



NABZ-IRAN

Working to Raise Awareness around Human Rights Violations in Iran

E-Learning Course

Verifying Information in Challenging Environments for Citizen Monitors

Introduction

At a time when information is readily available through the Internet and social media, the ability to distinguish between what is credible and trustworthy and what is propaganda is vital for anyone trying to engage in meaningful debate on political and policy reform. As citizen monitors in these efforts, you will use these types of sources to collect information. One way to collect this information is through *crowdsourcing*.

It is important however to verify crowdsourced information for accuracy, impartiality and objectivity. This course will give you the tools you need to evaluate and accurately report information you have gathered through crowdsourcing. Included are lessons on:

- Understand the basics of crowdsourcing;
- Authenticate the *source* of information to confirm its reliability;
- Verify the *content* of information to confirm its validity;
- Cross-Referencing the *context* of information to confirm its relevance; and

Internationally, crowdsourcing has become a common practice. Following the contested presidential elections of 2009, when the Iranian government imposed a total media blackout, activists used social media and e-mail to share information and report on events; in essence, the protests were crowdsourced. By learning how to use crowdsourcing information effectively your efforts to promote change will be amplified because you become a trusted and reliable source of information.

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LESSON ONE: UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS

By the time you finish this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Understand the fundamentals of crowdsourcing;
2. Recognize the advantages and disadvantages of crowdsourcing to gather information; and,
3. Learn why verifying information is important to your work as a change agent

Understanding crowdsourcing and the importance of verifying information will allow you to disseminate **impartial and accurate** information. You will also be a credible messenger and source for people looking for reliable information.

For more on how and where to collect information see Nabz Iran's [Documenting Information in Challenging Environments](#) course, which provides practical methodologies for documenting human rights abuses, focusing on how to collect data and stories and how to report on these with accuracy, impartiality and objectivity.

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What is Crowdsourcing?

On any given day, much of the information we receive is from sources like social media, SMS, email, and the Internet. The information sent to us is both solicited and unsolicited. What it all has in common, though, is its attempt to influence the information we use to support a particular message (you can learn more about message development in *Creating Persuasive and Powerful Messages*.)

As citizen monitors, often you will be soliciting information from these sources through a process called crowdsourcing. There are many ways to define crowdsourcing, but for your purposes the following fits best:

Crowdsourcing is the collecting of information, ideas or content from a large group of people, particularly from an online community.

The ability to collect and present factual information is critical to the success of any advocacy initiative. You want to ensure that the information you are presenting is reliable and factual. False information can harm not only your credibility, but also the message you are trying to promote.

A challenge with crowdsourced information is that it is collected from different users, who can be known or unknown to the person who is collecting information. Crowdsourced information can therefore present problems as it relates to the reliability and credibility of the source and the content. This course is designed to teach you how to analyze this type of information to ensure that you are disseminating factually correct and accurate information.

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The Advantages and Disadvantages of Crowdsourcing

Before you use crowdsourcing to collect information, you need to ask yourself what are the advantages and disadvantages of crowdsourcing?

Advantages

There are many benefits to crowdsourcing because it can help you gather more information in shorter periods of time and with great ease. You do not need to invest a lot of money to engage in crowdsourcing; SMS or the Internet are great resources to use, and there is no need for paid monitors. With crowdsourcing, you also do not need to be physically present to get information; other people will gather it for you. This gives you more freedom of mobility since you do not have to be in multiple places at once to collect information. You also have access to a much broader network of information. The quantity and variety of information you are exposed to increases with crowdsourcing since you are connecting with more people more frequently.

Disadvantages

Although crowdsourcing is an effective way to get information, there are drawbacks to using this method. The first is the anonymity involved in crowdsourcing: you will often get information from a source you do not know. This can be risky in an environment like Iran's where the government monitors outlets such as social media and can potentially take advantage of this method to spread false information. This can create questions about the reliability of the source, requiring you to use more resources, do more research and spend more time verifying information. With crowdsourcing you also do not know who is and who is not on the ground, so it is important to remember the difference between a primary and secondary source of when presenting information.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Inexpensive	Anonymous
More mobility	Risk of false information
More quantity of information	Question of reliability
More variety of information	More resource and time
Access to more sources of information	Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Test Your Knowledge

On a piece of paper, write down some of the benefits of crowdsourcing information, as well as what to be cautious of when using it.

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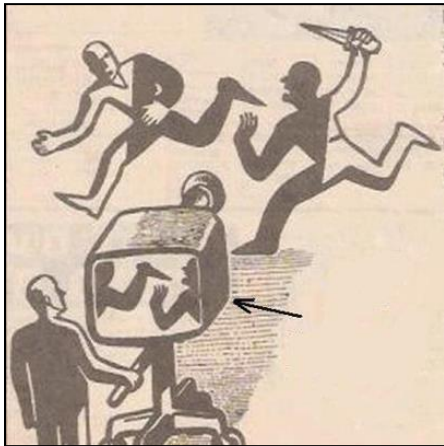
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The Importance of Verifying Crowdsourced Information

Citizen monitors have the opportunity and the potential to have a significant impact in influencing reform. Critical to the success of your work to promote change is the reporting of factual evidence.

Accurate information is a powerful tool for promoting change. The ability to meaningfully influence public discourse for reform is contingent on the accuracy of information you are presenting. Crowdsourcing can jeopardize any advantages you have gained if you present inaccurate information. Therefore, the importance of verifying information you gather through crowdsourcing is not only important to maintain your credibility, but also for the message of change you are promoting.



As someone looking to all sources of information - from traditional media to social media to first and second hand interviews - you need to look at the entire picture, and not just what is directly presented to you.

Look at the picture to the left. Clearly what is being portrayed on camera is not representative of reality. As citizen monitors you need to zoom out and analyze the entire picture. Otherwise, you will fall into the trap of reporting inaccurate information and hurt your credibility and your message.

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Lesson One: Key Points to Remember

- Crowdsourcing is the collecting of information, ideas or content from a large group of people, particularly from an online community.
- You do not need to invest a lot of money to engage in crowdsourcing; SMS or the Internet are great resources to use.
- Crowdsourcing gives you access to a higher quantity and variety of information.
- You need be a cautious when crowdsourcing because sometimes information is from a source you do not know; therefore, you need to test the validity of the information.
- Collecting and presenting factual information is critical to the success of any advocacy initiative.
- False information can harm your credibility and your message.

