

Website Evaluation

Introduction

The capacity to critically evaluate information is central within the research process of locating resources for academic purposes. Apart from being able to differentiate between fact and fiction, it's important for you to be able to assess the relevance, accuracy and suitability of information to your particular purpose.

Using poor quality information sources or worse still - citing misinformation - will degrade the quality of your work. While evaluation of information sources has always been important, this step is particularly important when using information found on the Internet.

The Need to Evaluate

There is no central governing body for Internet publishing. It's extremely easy, cheap and fast to publish on the Internet. There is no system of quality control; there are no editors; and documents can be easily falsified and/or copied. This is the fundamental nature of the World Wide Web!

One of the most positive aspects of the Web is that it provides a means for people to express themselves; it allows for freedom of speech and ideas; and allows people to meet and communicate who would not ordinarily ever have met. As long as the Web retains these qualities of freedom, it will also remain unmonitored and unregulated. This, therefore, leaves a large responsibility on you, the user, to carefully and critically evaluate the Web sites you use as information sources.

Here is a good illustration why Web site evaluation is necessary. Look at the Web site below:

- <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

Now go to the next site. Once the site appears on your computer screen click the Reload (or Refresh) button within your web-browser menu bar. After looking at the site briefly click the Reload or Refresh button again.

- <http://www.whitehouse.net>

Types of Websites

When evaluating Web sites it is helpful to keep in mind the reason they have been published. Are they trying to sell something to you? To convince you? To inform you or maybe even to amuse you? Web sites can basically be broken into five main categories:

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Advocacy | sponsored by an organisation attempting to influence public opinion |
| Business/Marketing | sponsored by a commercial enterprise |
| News | the primary purpose is to provide extremely current information |
| Information | purpose is to present factual information |
| Personal | published by an individual who may or may not be affiliated with a larger institution |

How to Evaluate a Website

Although many people evaluate Web sites (particularly commercial sites) based purely on their look and feel, for academic purposes it is far more important to evaluate the content of a site. Don't be put off a site because it is unattractive - much of the quality information resides on sites that are unadorned by flashy graphics and images. On the flip side of the coin, many sites that look great have little real substance. If you are citing information for assessment purposes, the reader (or the marker) will be unimpressed by the attractiveness of your source, more that you have been able to verify the accuracy and objectivity of the content it contains.

When using a Web site for research purposes, in the first instance look for sites that contain at least the author's name, title or position, organisational affiliation, contact details and the date of creation. Sometimes you'll be tipped off by the general tone or style of a site, or the apparent competence of the writer. However, some authors go to great lengths to disguise the main objective of a site and you will need to look much harder and further for clues about the overall integrity and accuracy of the information provided. You should then go on to test for some further indicators of quality in the areas of credibility, accuracy, objectivity and support as outlined below:

Credibility

Before acting on or making any decision based on information most people take into account the credibility of the source. If you read that drinking water causes heart attacks you would probably seek to verify the information before believing it. To do this you need to investigate the credibility of the source. Why should you believe it? Can you trust the information?

Assessing the credibility of a page involves working out who is responsible for the information, if they are who they say they are and whether or not they are a qualified

authority. Regardless of how professional a site looks, you must investigate its credibility if you want to use information contained on the site.

Get tips from the URL

You can learn a lot about a Web page from its URL. Analyse the URL to get clues about the source of the information you are looking at.

- What type of domain does it come from? (educational, government, commercial etc)?
 - Does the URL 'fit' the content?
 - Educational sites: look for edu or another country code
 - Government sites: look for mil, gov or another country code
 - Commercial sites: look for .com or co
 - Personal Web pages: look for the tilde (~) sign in the URL or a personal name (e.g. mjones). Personal pages are also often hosted on commercial ISPs and have their name in the URL e.g. geocities.com
- If the URL is quite lengthy, learn what you can by truncating (deleting parts of) the address from right to left.

Author Details

If you find information on a Web site you wish to use or quote you must first attempt to find the author's or authoring institution's details. It's quite possible for a seven year old to publish their thoughts on nuclear fusion on the Web, but do you really want to quote their work in your final year assignment?

- Look for the author's name and/or email address on the Web page (try the top and bottom of the page, side bars, menu bars or About Us sections)
- Are the credentials of the author supplied? Try truncating the URL and performing an on site search for the person's name or looking in a staff directory if there is one.
- Is the author qualified in the field? Are they a reliable authority on the subject? Perform a Web search on the author's name to see what you come up with.
- Does the authoring organisation or person match the URL? For example a site may claim to be the official site of a political party yet have a URL that suggests it is a personal home page.

Evidence of quality control

Most scholarly journals have a peer review process where several people recognised in their field review and critique content prior to its publication. Many online journals have also adopted this process as a means of maintaining the quality of their resources.

If the Web page belongs to an organisation, statements issued on their behalf tend to have been through a QA process or the person responsible tends to have been approved to make statements on behalf of the organisation.

- Does the site have any editing, quality assurance or refereeing processes in place?
- Is there evidence of quality control?
- Is the information communicated on behalf of an organisation or by an individual who happens to be employed or affiliated with that organisation?
- Are there any disclaimers evident e.g. something like "the views expressed on this page are not necessarily those endorsed by xxx"?
- Is there evidence of poor grammar, spelling and typographical errors that indicate lack of proofing and quality control processes?
- Is the publication also available in other formats? print, CD?

