

Video Transcript:

## **Sort Fact from Fiction Online with Lateral Reading by Stanford History Education Group**

We live in an era of information overabundance. This demands that we be more discerning. Instead of accepting information at face value, we should always ask this one important question. Who's behind the information?

The Stanford History Education Group conducted a study with Stanford undergraduates, professors from four different universities, and professional fact-checkers to determine the most effective methods for evaluating digital information. There were dramatic differences in how intelligent people looked at the web.

Many smart undergrads and esteemed professors evaluated a site by reading vertically, staying on the site and reading it as if it were a printed document. They focused on the site's look, it's aesthetics, graphics, and overall appearance. They were deceived by an official-looking logo or the name of the organization. They attributed importance to the .org in the URL without realizing that .org is an open domain. Any individual or group can buy a .org domain without passing a character test or proving they're working for social betterment. They examined scholarly references and research reports without realizing that unlike an academic journal, on the web, anything goes. Intelligent people equipped with critical thinking skills were often taken in by slick web pages.

Professional fact-checkers approach the web differently. They understood that on the web, what you see is often not what you get. The web is treacherous territory and you can't let your eyes deceive you. Landing on an unfamiliar site, they didn't waste precious time engaged in close reading. Instead, they opened new tabs in their browser and read laterally. Rather than spending time on a site like the Employment Policies Institute, they turned to the broader web. They clicked on a New York Times article about the Employment Policies Institute entitled Fight Over Minimum Wage Illustrates Web of Industry Ties. They scanned the Wikipedia entry, which describes the institute as "a fiscally conservative think tank, "particularly aimed towards reducing the minimum wage. "Its staff worked for a public affairs firm owned "by Richard Berman." A search for Richard Berman leads to a 60 Minutes report which labels Berman as "Dr. Evil" for his use of nonprofit front groups that advocate on behalf of his corporate clients. Only 40% of bright Stanford students were able to make the link to Berman. 100% of the fact-checkers did, often in a fraction of the time. Lateral reading was the reason why.

Our research studies have shown that lateral reading can be taught. Students in classes that completed civic online reasoning lessons significantly increase their ability to accurately judge websites compared to a control group.

Lateral reading stands in sharp contrast to many methods for teaching digital literacy. These methods focus on long checklists of questions and keep students' eyes on a single site before they've even established that the site is worth their time.

Although the basic idea of lateral reading is simple, becoming skilled at it takes practice. Students need to see examples of lateral reading and practice it with a range of sources. They also need to know when they found a reliable news source or one that's known for conspiracy theories.

Lateral reading helps students to find better information online and to become informed and more thoughtful members of society.