Evaluating Websites: A Useful Guide

Evaluating information found on the Internet can be challenging to both students and professionals. It can be difficult to distinguish between legitimate sites, and those which display false, biased or misleading information. Currently there are no standards websites must follow – it is a self publishing medium, and it is up to the researcher to decide if a website is worth using. This brief guide is intended to provide students with basic criteria to look for when evaluating a website's validity.

Credibility

The author of the website should be qualified to present the information displayed, and should have his/her credentials listed. Consider the following:

- Is there contact information for the author?
- What are the author's qualifications for writing on this topic?
- Is the author affiliated with an organization? If so, is this relationship clearly outlined?
- Personal websites can be misleading. Look for sites that end with edu., and gov. These domains indicate sites run by educational facilities, and government agencies. As a rule, these sites contain factual material that is reliable and free from bias.

Objectivity

A website that is bias-free may not be important to your research, but if personal opinion is presented on the site, it should be identified as such. Keep in mind the following points:

- Is the website sponsored by a company or organization? If so, is this relationship clearly identified?
- Is the website free from advertising?
- Area variety of viewpoints represented, or does the author display a biased opinion?
- Keep in mind the Internet is often used as a soapbox, and be aware of bias

Accuracy

Unlike print materials, most websites do not go through a lengthy editorial process. The result, therefore, can be a site that includes errors and misinformation

- Is the information presented on the site second hand information, and if so, is it documented?
- Are there obvious spelling errors, or typos? If so, be wary of the information provided
- Remember there are no web standards to ensure accuracy. It is "buyer beware"

Currency

If up-to-date information is needed, keep in mind the following:

- When was the site last revised or updated? The date should be clearly marked
- Do links to outside sites still work, or have some moved or expired?
- Are there more current documents available?

Content

It is important to look at the coverage of the information available on a website, and the ease by which it is retrieved. Websites are different from print resources in that it's often difficult to determine the extent of coverage of a topic by looking at a site's homepage. Ideally, the homepage should be like a book's table of contents – a researcher should be able to tell at a quick glance what is inside.

- Does the site thoroughly cover the topic? Is the content useful and appropriate?
- Does the site provide useful, reliable links?
- Is the site user friendly? Ideally, there should be a site index or table of contents
- Does the site load quickly with a minimal number of error messages?
- Is the site searchable, and is the search box clearly visible?