# UPSIDE DOWN THINKING FROM WEB MEMES?
*What to consider when accessing web sources*

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**Abstract**
This article considers the issue of false information, which has been increasingly available on the World Wide Web. This misrepresentation has engendered much distrust in populations, leading to polarized views, anger and fear, which is tearing society apart. How to evaluate information sources for judgement about their reliability and validity is crucial, particularly for impressionable students, who need a fair, unbiased perspective in their learning experiences. The fact that universities have been cracking down on ideas and materials that are unpopular amongst certain sections of society is an issue that must be addressed. Free speech has always been considered necessary for the progression of societies, but is in danger from today's oppressive culture that cancels those whose views are not accepted.

*Keywords:* Internet, information, web-sites, author identity, URL hijacking, Top Level Domain, freedom of speech, British universities.

### Introduction

A teacher recently told me about a colleague who switched on a Zoom lesson to find all the students hanging upside down!  I then read about this happening elsewhere! What a relief! Students have not lost their sense of humour during the pandemic. They were demonstrating their digital literacy and I am not sure I could press the right buttons to achieve this!  Bats relax upside down because as flying mammals it is difficult to take off from the ground, so this position enables them to speed away quickly. Perhaps there is a hidden message here - the students will fly away (*press leave*) if the lesson is boring!

Following this occurrence, there were many television interviews with people having no intention of taking the Covid-19 vaccine. Why? They had read on the web that it was designed to kill not cure.  The pandemic exposes a gap between science and practice, showing the importance of educating about risk, prevention and treatment. Inferior experimental design and data interpretation or dubious ethics practice brings distrust, misinformation and vaccine refusal. The 2020 YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project survey of around 26,000 people, in 25 countries, found widespread scepticism about vaccine safety from web memes. What is a '*meme*'?  The word came from Richard Dawkins's book: '*The Selfish Gene'* (1976), describing '*a unit of cultural transmission'* – passed between people and subject to selection pressures - analogous to gene selection and transmission. Web memes include animated graphical interchange formats (GIFs), videos, images and words, offering humour and entertainment while communicating ideas, which are often not accurate.  Thus, a meme can produce '*upside-down'* thinking amongst us. To prevent this, digital literacy must evaluate Internet source material for its truth and credibility.

### Evaluating Web Sources

Website numbers change constantly, with over one billion sites on the world-wide-web (1,229,948,224 – Netcraft's November 2020 Web Server Survey).  Many are protected by free speech and anti-censorship laws, so can print what they want (*true or not*) without legal consequences. This has changed ways for gathering and assessing information. Techjury.net presents the following 2020 statistics:

- 4.54 billion worldwide internet users
- 1.5 billion internet inactive websites
- 56.5 billion web pages indexed through Google
- 200 million active websites.

Evaluating sources for their authority, accuracy and relevance is important for students acquiring knowledge to help them become worthy citizens and writers who produce this for audiences to read and

accept. It is said that bad sources, like bad seeds, bear bitter fruit for those using them! However, internet global connectivity makes verifying sources easy. *Grammarly's Plagiarism Checker* shows if content is original and the *Online Writing Lab* (OWL) advises on evaluating sources. Google top results are won by big budget commercial websites with social media ones often based on opinion not fact. There are steps to evaluate credibility.

### 1.        Use Trustworthy Sites

If wanting world updates you go for The Daily Telegraph (*or similar quality paper*) rather than The *Wigston Spine* (*a newspaper created by children for hedgehog news!*). The same practice should be used for Internet research. Choosing a reputable site is the first step. Type in your topic to the search box and discover related sites and possible links. For example, if you type in surveys on *racial discrimination*, you will find a host of possibilities, but look for reputable research organisations like *The Joseph Rowntree Foundation* – http://www.jrf.org.uk or a government one http://www.yougov.co.uk. Type the URL into the search box on Alexa.com. Click on '*Get Details'*. Check links to them and other facts. The URL is the acronym for *Uniform Resource Locator* (*web address*) referring to a resource, specifying the computer network location and a mechanism for retrieving it. The common form starts with http:// followed by www and name. When you want to visit the site, type in the link into the Google search box. Paste the URL directly after the colon with no spaces. If not seeing links, shorten the URL. Different search engines may have varying results, so it is worth re-trying. Alexa Internet Inc, provides web traffic data, global rankings and other information on over 30 million common websites.

