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What's in a Web Site?

(Things you always wanted to know about the Web, but didn't know who to ask!)

There is a tremendous amount of information available on the World Wide Web. Some of this information is good, sound research data; some is opinion. When a person searches the Web, the sheer volume of information can be overwhelming. How can an individual determine the appropriateness or validity of the information they are finding?

As you prepare to evaluate information from the Web, there are a few basic assumptions that should be made clear.

- 1 Not all information is created equal
- 2 There is good information on bad sites, and bad information on good sites.
- 3 Information on the Web should be viewed as no more or less than information from other sources.
- 4 Authorship on the Web does not mean "authority."
- 5 Evaluating a site means applying individual judgement.
- 6 The individual evaluating the content of a Web site has a bias in how they view the information.
- 7 Evaluation of Web sites is a means, not an end.



A review of dozens of sites discussing content evaluation seemed to have at the center five general themes:

① Authority; ② Audience; ③ Context/Coverage; ④ Accuracy; and ⑤ Currency.

Together these five themes create a base for determining how to use information from a web site. Whether for personal use or for a report, a student can learn to ask these basic questions to ascertain how much credibility they choose to assign to the information found on a web site. These are good questions to ask regardless of the reason for obtaining information from the Web.

Questions about Authority

- ◆ Who is responsible for the content? (The author? The publisher?)
- ◆ What is the level of authority of the author or the publisher (Is this their own research? Is the information research based?)
- ◆ What is the affiliation of the author? Who is the author's employer? Who sponsors or pays for the author's work? Is this affiliation clear on the Web site or is it hidden?
- ◆ What is the relationship or association between the author and publisher?
- ◆ What is the reputation of the publisher?
- ◆ Is there contact information for questions?
- ◆ Is the information on the author or publisher verifiable?
- ◆ Who developed the site?
- ◆ Who is the sponsor/what is the location of the site?

Questions about the Audience

- ◆ Is the purpose of the site made clear? (For example, is the purpose to get people involved in a campaign? Or is the purpose to get people angry about a topic? These would be indicators of target audiences.)
- ◆ Is the target audience identified? Is it for specialists? An interested individual? A casual Web surfer?
- ◆ Is the content, reading level, graphic presentation and organization appropriate for the content and audience?
- ◆ Does the information meet the needs of the intended audience? Is it enough information? Too much?

Questions about Context/Coverage

- ◆ What is the persuasive approach used, if any?
- ◆ Are there emotional arguments present for the information?
- ◆ Is there one point of view presented? Are there multiple perspectives offered?
- ◆ Is there evidence of bias?
- ◆ Are there linkages to other sites that only agree with the point of view offered in the site you're examining?
- ◆ Does the site or the article provide sources for the information and then link to those sources?
- ◆ Is the discussion in depth on the topic or superficial?

Questions about Accuracy

- ◆ Are studies/sources of data referred to and obtainable (on-line or through a library)?
- ◆ Does the information avoid general statements such as "research suggests" or "many scientists believe" without citations?
- ◆ Are there comparison data or studies available and mentioned?
- ◆ Is the methodology used described and appropriate?
- ◆ Has the document been subjected to a peer review process? How could you know this?
- ◆ Are the data primary (original research) or secondary (modified, selected, or reported from another study)?
- ◆ Is there a bibliography or references cited section?
- ◆ Is the site maintained by a university, governmental agency or other reputable organization?

Questions about Currency

- ◆ Is the information using the most currently available data (if using governmental data, secondary sources, and other non-primary data).
- ◆ Is the information using primary data? If so, have there been subsequent studies verifying the data or the findings?
- ◆ Is the information current – meaning does the information carry the weight of current agreement in the scientific community?
- ◆ Are the data and the findings relevant today given changes in society, knowledge, or technology?