Reputation

What others say about a site is sometimes a helpful indicator of its quality and content. An easy way to discover what others think of a site or who links to it is by using a search engine such as AltaVista and searching for linking pages. By typing **link:** followed by the relevant URL in the search box you will be returned with sites that link to the page in question. For example entering link:www.csu.edu.au will return pages that include a link to the CSU home page.

Uniqueness

Uniqueness refers to the amount of original material on a site that cannot be obtained elsewhere. If you've spent any time searching the Web, you'll know that you often end up at the same site, or else different sites containing the same or very similar information and links. When evaluating a site, be clear about whether the information contained is primary or secondary information. Primary information is original material produced by the owners of the site with mainly internal links i.e. links to other parts of the site on the same server. Secondary information is very common on the Web and is typified by lists of links to other sites.

Coverage

Check that the site in question contains adequate coverage of the topic in question. Does it go into the depth you require, or is it merely looking the surface of the issue?

- Is this the 'main site' or a local one?
- Does the site give the 'big picture' or cover just a specific part of the topic?

Completeness

A clue in the credibility of a site is its completeness. This can be due to the site being unfinished and still a work in progress or because it is only meant to serve as a taster to material that can be accessed or purchased elsewhere.

- Check that there are no dead links
- Are all links live (not greyed out)
- There should be no 'under construction signs'
- Is everything promised included on the site?

- Does the site include all the necessary information or just an abstract, table of contents or review?

Audience

This area will be touched on again under objectivity, but it also applies in this, the area of Web site credibility. Before using information from a Web site, do take into account the intended audience. For example, a site about volcanoes for primary school children will probably not provide the depth or complexity of information necessary for a university geology paper.

Accuracy

Once you have checked the overall credibility of a Web site, you should move on to evaluate the accuracy of the information presented. Information from even the most respected source is useless if it's wrong or outdated!

Currency of information

Some information is timeless- it remains static regardless of how long ago it was published. This applies to works such as novels. However, much information today has a very limited shelf life - technology news dates extremely quickly. Advances in medical research makes things of fantasy ten years ago a reality today. Web sites that contain information such as news, weather, timetables, prices, statistics or latest research obviously need to be updated on a regular basis or they may provide misinformation.

This is not to say that all older information is useless - information written some time ago can be useful for comparing current information with (e.g. the growth in a population or comparisons between treatment of disease) but it must always be obvious how old information is.

- Look for the date of creation on any information you wish to use
- Check for the date of last update
- Check for statements regarding the frequency of updates
- Be sure as to whether you are viewing current or archived information.

Typographical errors/spelling mistakes

In addition to lowering the tone and taking away from the overall integrity of a site, typographical, spelling and grammatical errors can affect the accuracy of the information provided. Be wary of a site that includes many of these errors as it is difficult to tell whether the errors are due to carelessness or an intent to mislead.

Factual

Look for supporting evidence of information supplied in the way of references or bibliographies. While some sites claim to be presenting 'the facts' further investigation

may reveal they are presenting either a biased view or completely inaccurate information. This point will be elaborated on in the Objectivity section.

Objectivity

Objectivity refers to how balanced and fair the information is. While it should obviously be truthful, the information presented should be balanced, cover all sides of the story and should be presented without bias.

To help gauge the objectivity of a site, you should first ascertain the original goal of the site and whether there has been any sponsorship associated with the information. The greatest danger to the objectivity of a site is a conflict of interest. For example an article on the dangers of babies drinking soy milk that is sponsored by the dairy association may ring alarm bells. The information and activity earlier in this topic about different types of Web sites should help you to recognise any conflict of interests on a Web site.

Clues to help judge the objectivity of a site are:

- Look out for sweeping and unsupported claims - e.g. TV is the greatest single influence on today's youth
- Are the claims backed up by supporting evidence? providing referenced statistics
- Overly emotive writing - designed to appeal to your sensitivities
- Does it seem plausible? Could a person really swim around the world in one year?
- Consistency - is the argument consistent or are there contradictions in the writing?
- Conflict of interest - e.g. a report on the educational benefits of computer games for children, sponsored by a computer game company.

Support

Support refers to how well the information presented can be verified and corroborated if necessary. If you have any questions or reservations about a site or the information presented, the support offered should assist you in clarifying any grey areas.

Information should be supported by references and/or bibliographies. This is especially important when presenting statistics. If you are unable to find any other source that corroborates the information presented be wary. You should be able to triangulate the information (find two other sources that support the information).

Look for:

- References and bibliographies
- Supporting documents and/or links
- Contact follow up details supplied

The following [link provides a printable checklist](#) to use when evaluating Web sites.

References/resources

- [Checklists and tips for evaluating Web sites](#)
- [Internet Detective Tutorial](#)
- [Evaluating Internet Research Sources](#)

Evaluating information on the WWW

- [Criteria for evaluation of Internet Information Resources](#)
- [Online information: Fact or fiction](#)
- [Evaluating information found on the Internet](#)