### 2.        Check Author Identity

If searching for information about *Student Educational Needs* and the management strategies that might meet these effectively*,* make sure the author of the content is qualified, with a background in medicine, psychology and education, to have the required knowledge breadth to provide accurate information and advice. Having a '*Doctor*' title may not indicate superior knowledge and application nowadays. A research doctorate can be gained with studies that do not follow significance level criteria, showing just one method of data collection (*online survey with ambiguous questions*). Many theses available for reading on the web would not have been accepted in the past! A long debate on a *Linked In* web professional network has evidence on this matter! Also, many students buy their theses from the many websites offering writing services. Therefore, it is wise to be cautious and assess author credibility. A reputable academic has extensive research experience, is well-published and peer-reviewed with probably an ORCID ID. This is a non-proprietary alphanumeric code to identify scientific and academic authors and contributors. It provides a persistent identity for people and connects their unique IDs with manuscript reviews undertaken for scholarly journals. Web authors should indicate their experience, with short biographies a vital check. Non-qualified writers should use professional sources and quotes for credibility. Always evaluate education and professional experience to decide if an author is competent to write about a subject.

### 3.        Appraise the Article

Look at the article date, included studies and resources. Topics, like '*Student Responses to the 2020 Pandemic'*, require up-to-date sources - recent surveys/case studies/interviews. Other subjects, such as '*Communication Matters'*, benefit from a historical approach, with literature in the 1980s debating this topic, in line with public pressure to give it more attention in education and training for effective connections in an increasingly global world. This discussion was started by engineering professions, working in multidisciplinary teams internationally and dismayed at the limited abilities of graduates to speak, write and communicate with colleagues from other backgrounds. They noted the lack of expertise amongst teachers to develop such a complex process. (Shuman et al, 2005, Willmott & Colman, 2016 amongst many others). The number of articles on the web from various parts of the world indicates that this is an important subject of universal concern.

Regarding evidence, look for primary source use: *historical documents, personal interviews, author scientific experiments, works of literature, conference proceedings etc*. Secondary sources

include: *important thinkers views on the problem, a review of topic studies, an interpretation etc.* These two source possibilities provide comprehensive understanding.

Reliable information is vital. Many website articles include links for more data. If these do not go anywhere the article may be old. Legitimate websites keep links updated for users to gain more material. Look for other articles on the site and those written by the same author to assess views on other topics and note any bias. Is the writing consistent? Is opinion backed up by strong evidence? Are there a range of views explored? Scholarly content must have source data and not just be opinion. If reproduced from another source consult the original to ensure meaning has not altered. References show breadth of material consulted (Bailey, 2020). Effective research will trace the history of the subject being investigated, so check for a spread of dates in the reference section.

The Facebook social-networking site often posts from fake news platforms like *The Onion.com.* The mocking tagline of *The Onion.com* is: '*America's finest news source'*. This is a very popular internet news site used by many, but readers have been frequently hood-winked into thinking some stories are real/true when they are not. An example of such deception is an interview with Prince Harry and his actress wife, Megan Markle with Oprah Winfrey, in March 2021 on American television that was broadcast worldwide. The interview berated the UK press for their racist treatment of the couple, but a third of examples shown on the programme were not from British sources. Those that were had titles taken out of context to appear racist, when the content presented an opposite view. The programme even *altered* titles, as in an example from the Daily Mail: '***Yes, they're joyfully in love. So why do I have a niggling worry about this?'*** The innocent headline had the word '***niggling'*** removed in the programme to make it look bigoted, although the article contained no colonial or racist views. Associated Newspapers (AN) stressed that a good, impartial researcher would realise the term '*niggling*' was not offensive. *'By blanking out the word, and including this item prominently in the montage, you have invited audiences to speculate what word had been used and, in the context of the programme, to reach a false and damaging conclusion that it was racist'*. The statement was made to Viacom CBS, the US Television giant which aired the 2 hour programme. In the AN's view, the programme made a '*deliberate distortion and doctoring of newspaper headlines'*.

