Being digital

Deciding who to trust online

1: Introduction

There are many different places where you might come across people online, for example on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, personal websites and forums, or in virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft. The image on this page shows the kind of avatars you might find in a virtual world. (An avatar is a digital persona you create to represent yourself online. It may, or may not, look like you in real life.)

Just as you can't always judge a book by its cover, people are not always what they seem to be. In this activity we are going to look at the questions to ask of people you meet online.

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should know how to go about judging whether someone you meet online is trustworthy.

2: Would you trust this person?

You may feel that you only wish to have online contact with individuals you already know in real life. However, sometimes pursuing your subject of study or research may lead you to interact online with people you have not met in person.

In your mind, picture a person dressed like a student with long hair.

Now picture an angrier looking person with a baseball bat and ball.

Which one would you prefer to have online contact with?

What if the person dressed as a student was a respected academic in your field? And what if the angrier looking person was trying to push a product or agenda to you? Or it might be the other way round.

Someone's online image is not always very revealing, so how do you decide if they are credible or not?

3: Asking the right questions

Picture in your mind two avatars, one dressed as a lamb and one as a deer. These are the sorts of images that might leave you wondering what the person is really like.

Knowing the right questions to ask can help you feel more confident when deciding who to trust online. Think about what influences your decision on whether to trust someone.

Someone's appearance and name can create an instant first impression for good or bad. However, further evaluation may reveal a different picture.

Try to go beyond your initial reaction based on what they look like. Find out more about them from their biography, who they are linked with online, and what they say and do. This will help you to find out if they are credible and if they have any particular agenda (for example, trying to make money or put forward a political view). Think too about what you will do with any information you get from them - how important is it that their views can be backed up by evidence from other sources?

4: Can I trust this person?

The set of questions we have identified can be summarised with the letters **CAN**:

- **Credibility:** How much do you know about this person from the information they have provided about themself? What sort of authority do they have for any statements or opinions they put forward? Is what they say consistent with their online identity? Do they use their real name when posting online?

- **Agenda:** From what they do and say online, what sort of message do you pick up? Do they seem to be pursuing any particular agenda? For example, are they an academic at a university, a representative of a commercial organisation, or an individual promoting their own interest? How does this fit with your own viewpoint and values?

- **Need:** What is your need in this particular situation, and how important is it that they are trustworthy? Think about what you are planning to do with any information you get from them. For example, will you be citing their views in an essay or basing a workplace decision on their opinions?

Ask yourself, **CAN** I trust this person?

5: Putting it into practice

How do you find out the answers to your questions?

It will generally become clear over time if someone is not being honest online. On the other hand, some people may feel able to express themselves better online than face-to-face. By knowing the right questions to ask, you will be in a good position to make up your own mind. Here are some ways you can find answers to your questions:

- Trying checking their biography and any description of their activities and interests.

- If that doesn't give you enough information, you could see what comes up when you search for them on the web.

- Another way of getting the low-down could be to look at who else they are linked with online. How reputable are these individuals? If you are unsure, you could ask other people you trust for their views.

Putting it into practice

Think about how **CAN** could help you in the places you go online. For example, if you use an online forum as part of your studies, how do you form a judgement of others you only meet online? If you are on Twitter, and someone starts to follow you, how do you decide whether to follow them back?

Further reading

Website: [Phelps, Andrew (2012) Think fast: is that tweet true or false? How we use credibility cues to make decisions](#).

Website: [Seidman, G. (2014) Can you really trust the people you meet online?](#)

References

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