

Evaluating Sources

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover how to evaluate internet sources in sociological research, focusing on:

1. Issues with Sources
 - a. Authority
 - b. Bias
 - c. Citations

1. ISSUES WITH SOURCES

Research on the internet is a good way to give you a preliminary background and knowledge on a topic that you intend to study and research.

Of course, serious academic research should be obtained through using books and peer-reviewed academic journals, and through gathering empirical data on your own. The internet, though, is a good place to start gathering information, especially if you don't know much about your topic.

When evaluating research sources on the internet, there are three issues to be aware of:

- Authority
- Potential bias
- Citations

1a. Authority

An **authority** is a person or organization with recognized and official expertise on a certain topic in a particular field.

IN CONTEXT

Modern society is full of authority figures. We've divided knowledge and knowledge production into various offices, each with its own authority. We have doctors, we have professors--these are very specialized authorities on every topic imaginable. However, not all authority figures are equal.



THINK ABOUT IT

Both sides of the global warming debate can point to many different authorities who support their claim. But are they really the same? They all can't be exactly right, yet they are each considered to be an authority, which introduces an area of uncertainty.



TERM TO KNOW

Authority

Having recognized and official expertise about something, or in some field.

1b. Bias

Authority figures can be motivated by **bias** or by having a vested interest for or against a certain side.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are a sociologist who is interested in doing research on global warming and the environmentally motivated social movements that have sprung up in response to issues of global warming. You want to learn more about global warming, so you Google it.

You find a geologist--say Phil Johnson is his name--who has a website, a blog, and a book that all state that global warming has absolutely no connection to human industrial activity. Well, Phil Johnson is an authority figure. He's got a PhD in geology and likely knows what he's talking about with respect to climate change--all credible enough, correct?

You do more research on Phil, look at his book, his career, his biography, and you find out that he worked as a prospector, prospecting oil fields for Exxon Mobil for the first 20 years of his career. Do you think that Phil might be biased by that contact and influence with Exxon Mobil? Does he still have merit as an authority?

You might question his standing as an authority figure on account of potential bias.



TERM TO KNOW

Bias

Having a prejudice for or against a particular side.

1c. Citations

You will always want to check the source of an authority's information. You do this by looking at your source's **citations**. Citations are stating where you got your knowledge information on some topic.

IN CONTEXT

Because you're concerned about Phil's potential bias, you investigate the source of his information,

by looking at his citations. You find that Phil primarily cites studies that have been funded by Exxon Mobil itself and carried out by private research firms, not research universities.

Even though Phil is technically an authority figure and has a PhD in geology, he might be motivated by bias, having worked for Exxon Mobil and carrying out and citing research that has been conducted by private research firms, research that was funded by Exxon Mobil.

What is your conclusion? Perhaps you shouldn't trust Phil as an authority figure. Perhaps you shouldn't trust his research as a source for your knowledge. You constantly have to be thinking critically about the sources you use.

Academics do their research and fill their citations with books and peer-reviewed journal articles--peer-reviewed, meaning that they go through a process whereby everybody reviews it to ensure it is valid. In any one 30-page article that a sociologist will write, there will probably be a hundred citations in that article--it's extremely thorough.



TERM TO KNOW

Citations

Stating where you got your knowledge and facts.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **evaluating sources** on the internet, focusing on three concerns: authority, bias, and citations.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Authority

Having recognized and official expertise about something, or in some field.

Bias

Having a prejudice for or against a particular side.

Citations

Stating where you got your knowledge and facts.