ATTACHMENT 1: FIVE QUESTIONS THAT WILL HELP YOU DETERMINE WHAT MEDIA CONTENT TO TRUST

You may encounter content today from any number of media sources, from traditional news outlets to social media to email and videos. How do you know what to trust?

Ask these questions to help you unlock whether something is trustworthy. It's easier than you think. They will make you a more critical thinker and save you from being misled. (These are adapted from the book "Blur: How to Know What to Believe in the Age of Information Overload" by Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach.)

1. Type: What Kind of Content Is This?

Recognize first what kind of content you're looking at.

Is it a news story? Or is it an opinion piece? Is it an ad or what some people call native advertising produced by a company? Is it a reaction to someone else's content?

Part of knowing what you're looking at involves knowing who produced the content. Is it a news organization? Or is it a publication that is sponsored by a think tank, or a political group or a corporation? (If the story or graphic you're looking at came in a tweet or through a friend, look at the name of the organization, not just the name of the author. If you don't know the organization, look it up online.)

Another thing to know is where the organization gets its money. If it's a nonprofit or an advocacy group, where did that money come from? If that isn't clear, that's a problem.

Does the content have an obvious political slant? There are a lot of new partisan sources for news now. Sometimes it's hard to tell from any single story whether the source is political. One way to identify partisan or political leaning is to see whether all the stories seem to point in a particular ideological direction, or would tend to reinforce the views of one party. If they do, that is a tip-off that the site really has a political viewpoint. It's easy to recognize. Scan the stories quickly. You will know it when you see it, even if each story itself seems fairly straightforward.

Knowing what you are looking at is the first step to figuring out what you can believe.

2. Source: Who and What Are the Sources Cited and Why Should I Believe Them?

News content usually cites sources for the information provided. These are the people quoted, or the documents or reports or data being referred to.

As you read, listen to, or watch a piece of content, note who is being cited. If it's text, print it out and circle the sources. Is it a police official? A politician? What party? If it's research, what organization produced it and what background, if any, is offered about them?

A major part of understanding sources is recognizing the level of knowledge that someone might have—or how close it is to being first-hand.

There are lots of different kinds of sources.

Sourceless News: Some news is actually "sourceless." If the president says something on television or in public, the account may cite no source at all. It was a public event for all to see.

The Journalist as Witness: The journalist or author could also be an eyewitness. In that case, the account may make it clear the author saw it but cite no one else.

Credentialed Experts: In some cases, the author or journalist may have such obvious expertise or credentials that they are a credentialed author/source. Doctors who are also reporters (such as Dr. Nancy Schneiderman on NBC News or Sanjay Gupta on CNN) are examples. An opinion column written by Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is another example.

Proximity of Knowledge: When we move to content that cites other sources, one question is how close is the source to the event. In other words, how well would they know what they are talking about? Are they a first-hand eyewitness? Or is it second-hand? In courtroom trials, only things that people saw for themselves are usually permissible as testimony. If they are an official source, such as police spokesperson, they are likely second- or third-hand witnesses, but they may be basing what they say on multiple first-hand witnesses.

The key question is: How do they know? If it's not clear, you should be more skeptical.

Distance in Time: Time is also a factor. Research shows the more time that has passed since an event, the more faulty memory is. Police investigators know this well. So, ask yourself: How far in the past did this event occur before the witness was asked to recall it?

If the source is a document (a study, or data), ask the same question: Who produced it and what background do you have on how the study was done and what other studies that group might have produced? There is no such thing as knowing too much about a source.

Then there are outside experts who might be asked to comment based on their experience. Just because they are called an expert doesn't mean they necessarily know a lot about this situation. Do they have a lot of experience with this kind of event? Have they done any research on this particular situation?

The source could also be anonymous (journalists sometimes use sources without naming them, because that person could get in trouble). If so, what background is offered about how this source would know what he or she is talking about and why you should believe them? And why were they were allowed to remain anonymous? Sometimes, journalists simply fail to identify the source for some statistic or assertion to save time or because they forget.

Once you have identified who the sources are, ask one other thing: Do they have a bias?

If so, that doesn't necessarily mean what they have to say isn't reliable. Think about whether they are a witness to facts or are just describing their opinion. They may be the perfect authority. But this also leads to the next question you should ask.

3. Evidence: What's the Evidence and How Was It Vetted?

Evidence is closely related to, but slightly different from, source.

Evidence is the proof that the sources offer for what they know. It overlaps with how close someone is to an event. But even highly credentialed sources may begin to speculate sometimes. They may be guessing.

So, first, identify the evidence that any source is offering. Circle it. Write it down. Do it as an exercise a couple of times. It becomes easy to recognize.

