Is the Internet a reliable source of information?

The Internet is not a source of information. The Internet is a means by which we contact and communicate with various sources, including sources of Information. Billions of sources of information. Apparently not all of them are reliable. Apparently some of them are. There are different newspapers online. Are they reliable? All type of encyclopaedias. Are they reliable? All companies and organisations. All religions, political parties, all advertisements, songs, prayers and blasphemy, all opinions.

There are thousands of social networks with billions of users. Are they reliable? But even social networks are not a source of information. Is the phone reliable? It depends on whom you're talking to, not on the phone! Social networks are means of communication as well: if the person you are talking to on a social network is reliable, then the information given is as well, if not, it is not.

Therefore: the question whether digital social networks and the Internet are reliable sources of information is the wrong question. Putting it in a way is as if we don’t understand what is the internet and the social networks really are. The question «if all the sources of information we find on the internet are reliable" has the obvious answer 'no'; therefore the real question is:

How do we distinguish the reliability of information (found on the internet)?

And the answer is: the same way that we see the credibility of an information we found elsewhere. We have two elements to evaluate: the content and source of the information. Neither of them is as simple as it looks.

What is the content of the following photo?

What information do we get out of it?

Four men are running, three of them are in police uniform. Are they actually Police officers? They have masks: are they for COVID or for tear gas? Where was it taken? In Greece or Cyprus? I'm sorry. I guess it's summer since everyone's wearing short-sleeved. The police officers are running to catch him, hit him, or maybe are chasing some people in front of him? In fact, from the photo itself we can not acquire any information. Zero. We don't even know whether if it's from a movie or from real events, if it has been photoshoped, or even staged. Without any information for the photo's origin; as a source of information it's useless even dangerous. On the contrary it’s a perfect example as a source of misinformation!

What is the content of the photo below? What information do we get about it? What about the photo below? It's the exact same photo. But now it is in the context of a article written on the newspaper «Ο Ταχυδρόμος». This context changes, not necessarily the content, but the information we conclude to interpretating the picture’s content in the article’s context.

Therefore, the information that (indirectly) a photo transmits depends on the context. Of course, the article may also be fake- but that is another matter, that we will see further. Suppose you do see this article with the photo on a printed sheet of the newspaper that you have in your hands.

What information do we get out of it?

Ο ΤΑΧΥΔΡΟΜΟΣ – 27/6/2016

Yesterday's demonstration in Athens against Turkish provocations. On the occasion of the ongoing Turkish provocations thousands of citizens demonstrated yesterday against the

government's tolerance policy and called on the government to keep a firm stance. Citizens of all ages holding Greek flags forced the police initially to discontinue the traffic in the centre of Athens. But when a part of the protesters began to break and destroy shop windows, flip cars and set trash cans on fire, the police was forced to violently break up the rally.

What is the photos’ content below? What information do we get out of them? You see that the photos are the same, but they have a different subtitle, caption.

• Two armed ΜΑΤατζήδες are chasing an unarmed old man to hit him while he is trying s to escape them from them by running

• Police and civilians are running to drive out anarchists who stepped in the, until then, calm demonstration

• File photo (Source: ΑΠΕ)

What does it change with the addition of a caption?

A caption can provide information about the photo or describe the photo. Information about the photo e.g. when and where it was taken, where we found it, who has the copyright, but also information about the way, the lens, the filter and the process it has gone through. Such elements are called 'metadata'. The description of the photo recommends an interpretation.

Of the three captions, the first two interpret while the third gives some metadata

(where the newspaper found the photo)

• Two armed ΜΑΤατζήδες are chasing an unarmed old man to hit him while he is trying s to escape them from them by running

• Police and civilians are running to drive out anarchists who stepped in the, until then, calm demonstration

• File photo (Source: ΑΠΕ)

So if I change or skip the caption and relay the photo, then I'm guilty of misinformation. I'm the source of the misinformation, I'm the one who did it, not the Internet, not Instagram where I posted it.

Educational Activity for the Laboratory

1. Choose a topic that interests and concerns you.

* It may be associated to school, e.g. if the exams per quadrimester will be applied
* It can be social, e.g. if the recent floods are due to global warming and climate change.
* It can be athletic, e.g. if the moment in the APOEL – Omonia match was indeed penalty or not.
* It may be relevant to current issues, e.g. whether or not citizens comply with the pandemic’s measures

2. Find photos associated to your chosen topic.

3. Think of various, conflicting views on the subject.

4. Find photos that may justify views on the subject (while it may not have a direct connection, e.g. it may be an old photo of a flooded house or a collapsed bridge)

5. Choose a photo and think of three different captions that support three different points of view.

6. Post them in your social network account and ask your friends what do they believe

Notes

An activity that can be adapted to different themes and depending on the interests and age group of participants. Recommended for middle and high school students. Activity from 30 minutes and customizable