

FIT 100
Assignment 2: Evaluating Web Sites
(or, Now that you've found it, how good is it?)
Spring 2002

"You may have heard that 'knowledge is power,' or that information, the raw material of knowledge, is power. But the truth is that only some information is power: **reliable information**"
~Robert Harris~

Reading for Assignment 2:

Evaluating the Quality of Information on the Internet: A Checklist
http://www.virtualchase.com/quality/checklist_print.html

Introduction:

Many of you have done a fair amount of browsing and searching on the Internet. Have you ever stopped to question the content of sites you encounter when you are looking for cold, hard facts?

Anyone can publish on the Internet and most of that content is not verified for accuracy, unlike many print journals and other publications. The job of fact verification is left up to you, the user. Expert searching of the Internet for information is a valuable skill, but knowing how to evaluate what you find is something of an art. The same skills that go into evaluating print materials can be applied to evaluating web content. Honing those skills until they become second nature will make the task of wading through the glut of information out there a little easier.

Objectives:

- In a search engine, use basic search strategies to bring back sites with information on a topic.
- Use evaluation techniques to determine authenticity and credibility of web sites.

Online Resources:

Web search tips from Search Engine Watch:

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/facts/index.html>

List of Search Engines by function:

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/links/>

Evaluation Criteria:

When looking at information provided on the Internet, keep in mind the following criteria (you do not have to answer each of these questions in writing for the sites evaluated):

Accuracy

- Is the information reliable? Free from errors?
- Are the sources of information listed? Can you verify them?

Authority

- Is the author an expert in the field?
- Is the publisher of the site reputable? What does the domain of the document tell you? (Is it an educational institution, .edu, or a government site, .gov, etc.)
- Can you tell the difference between an educational site, and a site that is simply hosted by an education domain?

Objectivity/Reasonableness

- Do you find any biases on the site?
- What is the motivation for the site? To inform? To persuade? To explain?
- Is the intended audience of the site indicated?

Currency

- How updated is the content? Is the date of last update easily found?

Coverage/Scope

- Does the site contain original information, or just a bunch of links?
- What topics are covered
- Is the topic covered in depth?

Accessibility

- Is the site consistently available?
- How many links are dead ends?
- Does it cost money to use the site?
- Do you have to register to use the site?

What happens when you encounter an "official" looking site? At first glance it appears authoritative and reliable. Deciding whether the information presented is accurate and objective, current and authoritative is a skill to be developed.

Web site evaluation is a contextual process. How you evaluate a site is usually dependent on your research task or information need. Are you looking for new ideas and opinions, facts on a subject, or evidence that supports your position on a topic? Answers to every question in the criteria listed above will not be found for every site. The art of web site evaluation is to obtain answers to enough of your questions that **IN YOUR JUDGEMENT** the site has substance, merit, reliability, authenticity, etc. for your purposes- or it doesn't. In many cases it is your own knowledge or familiarity with some of the facts that may tip you off to inconsistencies in the web site content.

To Do:

1. Take a look at the following groups of sites. Using the criteria listed above, rank their reliability on a scale of one to ten (ten being most reliable).

Group 1:

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

Group 2:

- Copy and paste into a web browser:
<http://www.oncolink.com/templates/resources/article.cfm?c=3&s=8&ss=23&id=248>
- <http://www.smokingsection.com/issues1.html#smoke>

Group 3:

- http://ihr.org/jhr/v15/v15n2p10_Okeefe.html
- <http://www.ushmm.org/kristallnacht/>

Answer the following questions for each group of sites:

- A. Would you use these sites as objective sources of information on the topics?

- B. How much do you trust the information from each site?

C. Do you find each one to be credible in one way or another?

D. Is there a particular viewpoint the content is deriving from that should be considered as you view the site?

2. For every site listed in the groups, give a brief summary (1 paragraph) of the content. (Use additional paper or the back of this one)

3. How factual do you believe each of the sites to be on the content they publish? Why do you believe this?

4. Who owns the domain of each site? Use the website given in Chapter 5 that identifies domain owners and their physical addresses.

5. Use the search skills gained in Assignment 1 to do a search on a topic of interest (in other words, a topic in which you have some previous knowledge). Evaluate 4 sites found on the topic and reflect on how you evaluate them and what criteria influence your decision about the validity of the site. Use the questions in number 1 and the Evaluation Criteria as references. Mark the reliability of the site for the various criteria below.

Site Name/URL	Accuracy	Authority	Objectivity	Currency	Coverage/Scope	Accessibility

6. As you evaluate the sites you find, keep this question in mind: At first glance, what aspects of each website make it appear "authoritative"?

7. Keep in mind the criteria you read at the beginning of this assignment.
 - A. Did all the sites on your topic answer all of the questions?

- B. Did they answer enough to appear authoritative even though you, as a knowledgeable searcher, knew different?

Project 1 will require you to create a site that provides “misinformation” for the novice user. Will your site pass all, or most, of the above criteria?

Examples of sites that could be seen as spoofs, or as misinformation:

Aluminum Foil Deflector Beanie
<http://zapatopi.net/afdb.html>

Real Aroma
<http://realaroma.com/>

Feline Reactions to Bearded Men
<http://www.improb.com/airchives/classical/cat/cat.html>

GenoChoice
<http://www.genochoice.com/>

Dyhydrogen Monoxide
<http://www.dhmo.org/>

The Onion: News Parody
<http://www.theonion.com/>

Mankato, Minnesota Tourist site
<http://www.lme.mankato.msus.edu/mankato/mankato.html>