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Quiz

- 1. When dealing with crowdsourced information, it is important to verify the information's:**
 - a. Accuracy
 - b. Impartiality
 - c. Objectivity
 - d. All of the above
- 2. Which of the following is an important reason for verifying crowdsourced information:**
 - a. To make sure that enough people answered your survey
 - b. To hold sources/survey takers accountable
 - c. To maintain credibility
 - d. To make the survey process easier
- 3. Which of the following is not an advantage of crowdsourcing?**
 - a. It's inexpensive
 - b. It is anonymous
 - c. Access to more sources of information
 - d. More mobility
- 4. SMS or the Internet are not good resources to use when crowdsourcing**
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 5. All of the following points are disadvantages to crowdsourcing, except:**
 - a. Risk of false information
 - b. Question of reliability
 - c. Anonymity
 - d. More variety of information
- 6. Crowdsourcing is the collecting of _____ from a large group of people**
 - a. Information
 - b. Ideas
 - c. Content
 - d. All of the above
- 7. Crowdsourcing is particularly useful when dealing with an online community.**
 - a. True

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b. False

8. Learning to effectively use crowdsourced information will amplify your efforts to promote change because you will become a trusted and reliable source of information.

a. True

b. False

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LESSON TWO: AUTHENTICATING THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Determining if the *source* of your information is authentic is the first step in your verifying strategy. You need to confirm that where your information comes from is reliable. The goal of this lesson is to teach you how to authenticate the source of crowdsourced information, specifically from online social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter as well as personal websites and blogs.

In this lesson, you will learn how to authenticate and verify the credibility of the source of information by looking at the following:

1. Social Media Identity
2. Content on Social Media
3. Social Media Network
4. Influence
5. Location
6. Language
7. Timing
8. Media Authentication
9. Direct Engagement
10. Social Media Engagement

If you can authenticate the source, then this may be sufficient to trust its content. However, if determining the source's authenticity proves difficult, then you need to verify the content and cross-reference that information with the context of the source.

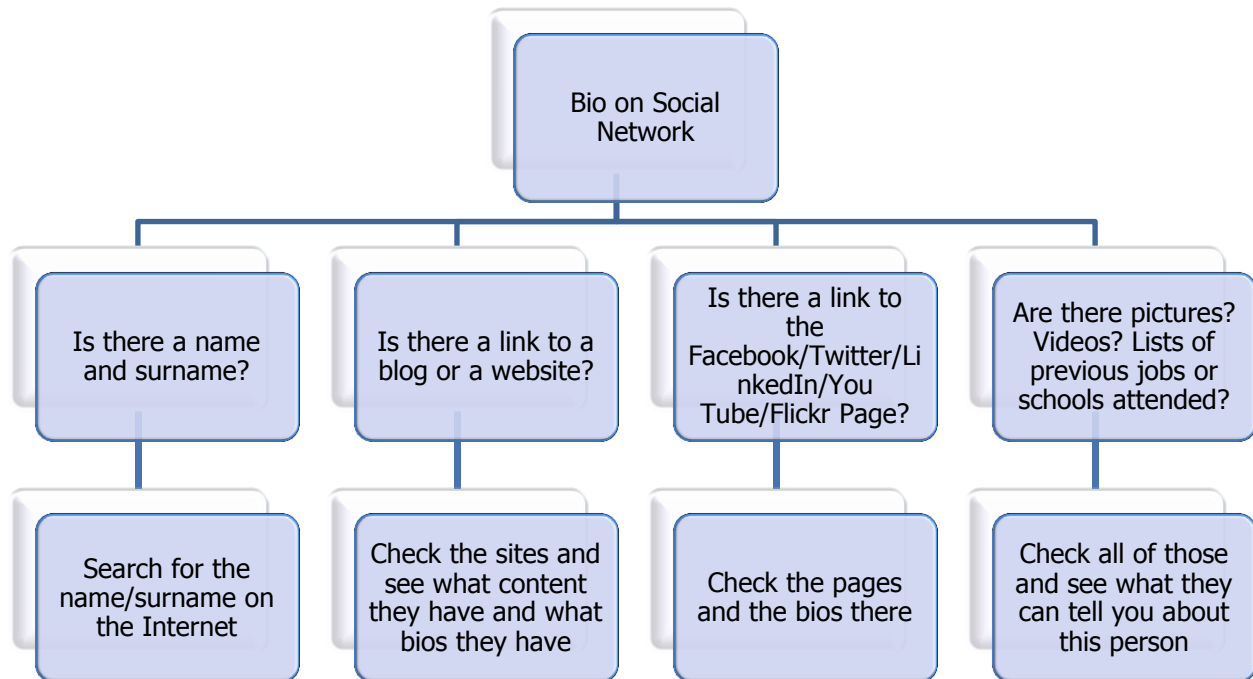


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Social Media Identity

When crowdsourcing information from a social media source the first thing you should do is look at the "bio" of the individual providing you with information. A person's bio is found on the homepage of any social media account. The purpose of this is to try and recreate an identity based off of a social media accounts' biographical information.



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Social Media Identity (continued)

Evaluate the information you gathered by asking yourself questions such as:

- Does this person seem to be linked to any political entity?
- Does this person work for a specific company, and if so, what does the company do?
- Does this person have a picture, and if so, does the picture tell you something about their political/religious affiliation?

When evaluating a sources identity, also check the bio information provided on other social media accounts, blogs and websites. to ensure that the source is providing the same information on all outlets. Any discrepancies can be a sign of an identity falsification.

Test Your Knowledge

Look at your social media profiles. Based off of the information in your profile, what could someone learn about you?

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Content on Social Media

After examining the source's identity, the next step is to look at the *content* they provide. Look closely to what the source is posting on Facebook, tweeting or writing on a blog. This information can give you a better sense of what their opinions are on certain issues.

- **First, outline their social media footprint.** Make a list of all of the source's social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn, blog)
- **Second, closely examine the content posted.** Look at all the possible types of content posted on social media: videos, photos, comments to other posts, article, retweets and forums. Most people have themes running through their interests, but a history consumed with one or two issues with no personal reference is suspect. It is important to remember that behind every social media account there should be a personality.

When looking through the source's online content, ask yourself: Does this person seem to be committed to a certain cause or particularly interested in a certain topic? What other topics are they posting about? Does this content seem reliable? Do they have strong opinions related to certain topics?

This process is done to add more information to the bio of the source and to get a broader picture of who this person is.






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Social Media Network

In this step you are looking at the social *network* of the source. In this context you are looking at their friends and the people and groups they are interacting with online. By examining who the source is interacting with you are gaining a better understanding of their views.

Social media outlets have different means of information sharing and interaction with networks. When examining a source's network it is important to ask specific questions as they pertain to a certain social media outlet.

Social Media Outlet	Questions to Ask When Looking at a Source's <u>NETWORK</u>
Facebook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are their friends? • Whose posts are they commenting on? • Who do they reach out and write to? • Whose comments are they reposting?
Balatarin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the topic of the post? • What is the original news source? • Who is commenting on the post? • Who are they following? • Whose posts are they voting on frequently?
Twitter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are they tweeting about? • What are the topics they are engaging on? • Who are they re-tweeting? • Who are they following? • Who are the people that they are interacting with?
LinkedIn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where has this person worked? • Who has recommended this person? • Who are the people in their network? • Who are the people that they have worked for?
Blogs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What blogs or websites are they posting on? • Whose blogs are they re-posting? • What are they writing about?






