Critical thinking II

Authority and dissent

MMUBS MRes

(slides available at cfpm.org/mres)

The fundamental problem

- One does not have sufficient time to develop/check/verify all knowledge oneself
- Thus one *has* to rely on exterior sources for most of one's knowledge
- But experience shows that sometimes these exterior sources are wrong
- Thus there is a *need* to judge sources and their content

Exercise 1: judging information

- In small groups (2 or 3)
- Look at the example web pages
- Decide:
  - *which* you believe
  - the *degree of trust* one might put in them
  - *why* one trusts some more than others
  - *how* one might check out the information or the source further

Indicators of a reliable paper (brainstorm)

- Academic status of authors, qualifications
- Present explicit evidence
- Citations you can trust
- Judging against personal knowledge
- Interests of the presentation – advertisement
- Leanings of institution of publisher
- Assertions flow from facts, rather than simply stated
- Presenting the argument explicitly
- Status of the journal
- Said what their method was
- Made assumptions explicit
- Emotionally loaded terms
- Vague terminology
- The inferred purpose of the paper (e.g. Simple summary)
- Not deliberately obscure
- Who funded research
- Type of paper
- Knowledge about the authors
- Is there any confirmation of conclusions by others
- Both sides of argument
- How the ideas evolved
- Time of publication

Indicators of a reliable paper (brainstorm from last two years)

- Backed up by evidence
- Data present
- Sources referenced
- Where published
- Nature of the sources
- Target audience
- First person report or indirect
- Nature of subject
- Stance of authors
- How ambitious/wide is it
- How rational is it
- How contentious
- Does it make sense
- The detail and rigour of content
- Neutral point of view
- Skill at technical language
- Clear language

Contrary indications:

- Particular world view of readers
- Agenda of source
- Nature of author
- Deliberately controversial
- Bad grammar/bad spelling

- Where it was published
- How much cited is it, what its judged as by other academics
- Who the author is
- Consistency of style
- Backing up with References
- Type of references, where they were published
- Consistency of references
- Strength of argument
- Balance
- Age of references
- Relevance of the methodology
- Literature review
- Where you found it
- Style of language

Some questions that arise (for discussion)

- Why would any source *try* to tell the truth independent of its own immediate interests?
- How do we *recognise* a reliable source? (i.e. without further research)
- How *should* we recognise a reliable source (as academics)?
- What *should* you do to check out information and sources?
- Why should you trust anything that I (as your lecturer) say/suggest?

Why read *Journal Articles*?

- A lot of knowledge/writing is in journal papers and not in (text)books or summaries
- Almost all recent/cutting edge developments are in journal articles
- They are (almost) all accessible to you
- They tell you what your academic peers are thinking/arguing/doing
- They indicate what topics are "in vogue", "controversial", etc.
- Knowledge of the literature is a "marker" used to recognise a member of academia

…but it's a *mess* !

- Each paper only gives a small picture of the whole (knowledge is fragmenting & context-dependent)
- There are far too many to read
- They are not very easy to read (ranging from the merely careless to the deliberately obscure)
- They will disagree with each other about pretty well *everything* including:
  - What key words mean
  - The nature of the disagreements themselves
  - How the dispute should be settled
- They contain a fair amount of "spin"
- You can't entirely trust them (e.g. citations to authority, that the abstract reflects the rest etc.)

So you need to ...

- Read a *lot* of them (not *only* was is suggested to you by teachers, supervisors, friends, etc.)
- Select *intelligently* what you read
- Persist until you get used to reading them fairly quickly (keep records *from the start*)
- Identify and *read* key texts in your field (not just rely on summaries or other's reports)
- Read papers criticising as well as supporting what you are involved in
- Read them with a critical eye (*even* if you agree with their conclusions)
- Check their references, data, arguments where possible
- ***Make up your own mind about them!***

Exercise 2: judging papers

- In small groups (2 or 3)
- Look at the example papers
- Decide:
  - the *degree of trust* one might put in them
  - *what* indicators give clues to their reliability
  - *why* one trusts some more than others
  - *how* one might check out the information or the source further

But…

- All quickly judged indicators can be counterfeited
- And these indicators can be used to keep outsiders and dissenters away
- If your very fundamental assumptions are wrong, this could lead you to misjudge all subsequent sources and statements
- Sometimes whole cultures (including their academics) have mistakenly rejected knowledge (later shown to be correct)

One way of thinking about how to read & analyse a journal article

- It is like a court room (but where you play all the active parts yourself in turn)
- The journal article is in the dock
- You seriously consider the case for the defence (the paper's strengths)
- You seriously consider the case for the prosecution (the paper's weaknesses)
- You come to a final judgement on it
- The sentence is whether you: forget it; remember it; takes notes on it; cite it; etc.

