

Evaluating Primary Sources Online

Social Media

What are you looking at?

What social platform is this? Is this a post, comments, a page/profile, a group, hashtag results, etc?

Is this piece of evidence actually a primary source?

This will of course depend on your research question.

How is this a first-hand account of the time period, events, or subjects you are researching?

Does it represent the voices and experiences of people or communities you are trying to document?

Can you identify the author(s)?

What are the account names/handles? Can you identify the author's real name?

Is the author a public figure? Was this published as a public broadcast, or was it meant for a more intimate community? Are you able to reach out to the author to ask permission to use/quote? How are you using it?

Can you get to the source itself? See it, read it, hear it, watch it?

Take a screenshot. Record links. Note the date published and the date accessed. Save files or links to any embedded content. This information will help you understand the source, and is key to citing it later.

Most citation style guides (MLA, APA, etc.) now have instructions for citing social media.

Now, evaluate the evidence as you would any other source.

Is the information accurate, credible, reliable? What bias or perspective does it reveal?

Or, are you trying to use social media data in aggregate?

Do you need to collect, organize, or visualize social media data? How will you interpret this data?