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Influence

Just as important as identifying who the source is interacting with, is learning who is interacting with the source. By analyzing this information you will get a better idea of what type of influence this person has on their social media network and who views them as a trusted source.

Similar to analyzing a source's network by looking at with whom and how they are engaging, you need to look at how the networks are interacting with the source. Again, when examining network interaction it is important ask specific questions as they pertain to a particular social media outlet.

Social Media Outlet	Questions to Ask When Gauging a Sources <u>INFLUENCE</u>
Facebook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the friends of this person? • Who are the people that post comments? • Who are the people that seek out and write on their wall? • Who are the people re-posting comments or posts?
Balatarin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is voting for the post? • Who are their followers? • What topics are people engaging on most often? • What type of posts are they commenting on?
Twitter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is re-tweeting this person? • Who are their followers? • What are these people tweeting about? • Who are the people interacting most often with this person? • What topics are people engaging on most often with this person?
LinkedIn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the people that they wrote recommendations for? • Who are the people in their network? • Who has worked for them?
Blogs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What blogs or websites mention them? • Who are the people that are reposting their blogs? • Who are the people that are writing about them?

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Location

You want to confirm the location of the source to figure out where they are getting their information. The reason you want to do this is to determine if they are the primary, secondary or tertiary source. Was the source a direct witness (*primary*)? Did the source get information from a witness (*secondary*)? Did the source get information from somewhere else (*tertiary*)? There are four steps that you can follow in order to authenticate the location of a source:

Determining if the user is a primary source:

- **First**, check the location listed on the user profiles of social media accounts;
- **Second**, check the location listed on smart phone messages;
- **Third**, cross-reference the locations from user profiles and smart phone messages; and,
- **Fourth**, cross-reference the location in the information you are verifying with locations in other messages from the source.

Ideally, you are looking for a primary source because the closer the source is to the information you are trying to verify, the more reliable the source.

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Location (continued)

➤ Step One: Location Settings on User Profiles

Some social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter have the option to include a user's location in their profile. This function is often updated manually, meaning the location is not automatically set by a GPS but rather it is set by the user. As such, the location listed on a profile does not necessarily reflect the actual location of where the source is sending you information from. A user can also decide to turn off their location setting completely.

In the first step for authenticating a sources location, you need to ask, **is the location listed on the profile (if available) similar to that of the information you are trying to verify?**

- If the answer is no, or it cannot be determined, this person is not your best source of information. For example, if the source is listed as being located in Istanbul, but is reporting on events occurring in Tehran, they are too far from the center of information to be a direct source.
- If the answer is yes, then you will need to authenticate the source further by looking at the location listed on the actual message sent through social media.

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Location (continued)

➤ *Step Two: Smart Phone Location Settings*

When a user accesses social media through a smart phone application by commenting on Facebook or Tweeting, the smart phone posts the location of that person if their GPS location service is activated. In cases like this, the location appearing on the social media site represents the actual location of that person at the moment the message was sent. However, it does not necessarily mean that this person is located in the exact place mentioned in the information you are trying to verify.

In the second step for authenticating a sources location, you will need to ask, **is the location listed on the social media message the same as the information you are trying to verify?**

- If the answer is no, than this person is a secondary or tertiary source because they are not located near the epicenter of information and are probably receiving second or third hand accounts.
- If the answer is yes, then this person is probably a primary source and requires further investigation by cross-referencing their biographical information.

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Location (continued)

➤ *Step Three: Cross-Reference Locations from User Profiles and Smart Phone Messages*

After you have determined a sources location based off of information found on their user profiles and the location listed on a social media message, you need to cross-reference these two locations.

In the third step for authenticating a sources location, you need to ask, **are the locations in the sources user profile and social media message the same?**

- If the locations differ, than the source was probably not located where the information you are verifying occurred, and is a secondary or tertiary source.
- If the locations match, then the source is probably a primary source, and requires one last step of investigation.

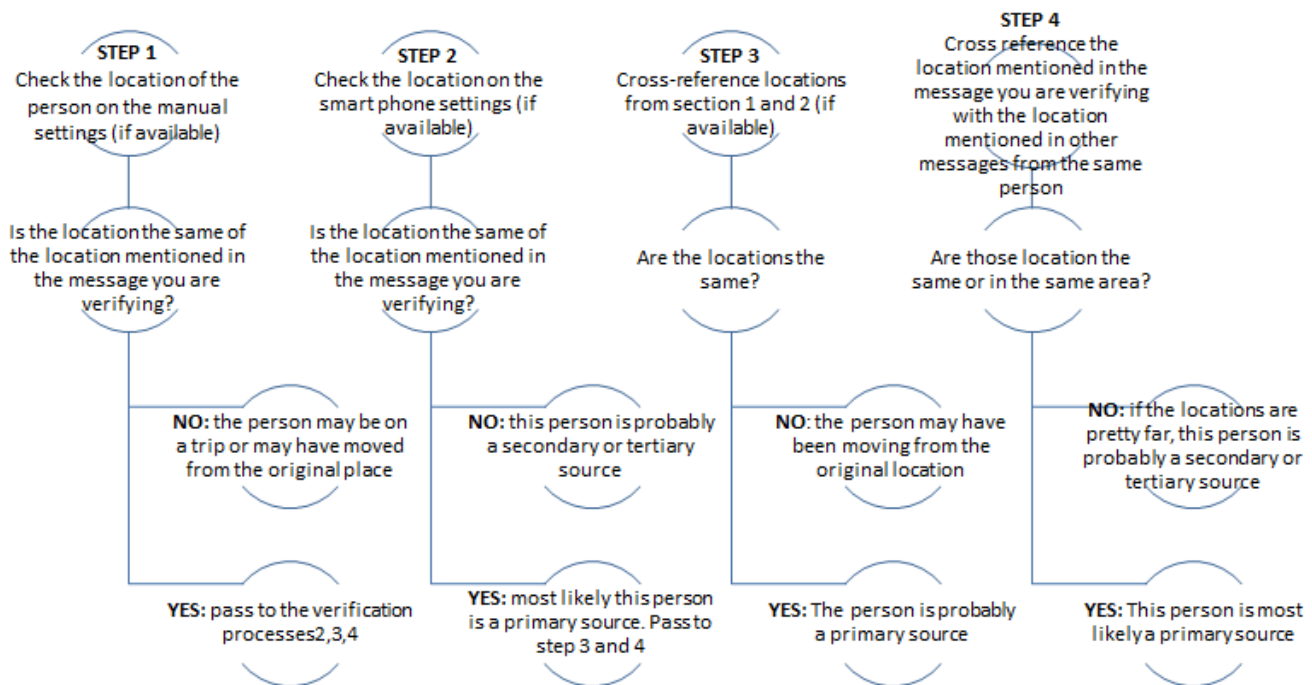
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Location (continued)

- *Step Four: Cross-Reference the Location in the Information Being Verified with Locations in other Messages from the Source*

The final step in determining if this person is a primary source is by looking at other social media messages posted by the source. **Is the location in the information you are trying to verify the same or close to the location of previous messages from the source?** If the locations are far apart, than the source is probably a secondary or tertiary source. If the location of your information and previous messages by the sources are the same, than this person is most likely a primary source.