Is the evidence a document? Was it something the source saw as an eyewitness? Is it hearsay, or second-hand? Or are they speculating about someone's motives or what they might have done?

Next, what if anything did the author do to verify this evidence? Did they check with a lot of sources? Do these sources disagree? Can you see how they vetted the evidence?

If the report is specific, that helps. If it says "scientists agree," that isn't all that specific. But if it says they interviewed 15 scientists and they all agreed, you have a better idea of how much authority there is. If they say scientists examined ten years of peer-reviewed scholarly research, more than 10,000 pieces of research, that is even more evidence.

Look for signs of a method—a method of verification. If you can see how the author or reporter checked or corroborated the evidence—if the method is explicit—that is a sign of more credible work.

Looking for these signs—and identifying what evidence a story contains—isn't as hard as it might sound. You simply need to start looking for it. And once you do, you will trust the material that offers more evidence, is more specific and more transparent about the proof being offered.

4. Interpretation: Is the Main Point of the Piece Proven by the Evidence?

Most media content offers a thesis, or a main point, of some kind.

The one exception might be a straightforward account of a breaking news event. Most other stories, however, are built around an idea, a trend, or even some angle on a news event. Even content that isn't narrative usually has a thesis or a point. For instance, most charts point you to a conclusion—like the number of people with jobs in America is going down or baseball salaries are going up.

So, the fourth step in knowing whether something is reliable is to ask whether this main point makes sense, and whether the conclusions are supported by the evidence offered.

In other words, think about what conclusions are being drawn. Do they follow logically from what has been cited? Sometimes this is a matter of some conclusions making sense but others going too far. Are too many conclusions being drawn from evidence that doesn't support all of them?

One concept to keep in mind here is that people may wrongly assume that because two events occurred, the first one must have caused the second one. In fact, it could be a coincidence. Or the second event could have been caused by something else. This is a common mistake that people make from looking at data.

One way to test conclusions is to ask if the same evidence might be used to draw a different interpretation. In science, there is a concept for this called the null hypothesis. It refers to the idea that whatever hypothesis a scientist is trying to test, one should also examine the possibility that there is another explanation.

Here's an example of the null hypothesis. If research shows that younger people are more inclined to use social media than older people, someone might think that they use social media because they are young. If that were the case, then logically, they would stop when they become old. But that is probably wrong. It might be that they use social media more because they understand it better, and they will keep using it as they get older. That would be the null hypothesis.

When looking at media content, it means asking whether there might be a different conclusion to draw from the evidence in the story or content than the one presented.

To see if a story or segment or other form of media content lives up to its thesis, there are some simple indicators.

- First, *we should expect enough evidence to prove the case*. We shouldn't just take someone's word. The more evidence, the better.

- Second, *we should expect that the other side(s) are given a good hearing*. Ask yourself this: Are alternative views given the chance to make their best argument? If the alternative views are weakly presented, be skeptical.

- Third, *what is unknown, unanswered, and unclear should be acknowledged*. Usually, news is simply the best obtainable version of events at the moment. Tomorrow we will know more. The best accounts admit this, and help us even more by acknowledging where the weak spots are.

- Fourth, *the best news providers and publishers let us know when new information comes along that contradicts or fills in what was thought before*. These publishers feel responsibility for giving misinformation or partial information that may have left a wrong impression. They show that sense of responsibility by letting know when a better view has come along.

All of these are signs that the publisher is mindful of the null hypothesis, or that an alternative thesis might be as good of or a better explanation. The man the police suspected initially might have been innocent. The conventional wisdom that in the long run the vote in Congress would hurt the Republican Party was wrong.

Look for signs, in other words, that the author is skeptical and open-minded.

5. Completeness: What's Missing?

Most content should lead to more questions. An important step in being a critical, questioning consumer is to ask yourself what you don't understand about a subject. Look back at the piece. Did you miss something? Or was it not there?

If there was important information missing from the story, that is a problem. If something was explained so poorly that it wasn't clear, that's also a problem.

If something was missing and the story explained why—this couldn't be answered yet—that is a good thing.

The point of any news content is not just to tell you something. It should be to create understanding and to help you react or take action. So, sometimes, what might be missing from a story, segment, or piece of content is what you can do about it.

Remember...

This process of critical thinking about media content is something we all do. When you decide what to click on, what to read, and when you lose interest and stop reading, you are making critical decisions about what matters, what you trust, and what you don't understand. These five questions are the same ones that editors and producers in the media world use to edit stories and make up web pages.

In the age when we are all both editors and consumers, we all need to know them.