The Role of Academics

- Some groups of people are specifically employed to seek out the truth independent of their own immediate interests, e.g.:
  - investigative police, coroners, judges
  - juries and other committees of inquiry
  - investigative reporters
- *Some questions for discussion:*
- Are academics such a group?
- Does society expect them to be such a group?
- Do academics see themselves as having such an obligation?
- Are different kinds of academic different in this?

What might the "extra" obligations on academics consist of? (discuss)

- Not to deliberately claim something they think is false?
- To try and find out what is true?
- To discover "useful" techniques/suggestions (regardless of truth)?
- To collectively check/verify claims and theories?
- To ensure that both sides of an argument are presented?
- To question assumptions?
- To contribute intelligent and interesting ideas?
- To be honest about what they have done, how they did it, and what it might mean?
- Not to oversimplify issues?

Dissent

- As discussed the "Western Liberal Academic Tradition" uses (and relies on) argument to test and improve statements and claims
- Thus it is important that there are adversarial debates on important issues
- In particular, that dissenting arguments are put, i.e. those that question accepted opinion or statements made by those in authority
- Thus, in the "West", there is a tradition of academic freedom and dissent
- Historically this has focused on dissent from religious and political authority (though now might also be from popular opinion or assumptions)

Intellectual Dissent is not Limited

For example that:

- There is no such thing as Truth
- Language *can not* express truths about an objective world
- All *given* conceptual structures are ways of politically controlling people
- Science is not objective and merely promotes a particular set of values
- We don't live in the real world but in our representations of it
- Authors do not know the meaning of what they have written any more than the reader
- Etc. etc.

Possible Caveats

- Are there core values and assumptions which are unproductive to question or dissent from? e.g.:
  - confronting theories with evidence
  - dissenting from dissent
- Academic fields which question everything (e.g. philosophy) have not clearly done better than those which don't (e.g. physics, mathematics)

Social Processes of Academia – analogy I: *building a wall*

- Knowledge is like a wall or building – built up brick by brick upon real foundations
- Each paper is a brick in the wall
  - It is checked by peers for correctness – letting in a bad brick can lead to a partial collapse
  - It is firmly grounded on previous contributions
- Knowledge is broadly cumulative, though sometimes parts get rebuilt in better ways
- A cooperative but rigorous processes

Social Processes of Academia – analogy II: *an ecology of contributions*

- Knowledge is like an ecology of organisms
- Each paper has to survive by processing inputs from other papers and providing outputs that can be used in other papers
- Some entities are predators – they survive by trashing other entities
- Some entities are symbiotic – they are mutually supportive
- When the environment (needs of society) changes so does the ecology – it is *adaptive*

Social Processes of Academia – analogy III: *cynical politics*

- The *only* ultimate guide to the quality of a paper is what other academics think about it (how many and who will like it)
- You need to join a party for mutual protection and for competing with other parties
- There are current norms and rules of the game by which the competition is played…
- …but these rules can change
- The aim is to gain status/security by climbing the party hierarchy and gaining acceptance
- It would be a game if it weren't so serious

Conclusions

- You have to trust *and use* other sources
- Thus you have to become "good" at judging sources/information/papers
- You will have to disbelieve some authorities
- It is impossible to be completely unbiased
- …but it is possible to reduce bias and be more honest in your research
- We have *some* obligation in this regard towards the society that pays for us

Suggested reading for my sessions (see list)

If you want to read something about the philosophy of science, read:

- Chalmers *What is this thing called science?*

It is not (much) about social science, but is clear to read and sets out many of the main issues.

There are some other links of materials at:

- http://cfpm.org/mres

under "Other Resources"

Please do not worry about the whole reading list or assignment yet!

The End of Session 2

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