For reference, follow the flow chart below to determine if the source is a primary, secondary or tertiary source, or if they should not be used at all.

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Language

During the location phase of the source verification process you can also check the language used by the source.

Try to verify whether the vocabulary, slang, and accents are correct for the location that a source might claim to be reporting from. For instance, if the reports are coming from a very rural area and the language is in perfect English, you may want to further verify the source. The same if a certain source is always reporting in a certain language and then suddenly you start receiving reports in another language. This may indicate that those reports are copied or taken from someone else.



In this example, two individuals by the name of *Irani Asil* (original Iranian) and *Irani Vaghei* (Real Iranian) are debating linguistics while Abbas, a regular Iranian, has no idea what they're saying.

Later on this course, the lesson on verifying the content of information will dive deeper into looking at language; however, it is important to pay attention to the language used when authenticating the location of a source. A particular turn-of-a-phrase or use of slang can reveal a source's location.

Test Your Knowledge

On a separate piece of paper, explain two to three reasons why looking at location and language can help you authenticate the source.

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Timing

Time is an important characteristic of the information you are looking at. In almost all social media outlets there is a time stamp indicating when the message was sent. This will tell you something about the possible location of the person sending the message as you might be able to determine if the source was actually present when an event occurred.



In this conversation, Pegah claims to have seen a celebrity football player at 1:02am, and that he had sunglasses on. Sara points out her inconsistency.

Check the time stamp on the message sent to you from the source. Is the time close to the time of the information you are verifying? If yes, the source may be a primary source or someone following information very closely. If no, the source may still be a primary source but did not have immediate access to communication means, or they are a secondary or tertiary source.

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Media Authentication

Media authentication is the tracking down of the source in media reports. The source may be quoted by media outlets in mainstream or local media or in social media space.

The evaluation of the reliability of the media outlet can tell you something about the source. For instance, a media outlet that is supported by the government will use a source that has a favorable bias towards the government, while an independent media outlet will most likely relay information from independent sources.

Search engines such as Google are useful tools to determine whether the source has been used by traditional media outlets or social media.

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Direct Engagement

The process of contacting an online source should online be used after careful consideration of the risks involved. This technique will force the source to either give you more information to identify themselves or to find additional sources to validate their information.

The means in which you directly engage with the source is dependent on how the source contacted you. If you received information via Facebook, you can message the source back asking them to identify the source of what they are reporting. If it was on Twitter, you could tweet the source.

For more on protecting yourself and your work online, see Nabz Iran's [course on digital security](#), which provides practical steps you can take to secure against cyber-attacks and addresses online threats, securing your computer and securing your communications.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Do you think these are the real names and pictures of these people? Why do you think they would use these names?

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Social Media Engagement

Social media authentication refers to the use of social networks to identify or validate the source of information. If you are still unsure about the source's reliability, you can use:

- Your own social network (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) to find out if anyone in your network knows about the source; or
- The broader online community to find out the reliability of the source. For example, you can Tweet, "Does anyone know about this person/account?"
- Ask your offline network if they know the source.

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Lesson Two: Key Points to Remember

- You will never have 100% certainty of the reliability of the sources unless you know them personally. Going through this process will help you better determine the authenticity of a source.
- Build a source's identity by analyzing their various social media *profiles*, as well as their social media *networks* to determine influence.
- Confirm the *location* of the source to figure out where they are getting their information. You want to determine if the source is a primary, secondary or tertiary source.
- The closer the source is to the information you are trying to verify, the more reliable the source.
- Determine the sources location by looking at their user profile and smart phone location, as well as *language* used in a message and the *time stamp*.
- Do an online search to see if traditional media or social media used the source before.
- Contact the source directly (with caution) or your social media networks for further validation.

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QUIZ

- 1. It is always possible to be 100% certain on the reliability of a source.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

- 2. Determining the authenticity of the source of your information is the _____ step in your verifying strategy:**
 - a. First
 - b. Second
 - c. Third
 - d. Fourth

- 3. Which of the following can you use to authenticate and verify the credibility of the source:**
 - a. Location
 - b. Influence
 - c. Media authentication
 - d. All of the above

- 4. Which of the following is not an important element of social media to examine when verifying a source:**
 - a. Social media identity
 - b. Content on social media
 - c. Social media network
 - d. All of the above are important

- 5. The first thing you should do when crowdsourcing information from social media is look at the "bio" of the individual providing you with the information.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

- 6. Which of the following is not an important question to consider when evaluating a source's social media identity?**
 - a. Does this person seem to be linked to any political entity?
 - b. Is this person a male or a female?
 - c. Does this person work in a specific industry that could influence his/her opinion?



- d. Does this person's picture tell you anything about possible religious/political affiliation?

7. Confirming the location of a source is important because:

- a. You want to determine how they got their information
- b. You want to record their addresses for future surveys
- c. You would prefer to have more sources from urban areas
- d. None of the above

8. What is the correct sequence of the following statements to determine if a user is a primary source:

- 1. Check the location listed on the user profile of social media accounts
 - 2. Cross-reference the location from in the information you are verifying with locations in other messages from the source
 - 3. Check the location listed on smart phone messages
 - 4. Cross reference the locations from user profiles and smart phone messaging
- a. 1,2,3,4
 - b. 3,2,1,4
 - c. 1,3,4,2

9. _____ can help you verify the location of a source:

- a. Vocabulary
- b. Slang
- c. Accents
- d. All of the above

10. Which of the following statements is incorrect:

- a. A primary source is a direct witness
- b. A secondary source got information from a witness
- c. A tertiary source got information from someone else
- d. A tertiary source is more reliable than a secondary source

