Tips for Evaluating Web Sites

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These days when we need an answer to a question we immediately turn to Google; and while the World Wide Web brings us a ton of information at a mere click of "enter," not all of it is good or even accurate. There are many sites that are purposely created as spoofs or hoaxes. In fact, Web creation has become so sophisticated that a misleading site can look quite professional. As a researcher you should always be somewhat suspect and maintain a critical eye, particularly when the site validates the points you want to state in your paper and your desire to use the information supersedes your caution.

Anyone can create a Web site and say practically anything they want, as long as they are not breaking any laws or outright conning anyone. For example, there is a site that is put out by a White supremacist group on Martin Luther King that, on the surface, appears to be supportive of the civil rights leader, but the text hints at illegal activities and dealings with the communist party. The group then promotes their own books on the site's recommended reading list. (I won't "advertise" the URL, since adding more "clicks" to the site only puts it higher on the Google retrieval feature.) Suffice it to say that most of the information you find on the Web is not peer reviewed or scrutinized by professionals.

So, how do you tell what is legitimate? To help you evaluate a site, check for the following five things: *Accuracy, Authority, Objectivity, Currency,* and *Coverage.*

Accuracy

Most information on the Web is not peer-reviewed, you will need to search scholarly journals to ensure this. Unlike books and other print material, Web site authors might not fact-check or even edit their material.

So ask yourself: Is the information accurate? Can it be verified through another source? Is there an editor for the site? Are there professionals cited in the text who have examined the information? Are there any studies cited that have tested the theories and can be traced for verification?

Of course, sites can be checked at Snopes.com, but some clues are obvious. Perhaps there is an outright disclaimer <http://www.thedogisland.com/disclaimer.html> or a tell-tale URL <http://www.idiotica.com/cranium/encyclopedia/>. Not all spoofs are vicious, most just want to have a little fun.

Authority

For many Web sites it is often hard to determine the author's identity, much less their credentials; but if you can do so, then their expertise (or lack of it) will either underscore your concern or help you gain more faith in the site's validity. Click on the "Contact Us" or "About Us" link on the site to find any sponsoring organizations and then check out their reputation. Another thing to check is the site's URL. Is the domain something that carries weight, such as .gov <http://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/> or .edu <http://www.unca.edu/> or .org <http://www.ywcaofasheville.org/>. Is there a tilde (~) present, which may indicate a student's

personal site--although it may also be present for some faculty members, in which case the person may have some authority on the subject.

Objectivity

Does the site have a clear objective? Often a bias, whether political, religious, or otherwise, can be readily detected. But some sites are purposely written to obscure the real purpose, as in the case of the misleading Martin Luther King site mentioned above. While having a bias does not necessarily mean the information on the Web site is wrong, it does mean that it is most likely one-sided and influenced more by opinion than fact. Try to detect the targeted audience for the site you are using. Is there any advertising that will offer a clue? If you are still in doubt, do some fact checking on your own at: http://www.factcheck.org/.

Currency

While searching anything via the Web it is important to make sure you are finding current information. Web sites remain up long passed there usefulness and it is up to you to verify that the information or studies you are collecting are still valid. It is not unusual for a more recent study to disprove earlier postings that are still brought up in a google search.

Check for a "Posted Date" or, better yet, a "Last Revised" one. This will help you determine the information's currency. If there are no dates on the site, check the links to see if they have expired or moved. At times outdated information used within the text will give away the site's age, so be aware of terms, names, or products that are old or no longer in use.

Coverage

Finally, it is important to check out how well the topic is covered by the Web site. Many online sources give only a cursory treatment of their subject, never diving very deeply into any controversies or alternative view points. For a site to be really beneficial to research, it will need to cover the material in an indepth way, perhaps adding links to other supporting Web pages and/or citing sources from books, journals, conference notes, correspondences, etc.

It takes work to find good sources, but you want this in order for your own work to stand up to scrutiny. "Googling" is easy, posting to the Web is open to anyone. Information found online should always be backed up by supporting evidence, which can be found in scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals, or dissertations that have stood the tests of experts in the field, or books put out by academic presses. You want your material to be well researched and backed up, this starts when you thoroughly examine and validate your online sources and Web sites.

Resources

Alex. (n.d.). Museum of hoaxes. Retrieved from http://www.museumofhoaxes.com
Bradley, Phil. (n.d.). Making the net easier. *Phil Bradley's website*. Retrieved from
    http://www.philb.com/fakesites2.htm
Novelle, Ali. (n.d.). 5 criteria for evaluating web pages. Blue Ridge Community College library
    web page. Retrieved from http://www.blueridge.edu/library/5_criteria.php