*Domain Tools*, a security analyst company in Washington, the United States of America, says the internet abounds with fake news sites, used by the media, with research showing how *typo squatting* and spoofing on domains are normal. *Typo squatting* involves deliberately registering internet domain names to redirect users to unintended destinations, or stealing traffic for monetary gain. Christopher Elliott, a senior contributor at Forbes, the global media company, focussing on business, investing, technology, entrepreneurship, leadership and lifestyle, presents the *Domain Tools Survey* (2019) of the top USA news sites and examines the tricks done to them: *Newsday, New York Times, Washington Post, New York Post, Los Angeles Times, New York Daily News, USA Today, Boston Globe, CSO and Chicago Tribune* are all well-known papers internationally that have been seduced by typo squatting techniques. This is, indeed, a shocking discovery!

*Typo squatting* (URL hijacking) relies on Internet user mistakes when typing an address into the browser. Spoofing happens when a scammer pretends to be a premium publisher. Such criminal acts can extract personally identifiable information, download malware, or spoof news sites to spread information. Organisations with high readerships are lucrative for scammers seeking spoof domain names.

## 4. Evaluate the Top Level Domain (TLD)

The site address (*domain*) ending enables one to look at its purpose for deciding online resource reliability. This part, is known as the **Top Level Domain**. Booking.com is a website showing hotel savings in such destinations worldwide. The ending .com indicates a commercial website. If researching something .com sites require more scrutiny, because of commercial bias, as they are created for the aim of selling a product or service. The web information wants the visitor to buy the offer. If wanting a candid comparison between Android and iOS, you will find on Apple.com a bias towards the latter. The .org TLD was originally intended for non-profit organisations, but anybody can use this. Just like .com websites, you can expect anything you read on the location to have an inclination towards the specific organisation's goal or mission. A .mil TLD denotes a military site.

A TLD .edu belongs to an educational institution, normally referring to a higher education one and .ac indicates a university. A reputable one has academic staff credentials. Look at their research profile,

major grants and leadership of international projects to assess trustworthiness. As students contribute to .edu sites, it is important to look for citations when dealing with their writing. If researching a paper or study assignment, it is vital to look for peer-reviewed articles. If a professor publishes something on an .edu website it may not be peer reviewed, but their record and reviews may lead you to find the information dependable.  An address ending with .gov is a government website. If looking for reliable information on topics like health or education etc. these are sensible places to start and likely to have updated information.  The tag .net is open to anyone but was originally intended for use by domains indicating a distributed network of computers, or '*umbrella*' sites that act as the gateway to a set of smaller websites. The .int TLD is strictly limited to organizations, offices and programmes endorsed by a treaty between two or more nations. However, a few *grandfathered domains* do not meet these criteria. What does '*grandfathering*' mean? This is the first registration phase of Top Level Domains, which were developed after their particular Second Level Domain (SLD) was already active. Grandfathering allows SLDs to apply for their name under the newly launched TLD before anyone else.

In June 2020, there were 1,514 current TLDs, according to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). This non-profit organisation regulates and coordinates the internet domain. TLDs are useful for looking at specific information, but with no guarantee of content credibility, so it is vital to evaluate material properly. The internet is a quick source of information but libraries are best for accurate content, as research databases require subscription and are not available from traditional search engines. Resources are peer reviewed by professionals in their field to ensure quality and reliability.