LESSON THREE: VERIFYING THE CONTENT OF INFORMATION

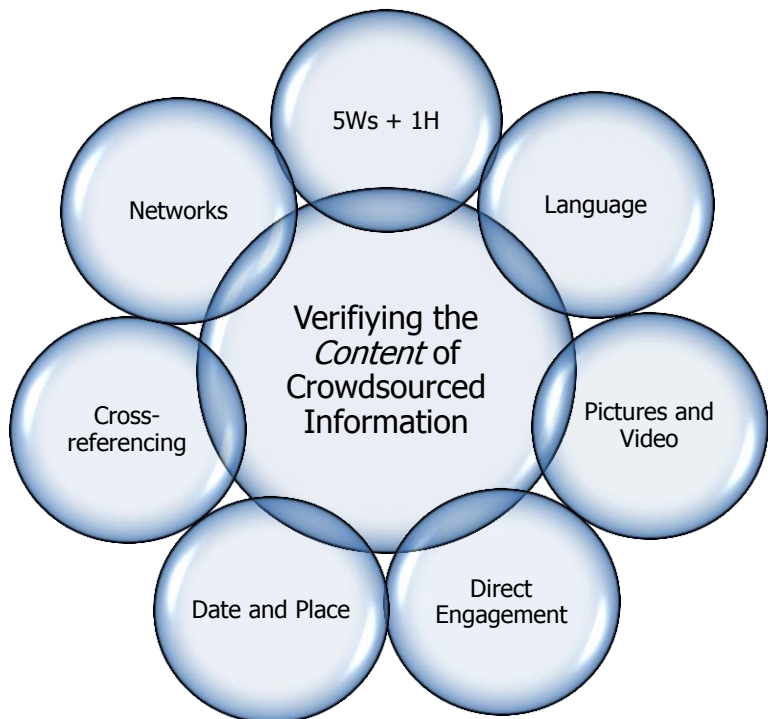
Now that you explored how to authenticate the source of information, the next step in the verification process is to assess the veracity of the information you have collected through crowdsourcing. In other words, you want to verify if the *content* of the information you have gathered is correct.

While crowdsourcing is an effective tool for gathering information, you need to be cautious and take certain steps to check the information for gaps or fallacies. By the time you finish this lesson you will have the tools and knowledge to analyze information you have collected through crowdsourcing and determine if it is factually correct and credible.

In this lesson, you will learn how to verify the content of information by looking at the following:

1. 5Ws + 1H
2. Language
3. Pictures and Video
4. Direct Engagement
5. Date and Place
6. Cross-referencing
7. Networks

Keep in mind, the content of information can be referring to an actual fact, but the details of the information might not be accurate. Always make sure you confirm the details as best as possible before reporting information.



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Key Questions for Content Verification

The process of content verification begins by asking **who, what, where, when, why,** and **how.** To answer these questions, you need to look at specific parts of the information you collected and ask yourself several questions.

WHO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who are the parties involved?• Who are the perpetrators?• Who are victims?
WHAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What actually happened? Can you rebuild the entire fact with all the information you currently have?
WHERE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where did it happen?• Is there any reference to an actual place?• Are an addresses or landmarks mentioned?
WHEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When did it happen?• Is the time of reporting close to the time of the actual event reported?
WHY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there any information on why it happened or the intention of the perpetrators?
HOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did it happen?• Can you make connections between the different components?

In some cases you might not be able to answer all of the questions directly; therefore you will need to do additional research on the information you collected to answer the remaining questions. Later on in the lesson you will learn how to cross-reference information to help you fill any voids in the information you have collected.

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Language

Just like when you are looking at language to authenticate the source of information, it is important to look at language to verify the content of the information. Language can give you some indication about the veracity of the information reported.

When analyzing the language in information it is important to look at the following:

Use of Dialectical Words	Use of Official Language	Use of Vocabulary, Slang, and Accents
<p>Is the language used neutral or is the person using a lot of adjectives and qualitative judgments on the information reported?</p> <p>Is the language biased?</p>	<p>Is the language technical?</p> <p>Are words like “breaking news”, “urgent”, and “confirmed” used?</p> <p>Does the information contain journalist colloquialisms or human rights jargon?</p>	<p>Are there particular inflections, slang words or grammatical mistakes in the report?</p> <p>Does the language used seem to correspond to a particular dialect?</p>

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Language (continued)

Particularly with vocabulary, slang and accents it is important to cross-reference the language with the location to see if they correspond. This will allow you to verify the content of the information by checking to see if the language is representative of the place the information is coming from.



Test Your Knowledge

What do the two phrases above tell you about the content? Can you tell where the source is from based off of language used? Can you tell if the sources are professional reporters? Do they represent a certain ideology or group?

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Pictures and Video

If the information you received is paired with a picture or video as evidence, you will need to analyze the picture and/or video by asking the 5Ws + 1H.

- **Who** is in the picture/video?
- **What** is happening in the picture/video? What is the context and dynamics of the actual information?
- **Where** was the picture/video taken?
- **When** was the picture/video taken?
- **Why** did these events take place? Why were these events/people motivated?
- **How** did events escalate?

Picture

When verifying a picture, look for signs and indicators of where it might have been taken. Look carefully at objects and images in the background. If you can verify the location through clues in the picture you should cross-reference the location with other pictures to check your findings. A good resource to verify a location is Google Maps.

Another way to verify the location in a picture is by looking at the way people are dressed. A particular uniform, outfit or costume can identify a particular region or city as well as help identify the parties involved. However, if the wardrobe is inconsistent with the reported location or a particular person or group, this can be an indicator that the picture, and therefore your information, is not correct.

Video

Similar to analyzing a picture, look for key identifiers to help verify the location of a video (i.e. buildings, signs, parks, etc.) However, a key advantage a video might have over a picture is sound. Sounds can help you connect to a certain place. Listen for the tone of voice, background noises and certain languages and dialects. These things can be extremely helpful when verifying the location and the parties involved.

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Direct Engagement

For more on protecting yourself and your work online, see Nabz Iran's [course on digital security](#), which provides practical steps you can take to secure against cyber-attacks and addresses online threats, securing your computer and securing your communications.

Similar to when you are authenticating the source to confirm their identity, you can directly engage with the source to verify the content of the information. This step however requires serious consideration as the risks involved with contacting a source, either online or offline, can be very high.

If you are going to contact the source online, do so privately. For example, send them a direct message through Twitter or send a private message directly to

their Facebook account. You should also consider if contacting the source online puts them in danger as well.

If you are going to contact a source offline, you can go through a local trusted contact on the ground. However, asking your contact to connect with a source could place your contact and the source in a compromising or even dangerous situation. Take careful security and privacy considerations before using this strategy.

As a substitute, ask your trusted contact on the ground to confirm the accuracy of the information. Your trusted contact may not be able to do verify the information, but they could gather firsthand witness reports based on their personal network.

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Date and Place

Verifying the time and place is often the most challenging piece of information to confirm as these pieces of information are affected the most by re-reporting of information by different sources. In other words, as information gets passed along, parts of the information may be misinterpreted, revised or completely left out as it moves from one source to the other.

When verifying the time and place, it is important to keep the following considerations in mind:

Date Format: In some places, for example, "09/08/12" may be interpreted as 9 August 2012 while the norm in other places would be to interpret this as 8 September 2012. The format of dates differs from place to place. Someone may receive information time stamped in one form, but may re-report that information using local norms for dates.



In this online dialogue, Sara, who has immigrated from Iran, claims it's her birthday, while her friend from Iran is puzzled and is claiming that her birthday is tomorrow. The dates on Gregorian and Islamic Calendars shift a day during leap years.

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Date and Place (continued)

Misspelling of a Place: The name of a place can change if the report has been translated from its original language. In this instance, you may find that spelling errors in the translation can lead you to a different location or even various locations. If a source misinterprets the spelling of a place they can send you in the wrong direction and you bear the risk of releasing false information.

