person next to you and compare notes. Where was it easiest to find the information? Where was it easiest to find out if the person giving you the information knew what they were talking about? Which do you think gave you the best information?

47. We're almost done this workshop, so let's stop for a second to see if anybody has any questions about what we've covered so far.

If you'd rather not ask your question now, I will be here for a little bit after the workshop, so feel free to come ask me.



48. Make sure to take home the Practice Sheet for this workshop. Use the video link on it to review what we covered today.



49. We've covered a lot in this workshop. Now we'd like to hear from you about what you learned, what you still have questions about, and your suggestions for how to make the workshop better.

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