### The Background to False Information

The '*Big Tech's* increasing power is tearing societies apart, by making them more divided and fragile on the whims of those who think they know better than the rest of us. They seek to dictate what we should be able to say, know or do.  Influence is focussed in the Silicon Valley, a small area of California, USA, dedicated to the development of advanced technology. The people working there on intelligent machine systems represent the most radically Left-wing views in the present world. Their biases have made web platforms become the enemy of enlightenment and respect for diverse views. These experts are powerful worldwide, because technology dominates present life and has taken over many dull, dirty and dangerous routines.

As a result of this trend, impartiality shows a growing, worrying loss of faith. A 2020 report, produced by the *Centre for the Future of Democracy*, University of Cambridge, involved more than 4 million respondents from 154 nations and 3,500 surveys. It showed that 58% of the population felt that governments were abandoning commitments to justice and human rights. Voters were being misinformed and misled, as seen in the number of accounts promoting state-backed political opinions not based in fact (telegraph.co.uk/front-bench). Unless democracies, like the UK, forge a stronger common national purpose, conflicting cultural identities will pull them apart and destroy their nations. Thus, it will be vital to regulate social media, so that diverse views are heard instead of a continual stream of assertions that strengthen prejudices to divide and rule.

Nowhere is this more important than in the university and college systems. C*ivitas*, the Institute for the Study of Civil Society, is a British think tank focussing on democracy and social policy issues. It suggests that UK universities banning free speech can be placed into categories – red (35%), amber (51%) and green (14%). The top ten Russell group universities had the worst record for free speech according to Civitas studies in: Why Academic Freedom Matters (2020). Researchers found that speech could be curbed by perceived 'transphobic episodes' in around 70% of red universities and 50% of green ones. Also, around one third of staff had experienced serious bullying and harassment and even been 'cancelled' (removed from their posts) for their views. Many UK highly qualified and experienced experts have left the university system, because of disrespectful treatment and are pursuing their intellectual interests in other directions.

Freedom of speech, understanding and respect of all positions is fundamental to the pursuit of truth and academic excellence. Herbert Marcuse (1969) in 'An Essay on Liberation' said: 'Society

cannot be indiscriminate in its tolerance of speech, where freedom and happiness are at stake'. The modern, educated mind and its pretentious rationalism nods sagely! Rationalism, in this context, refers to the practice or principle of basing opinions and actions on reason and knowledge rather than on religious belief or emotional response.

The Chopper's Podcast suggests that 50% of Britons do not feel they are free to speak their minds (telegraph.co.uk/choppers-politics). There are many examples of controversies regarding free speech. Gonville and Caius, one of Cambridge University's oldest colleges intends to remove a commemorative window to the eugenicist, Sir Ronald Fisher, the President of Caius who died in 1962. Winston Churchill, an English Prime Minister (1940-45 and 1950-55) has become to symbolise the old world versus the new, with attempts to remove his statue and rename the college, supported and founded in his name at Cambridge University in 1960. He has been deemed 'a white supremacist', promoted by the 'CharitySoWhite', which is devoted to attack white dominance. The fact is Churchill fought to protect the hundreds of millions of non-white people in the British Empire. Andrew Roberts, author of 'Churchill: Walking with Destiny' (2018), said 'Churchill did his best in the exigencies of wartime to alleviate the Bengal famine. In his political career, he fought again and again against slavery and for the rights of non-whites within the British Empire. Churchill was moreover instrumental in destroying the worst racist in history, Adolf Hitler' (p. 48).