Edited Information: In the search to verify a date or place, you may come across blog reports or Facebook posts about the information. Be cautious; people may edit information and Facebook posts for any number of reasons: to support a particular perspective, because they think it is incorrect, because of space limitations. In such a case, they may actually change the correct name.

While verifying the date and place of the information you have collected can be challenging, a way to solve this problem is to cross-reference your information with various reports.

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Cross-Referencing Information

The process of cross-checking information is the act of putting together all the information you have found and cross-checking it with the information provided to you through the source. To cross-check information you will:

- **First**, collect all possible sources of information available through social media, websites, blogs, local and international newspapers, television, radio, etc. During this step you should remain a bit skeptical about the reports you receive. Look for multiple reports from different unconnected sources. The more independent the source, the better.
- **Second**, if you find that all or part of your information is being reported differently (like the date and location) do not discard the information immediately as false. Try to identify which version of the report is the most accurate. If you cannot confirm the accuracy in any of the versions, do not choose the most likely one, but report all versions and highlight the differences among the reports.

Cross-referencing is a useful tool when verifying information that is easily subject to change as it gets re-reported. You can use this technique to compare and contrast your information with other reports, but keep in mind that the less you find about something the less reliable you can consider that information. When cross-referencing information, try and find as many sources as possible to either confirm or deny your information.

Test Your Knowledge

You received a report claiming that a civil rights violation occurred on 03/02/13 in the city of Shiraz and about 10-15 men and women were purportedly arrested without cause. What steps would you take to verify this information?

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Networks

The same networks that provided you with information can also help you verify that information. If you are still questioning the validity of the information collected there are three types of networks you can tap into to assist you in the verification process: *social networks*, *trusted ground networks*, and *trusted virtual networks*.

With your networks in general, it may be useful to have an ongoing list of the sources that provide you with information online (directly or via social networks), adding comments that highlight their reliability and credibility. You will have a comprehensive list of sources you can turn to and trust during the verification process. **Remember, authenticate the sources first!**

Online Social Networks

You can use your social networks to ask questions about your information to get a sense of how likely or unlikely it may be. Ask people what they think, what they know about that area, or if they know anything about that information. The online community can also help you translate, cross-reference, and track down key information.

When tapping into your social networks to ask specific questions about an incident or place, start by looking for trends or groups within the network. For example, Twitter uses hash tags (#) to draw attention to a particular thing. Facebook has pages or groups in support of particular causes. This tactic will allow you to narrow your search and extract a more direct answer as you are engaging with people are already aware of the issue.

Remember, when engaging with social networks, never give any indication of your source and if the information is not already public, avoid providing specific details. This will protect both you and your source.

Trusted Ground Networks

When verifying information online the use of an offline network can be very helpful as it can be your eyes and ears on the ground. Members of this network should only be people you trust and know personally. This network is also subject to a considerable amount of risk, so take careful security and privacy considerations before asking them to verify information on the ground.

Trusted Virtual Networks

To create this network, ask your trusted ground network for contacts they have vetted and know personally. You can then connect with these individuals through online platforms such as Google Hangout, Google Groups, encrypted emails, or Skype (although Skype can be vulnerable to monitoring by third parties, so be cautious).

For more information on how to protect yourself online, see Nabz Iran's [course on digital security](#).

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Lesson Three: Key Points to Remember

- Content verification begins with asking **who, what, where, when, why,** and **how**.
- Look at the use of language and check for dialectic words, official language and the use of vocabulary, slang and accents. Cross-reference the language with the location to see if they correspond.
- To verify a location, in a picture, look for indicators in the background, as well as the way people are dressed.
- Sound in video can help you confirm a reports connection to a certain place.
- You can engage with a source directly either over the Internet or in person. Be cautious either way as there are security implications for both you and the source.
- The date and place are often the most challenging pieces of information to verify due to the effects of re-reporting; cross-referencing is a useful tool to employ to verify these details.
- Cross-referencing allows you to compare and contrast your information with other reports to help fill in information, as well as to confirm or deny facts.
- Your various virtual and offline networks can aid in the verification process.

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QUIZ

- 1. The process of content verification begins by asking who, what, where, when, why, and how.**
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 2. When analyzing language, it is important to look at which of the following:**
 - a. Use of dialectical words
 - b. Use of official language
 - c. Use of vocabulary, slang, and accents
 - d. All of the above
- 3. Which of the following options are not important when analyzing pictures and video?**
 - a. Where was the picture/video taken
 - b. Why did the events in the picture/video take place
 - c. What kind of equipment took the picture/video
 - d. How did the events escalate
- 4. What is cross-referencing information?**
 - a. The act of putting together all the information you have found and checking against other source of information
 - b. The act of crossing things that you have checked off of your verification list.
 - c. The act of separating information you have found and individually analyzing it to check for authenticity.
 - d. None of the above.
- 5. What is the first step of cross-checking information?**
 - a. Immediately discarding information as false if you find it to be reported inconsistently.
 - b. Collecting all possible sources of information available through social media websites.
 - c. Disseminating information to your personal networks to be verified.
 - d. None of the above
- 6. Your “ground network” consist of:**
 - a. Acquaintances you know of through friends.
 - b. Only people you trust and know personally.
 - c. People who seem nice.

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- d. All of the above
- 7. If you're dealing with online crowdsourced information, you should only use online methods to verify information as well.**
- a. True
 - b. False
- 8. When verifying sources, there can be security implications for:**
- a. You
 - b. Your source
 - c. Both
 - d. Neither
-

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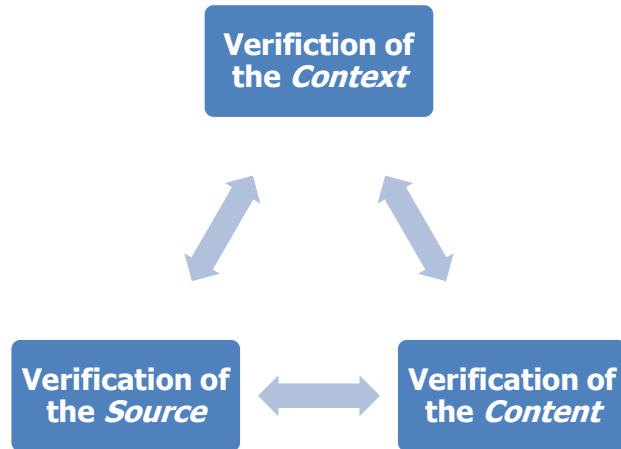
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LESSON FOUR: CROSS-REFERENCING THE CONTEXT OF INFORMATION

Understanding the *context* of information is crucial for understanding what really happened, particularly with crowdsourced information.

In many cases, even if you authenticate the source as reliable and verify the content as factually correct, there may be a situation in which the context gives you a completely different picture. Therefore, you need to cross-reference the context of crowdsourced information to completely test its veracity, making cross-referencing the third leg of your verification process.



