Critical Evaluation of Internet Resources

Introduction

The Internet provides access to a staggering amount of information, but how much of it is useful or appropriate for a research project? The researcher should aim to be a "smart consumer" when using the Internet for research, as the Internet does not replace resources owned or accessed through the University Library. The following evaluation criteria can help the researcher select valuable Internet resources:

Audience

Who is the intended audience for the Web site? Children, teenagers, adults? General audience, professionals, students, researchers? Members of a certain group or proponents of a certain viewpoint? Try to determine what audience the maker of the Web site is trying to reach.

Purpose

Why has this Web site been created? Is it to sell, to advertise, to inform, to persuade? The purpose of a Web site may not be stated clearly and directly.

Authority

- Who created the particular page and sponsored the Web site?
- Is there a link to a homepage? If so, is it for an individual or an organization?
- What credentials or experience does the author have? (occupation, education, experience) Credentials can be verified using college directories, search engines, LinkedIn, and other biographical sources.
- Does the author have other publications on this subject?
- Is there contact information? (e-mail address, physical address or institution)
- Is there a sponsor for the Web site? What is the sponsor's reputation?
- Check the address for clues as to the type of organization:

  .gov = government agency   .museum = museum
  .org = organizations, usually non-profit   .aero = airlines
  .com = commercial company, usually for-profit .pro = professionals
  .edu = educational, usually colleges and universities .name = individuals
  .net = network, sometimes an internet service provider .biz = business
  .coop = cooperatives   .mil = military
  .info = information

Objectivity

- Is any bias evident? Does the author present the information objectively, from various points of view, or from one particular point of view?
- Does the author or sponsor have any known affiliation which would indicate a specific agenda or bias?
- To what extent does the information attempt to persuade or sway the audience?
- Does the information include vague statements, generalizations, stereotypes or emotional appeal?

Accuracy

Web sites are rarely reviewed, refereed, or verified by an editor or fact checker, as are books and articles in scholarly journals (see "What is a Scholarly Journal?"). Remember, anyone can publish anything on the World Wide Web.

- Is the original source of information stated?
- When was the information originally created?
- When was the information last revised or edited? How much of the information was revised?
- Are the hyperlinks from the Web page still reliable?
- Is the document free of spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors?
- If possible, you may want to check some facts or quotes against the cited sources.

Currency

Dates are not always included on Web pages. Does the source indicate the date of the original? If present, Web page dates may indicate:

- the date the information was created
- the date the information was published to the Web
- the date the information was last revised

Coverage

- Does the Web site present an overview or a detailed discussion?
- Is the information comprehensive?
- What topics are included?
- What time periods are covered by the information?
- Are the hyperlinks from the site relevant and appropriate? Are they annotated? (Evaluate each linked site independently; the quality of pages may vary, even when linked from the same site.)
- What other kinds of sources are cited?

Conclusion

- Be sure you have all the information you need for your reference list. (See citation examples on our Writing, Citing, Tutoring, and Studying Resources guide)
- If you spend 30 minutes searching the Web without finding the information you need, talk to a Librarian. S/he may be able to help you with your search strategy or know where to find the information quickly in another source.