As the last globally powerful Englishman, Churchill is blamed for the fact that Western nations have dominated the world for 200 years, with undoubtedly a history of exploitation, but also the positive spread of Christian principles, the rule of law, modern medicine and education. People should be judged for character not colour of their skins. It is a general understanding about human nature that people who dominate tend to exploit the rest to some extent. However, sadly the response of many UK universities is to decolonise the curriculum and wipe out white culture. This is in response to movements like Black Lives Matter, which take action to dismantle systemic racism, racial discrimination and social and criminal injustices, in order to create fairer, just systems. The UK '*should be regarded as a model for other white-majority countries*' although it cannot be considered '*a post racial society*', a government-ordered review has found (March 2021). The independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities - which was appointed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, following last summer's *Back Lives Matter* violent protests, in which buildings were burnt and ruined and people severely injured.

Confident, thoughtful, reasonable people should not be seeking ways to denigrate their ancestors for doing things in the past that were not considered crimes at the time, although we would not necessarily repeat all their actions today.

**Two Groups of People**

People tend to fall into 2 opposing groups. There are those who accept that movements have legitimate reasons for rejecting the status quo, that does not work for them and is dismissive of concerns about preserving their valued national traditions, culture and ways of life. The second one dismisses the other as reprehensible racists, who have been manipulated by distant elites and so unable to make judgements and choices of their own.

Evidence shows hardliners are winning by exploiting liberal principles. These are dangerous times for the rights and safety of the individual. Social media now acts as judge, jury and executioner. In 2020, a social media campaign led to the beheading of Samuel Paty, a teacher in Paris, France. His killer was incensed by on-line posts denouncing him for showing pictures of the Prophet Mohammed in a lesson on free speech. The parent of a girl, in Samuel Paty's class, published the teacher's name and address on Facebook and YouTube, demanding his sacking and urging others to act against him. Later, it emerged that this 13 year-old student had admitted to lying about the incident and, because of her suspension for truancy, was not even in school to attend the lesson. Quick as a flash, in a few clicks, the teacher's famed reputation for fairness, respect and understanding of different views in a plural society, was brutally destroyed. In March 2021, a British teacher produced the same picture in a lesson on blasphemy and has had to go into hiding, because of vicious media, school-gate attacks and harassment at home. People are using the norms, rules and fashions of a liberal democracy to attack its principles. Fear, naivety and cynical complicity mean we are failing to deal with such incidents. Extremist beliefs control public thought and conscience and use pluralistic values to destroy the unity of society.

The world is built on a blend of post-modern philosophy and its critical theory developments on the one hand and self-indulgent narcissism on the other. Liberal elites appear to accept that discourse is oppressive, so admitting that language, customs, values, institutions and traditions abuse the weak and maintain the power and prestige of the strong. They use traditional narratives and social roles to keep them in their place. In this woke world, alert to issues of social and racial justice, it is suggested that exploited people take part in their own oppression by using language and stories. Words and reality do not need to correspond, as the teacher examples above suggest. Scrutiny is dismissed as racially charged and misogynistic.

Today, UK universities are driven by the expectations and demands of fee-paying students, who presume instant satisfaction from their higher education experience. Also, university leaders are expected to comply with the bureaucratic demands of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its latest off-shoot, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In this rapidly changing higher education setting, the belief that academic freedom matters, represents an important continuity with the past. This historical link, even if its existence is only rhetorical, makes possible an evaluation of change.

Truth matters and has become twisted and dangerous. In a 'woke' world, alert to issues of social and racial justice, words and reality do not have to correspond. Across, academia, business, sport, the arts and public life this new, woke paradigm holds sway. Truth (or mistruth) is a commodity to be bought, manipulated and sold for profit. Until recently, the successful in society, sought to prove they earned their place through hard work, resulting in intellectual brilliance and superiority. Now many are seeing themselves as victims and place themselves above others by teaching the masses about social justice.