In this lesson, you will learn to cross- reference the context of crowdsourced information by looking at the following:

1. Time and location
2. Big picture context
3. Political context

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Why Context Matters

People develop opinions based on the information available to them. If the information is not presented in the right context, the information may be evaluated very differently from how it actually occurred.

The idea here is that once you have verified the validity of information and the credibility of the source, you need to make sure that *every* part of the fact has been reported. As a citizen monitor you do not want to report something that may be missing information. This will not only hurt your credibility, but it will also portray the information as biased or as propaganda and hurt your overall story and mission.

To prevent this, there are two contextualizing techniques you can use to further verify information and ensure that all parts of the story have been reported:

1. Find data that can further support or give you an idea of the veracity of the information; and
2. Find data that can give a meaning to the information reported.

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Time and Location

In lesson two and three you learned how time and location help you test the credibility of the source and the content. In this case you will look at them as important factors for the contextualization of the event reported.

In the case of context, looking at the time and location allows you to not only further test the veracity of information, but also determine if the information is even viable considering these two factors.

Time

When looking at time you need to ask if the timing of the information makes sense for what is being reported. For example, if you receive a report about an attack on a street vendor, you need to see if the timing of the event makes sense considering the type of activity. Additionally, the timing of information can give significant meaning to an event, for example, an attack on a mosque during Friday prayer.

Location

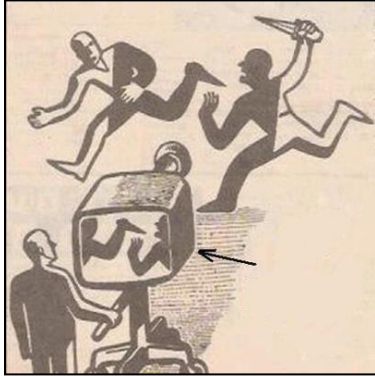
When looking at location you need to ask if the location of the reported information makes sense for what is being reported. For example, does information reflect the appropriate type of actor for the location or does the location have a specific meaning for the type of information reported?

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Big Picture Context



One of the first things you need to do when looking at the context of information is to try and put the information into perspective and look at the big picture.

Think back to lesson one. You learned to zoom out and analyze the entire picture and not just what was presented to you because what is being portrayed might not reflect the entire story. Remember, as citizen monitors you need to look at the entire picture; otherwise you will fall into the trap of reporting inaccurate information and hurt your credibility and your message.

Cross-referencing the context of information can you help paint the entire picture. By comparing and contrasting elements such as time and location, as well as additional data you have found to support and give further meaning to the information, you not only fill in possible gaps, but you further test the veracity of the information.

Test Your Knowledge

Look at the picture below and think about how you would report this event. You would probably give three completely different reports depending on which picture you were looking at. What steps would you take to ensure that your report is accurate and reflects the entire picture?



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Political Context

Events are often influenced by external factors both domestically and internationally. Cross-referencing information within a domestic and international political context will give you a better understanding of the information within a certain framework. Additionally, cross-referencing information in the domestic and international political context can also help you develop the big picture context.

In other words, cross referencing means checking the information you gathered against others sources of information on the same topic. This will allow you to fill in gaps to your information, as well verify or falsify the information you gathered.

Domestic

The domestic environment can have a very close relationship to the information reported. Looking at the domestic environment can help you understand the reasons as well as the possibility of an event occurring. When looking at the domestic environment to cross- reference the context you need to ask yourself:

- Did something happen domestically to trigger the event?
- Are there other events similar to this taking place?
- What is the economic situation in the country?
- Is something influencing the way people are describing the event?

International

Now more than ever, countries are influenced by external factors; sometimes domestic events are triggered by international factors. When looking at the international environment to cross-reference the context you should ask things such as:

- What is general political environment in the region?
- Are there any political issues happening in one country that can effect another?
- Have events taken place in a neighboring country that might have spilled over in to another?

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VERIFICATION STANDARDS AND PROTOCOLS

Now that you have explored how to authenticate the source, verify the content, and cross-reference the context, you need to develop standards and a protocol for your own verification process. In other words, you need a system that allows you to decide what information you will verify and to what degree.

As a citizen monitor you collect a lot of information on a daily basis. A set of standards to determine the level of veracity and a protocol to review information will not only allow you to go through your verification process efficiently, but also allow you to distribute information in a timely manner.

Step I: Choose what you need to verify

You do not necessarily need to verify everything. Choose the most important information by looking at the type of information you receive and the amount. You may need to evaluate your capacity to verify all of your information. Sometimes it is better to have fewer, well verified facts, than a lot of semi-verified information.

Step II: Choose your verification criteria

Create a standard set of criteria that measures the veracity of information. Often, the level in which you can verify something is dependent on what is available to you at the moment (i.e. Internet access, a trusted source, etc.) so you need to have different degrees in which you would consider information verified. If the information remains questionable or is not verifiable, it is still possible to share the information, but just ensure it is duly noted as “unverified” or “suspect” and give as much explanation as space and format allow.

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Step III: Draft your verification protocol and stick to it

Once you have drafted your standard set of criteria, use it for every piece of information you verify. You need to remain consistent to ensure that all of your information is verified the same way at all times. This will also allow you to review and refine your verification process. Additionally, by maintaining a certain level of verification, the expectations of the recipients of your information will remain steady; shifting away or back and forth from a certain level can raise suspicion.

Step IV: Make your verification process public

You want to make your verification process known to inform people of the credibility of your information. You do not have to make all of the details of the process public, but recipients of your information need to know if they can trust it. The more that people are aware of your verification protocols, the more you will be able to manage expectations about the reliability of the information posted.

In environments like Iran, make sure to protect your personal safety and security throughout the process.

Test Your Knowledge

Develop a standard set of criteria for your verification process. How will you decide what information to verify and what not to? When will you consider information fully verified or not at all? What degrees of verification are you willing to have for information?

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Lesson Four: Key Points to Remember

- You need to test all three legs of information – the source, the content, and the context – to have complete analysis of the information.
- Think about how likely the event is considering the time and location reported.
- Zoom out and analyze the entire picture, not just what is presented to you; what is being portrayed might not reflect the entire story.
- Put the information in a domestic and international context and think about the likelihood of the event occurring within each framework.