**Review**

As the Internet is open to everyone, it is easy to access false information or opinions instead of fact. This review considers **accuracy** (*reliability*) **authority** (*expertise*); **coverage** (analysis); **currency** (relevance) and **objectivity** (impartiality). There are links: the author's authority and sources often predict accuracy (Tate, 2010). Skill in making a content analysis is needed, as Beck (2009) points out. Another issue about Internet-based sources is URL changes to the accessing link. Also, web pages alter or disappear, so it is possible that the page cited may be gone by the time a reader tries to find it. This has happened to me! Beck's (2009) title in the web article: '*The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: Or, why it's a good idea to evaluate web sources'* is entirely appropriate here! The consequences of not reflecting on the information we receive is disastrous for everybody and leads to the most awful consequences. Generations will always diverge on social issues, but compromise and taking the middle ground, brings chance of reconciliation and understanding. There are signs that this possibility is vanishing fast. Hatred and hostile behaviour has become our mode of operation, so that there are very few matters which we are unable to fall out about. Instead of proper dialogue, we have memes, put-downs and dismissals of those who do not think in the way that we do.

The fact that universities are strongly following this agenda, means we are producing students with strong bias and prejudice built into their psyche. Suppressing views gives no opportunity to study and understand other standpoints and learn how they have come about in people's thinking and actions. Research and evidence have been trumped. Unless we are prepared to reverse this grave situation the world will become an increasingly unpleasant place to live and work.

When students complain they are offended, many universities opt for the easiest solution, which is to give in to their demands. Universities are under continual pressure to encourage student applications, so they have become risk adverse when it comes to free speech, because of a fear of damaging their reputations. Winston Churchill has come to symbolise the old world versus the new. This generational clash, in which each side is seemingly less able to see eye to eye than ever before is disturbing. It means by reducing issues to misrepresentations, we fail to articulate positions developed from a place of genuine concern. Education has an important role to play here. The sooner we get our heads around this situation, the better!

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**Веб-мемдеден инверттелген ойлау?**
*Веб-көздерге қол жеткізу кезінде нені ескеру керек*

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Бұл мақалада бүкіләлемдік ғаламторда жиі қолжетімді болатын жалған ақпарат мәселесі қарастырылады. Бұл бұрмалау халық арасында үлкен сенімсіздік тудырды, бұл қоғамның бір бөлігін бұзатын көзқарастар поляризациясына, ашуланшақтық пен қорқынышқа әкелді. Олардың сенімділігі мен жарамдылығы туралы пайымдау үшін ақпарат көздерін қалай бағалау керек, әсіресе оқу тәжірибесінде әділ, объективті перспективаны қажет ететін әсерлі студенттер үшін өте маңызды. Университеттердің қоғамның белгілі бір салаларында танымал емес идеялар мен материалдармен айналысуы - бұл шешілуі керек мәселе. Сөз бостандығы әрқашан қоғамның дамуы үшін қажет деп саналды, бірақ қазіргі кездегі көзқарасы қабылданбайтындарды жоятын қатыгез мәдениетке қауіп төніп тұр.

*Түйін сөздер:* Интернет, ақпарат, веб-сайттар, автордың жеке басы, URL мекенжайын түсіру, жоғары деңгейлі домен, сөз бостандығы, Ұлыбритания университеттері.

**Перевернутое мышление из веб-мемов?**
*Что следует учитывать при доступе к веб - источникам*

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В данной статье рассматривается проблема ложной информации, которая все чаще становится доступной во Всемирной Паутине. Это искажение породило большое недоверие среди населения, что привело к поляризации взглядов, гневу и страху, которые разрывают общество на части. Как оценивать источники информации для суждения об их надежности и валидности, имеет решающее значение, особенно для впечатлительных студентов, которым нужна справедливая, непредвзятая перспектива в их учебном опыте. Тот факт, что университеты расправляются с идеями и материалами, которые непопулярны среди определенных слоев общества, является проблемой, которую необходимо решить. Свобода слова всегда считалась необходимой для развития общества, но она находится в опасности из-за сегодняшней угнетающей культуры, которая уничтожает тех, чьи взгляды не принимаются.

*Ключевые слова:* Интернет, информация, веб-сайты, личность автора, захват URL-адресов, домен верхнего уровня, свобода слова, британские университеты.