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QUIZ

- 1. When looking at context, you should put information into perspective by only looking at the small, limited picture.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

- 2. In order to have complete analysis of information, you must test which of the following:**
 - a. The source
 - b. The content
 - c. The context
 - d. All of the above

- 3. It is important to consider the time and location when thinking about how likely an event is.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

- 4. Information that is portrayed to you might not reflect the entire story. This is why it's important to:**
 - a. Zoom out and analyze the entire picture
 - b. Focus on the questionable details of the information
 - c. Ask the source to give you the information again
 - d. All of the above

- 5. Why is cross-referencing information within a domestic and international political context important?**
 - a. It will give you a better understanding of the information within a certain framework
 - b. It will allow you to fill in gaps to your information
 - c. It can help you develop the big picture context
 - d. All of the above

- 6. When looking at a domestic environment, which of the following is not an important question to ask yourself?**
 - a. Did something happen domestically to trigger the event
 - b. Is the source a male or female
 - c. What is the economic situation in the country

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- d. Is something influencing the way people are describing the event
- 7. Domestic events are rarely influenced by external and international factors.**
- a. True
 - b. False
- 8. When looking at international environment, which of the following is not an important question to ask yourself:**
- a. Are there any political issues happening in one country that can effect another?
 - b. Have events taken place in a neighboring country that might have spilled over into another
 - c. What is general political environment in the region
 - d. These are all important.
- 9. A set of standards to determine the level of veracity and a protocol to review information will allow you to:**
- a. Go through your verification process efficiently
 - b. Allow you to distribute information in a timely manner
 - c. Both A & B
 - d. Neither A nor B
- 10. You should verify everything.**
- a. True
 - b. False
- 11. Which of the following is not a reason that you should make your verification process public:**
- a. To inform people of the credibility of your information
 - b. So that recipients of your information know they can trust it
 - c. So that people can manage expectations about the reliability of the information posted
 - d. All of the above are reasons to make your verification process public

Conclusion

As a citizen monitor collecting crowdsourced information there are nine golden rules you should follow when verifying information:

1. Unless you are an eye witness, meaning if you don't see or hear it, it is not 100% verified.
2. Choose your verification criteria in advance and be transparent about it.
3. Choose your trusted network and make membership rules clear.
4. Always be ready to change your mind about the reliability of a source.
5. Always be ready to change your mind about the veracity of information.
6. Question everything.
7. Choose your battles; you might not be able to verify everything.
8. Admit when you make a mistake.
9. Remember that what you know, others also know.
10. 10. Maintain measures to protect your personal safety and security.

The number one rule for the verification of crowdsourced information is that **unless you see and hear it, it is not 100% verified**. You need to protect your reputation and your credibility every time you use, republish, collect or release crowdsourced information. With that in mind, remember to be very transparent about your verification criteria and the degree of verification you achieve with your methodologies.

Your most powerful tool for promoting change is information and the credibility behind it. As someone working on verifying information in Iran, you must do everything you can to protect your credibility and the message of change you are trying to convey. While it can be a daunting process, by verifying information collected through crowdsourcing you are taking the right steps in becoming a reliable source of information and agent of change.



QUIZ ANSWERS

Lesson One Quiz

- 1) D. When dealing with crowdsourced information, it is important to verify the information's accuracy, impartiality, and objectivity.
- 2) C. By learning to use crowdsourced information effectively, your efforts to promote change will be amplified because you become a trusted and reliable source of information.
- 3) B. Since crowdsourcing is anonymous, getting information from someone you do not know can be risky, especially in an environment where the government monitors outlets like social media, and can potentially take advantage of this method to spread false information. This can create questions about the reliability of the source, requiring you to use more resources, do more research and spend more time verifying information.
- 4) B. SMS and the Internet are great resources to use, as they don't require you to be physically present, and allow you to access a much broader network of information.
- 5) D. Crowdsourcing allows you to have access to a large variety of information.
- 6) D. Crowdsourcing is the collecting of information, ideas, and content from a large group of people.
- 7) A. Crowdsourcing is particularly useful when dealing with an online community.
- 8) A. Learning to effectively use crowdsourced information will amplify your efforts to promote change because you will become a trusted and reliable source of information.

Lesson Two Quiz

- 1) B. The only way to be 100% certain regarding the reliability of a source is if you, yourself are the source.
- 2) A. Determining whether the source of your information is authentic is the first step in your verifying strategy; you need to confirm that where your information comes from is reliable.
- 3) D. To authenticate and verify the credibility of the source, you can use location, influence, and media authentication, among other things.
- 4) D. When verifying a source, it is important to examine the source's social media identity, content on social media, and social media network among other things.
- 5) A. The first thing you should do when crowdsourcing information on social media is look at the bio of the individual providing you with the information.
- 6) B. Gender is not an important question to consider when evaluating a source's social media identity.
- 7) A. Confirming the location of a source is important because you want to figure out where they are getting their information. The reason you want to do this is to figure out if they are primary, secondary, or tertiary sources.
- 8) C. In order to determine if a user is a primary source, first you must check the location listed on their user profile of social media accounts, second, check the location listed on smart phone messages, third, cross reference the locations from user profiles and smart phone messaging, and fourth, cross reference the location from in the information you are verifying with locations in other messages from the source.

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- 9) D. Vocabulary, slang, and accents can help you verify the location of a source.
- 10) D. A tertiary source is less reliable than a secondary source.

Lesson Three Quiz

- 1) A. The process of content verification begins by asking who, what, where, when, why, and how.
- 2) D. When analyzing language, it is important to look at use of dialectical words, use of official language, use of vocabulary, slang, and accents.
- 3) C. When analyzing pictures and video, it is not important what model of equipment took the picture and/or footage; rather, it is important to ask where the picture/video was taken, why did the events in the picture/video take place, and how did the events escalate.
- 4) A. Cross referencing is the act of putting together all the information you have found and checking it against other sources of information.
- 5) B. The first step of cross-checking information is collecting all possible sources of information available through social media websites.
- 6) B. Your "ground network" consists only of people you trust and know personally.
- 7) B. If you're dealing with online crowdsourced information, you should use multiple methods, not only online methods, to verify information.
- 8) C. When verifying sources, there can be security implications for both you and your source.

Lesson Four Quiz

- 1) B. When looking at context, you should look at the big picture.
- 2) D. In order to have complete analysis of information, you must test the source, the context, and the content.
- 3) A. It is important to consider the time and location when thinking about how likely an event is.
- 4) A. Information that is portrayed to you might not reflect the entire story; this is why it's important to zoom out and analyze the entire picture.
- 5) D. Cross-referencing information within a domestic and international political context is important because it will give you a better understanding of the information within a certain framework, it will allow you to fill in gaps to your information, and it can help you develop the big picture context.
- 6) B. When looking at a domestic environment, it is not important to distinguish if the source is male or female.
- 7) B. Domestic events are often influenced by external and internal factors.
- 8) D. When looking at international environment, it is important to ask yourself if there are any political issues happening in one country that can affect another, have events taken place in a neighboring country that might have spilled over into another, and what is the general political environment in the region.
- 9) C. A set of standards to determine the level of veracity and a protocol to review information will allow you to go through your verification process efficiently and distribute information in a timely manner.
- 10) B. It will be impossible to verify everything; instead, choose the most important information that you need to verify.

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- 11) D. You should make your verification process public to inform people of the credibility of your information, so that recipients of your information know they can trust it, and so that people can manage expectations about the reliability of the information posted.
-