

Evaluating Web Resources

Objective: To illustrate the benefits of Web publishing as well as the differences from print publishing that create challenges in assessing the content and credibility of Web sites. We will establish some critical techniques and apply them in evaluating one Web site. While we are under some time constraints, please ask questions as they come up and I will attempt to answer them.

Relevance: This is important because so much information is being made available on the Web and the rules of print journalism may not apply. We need to understand these differences to make critical evaluations about Web content.

Benefits:

- Anyone can publish on the Web. Information is available at your fingertips from a variety of sources. It is available instantaneously. You have easy and sometimes free access to credible news organizations and resources such as *New York Times*, *Business Week*, *Wall Street Journal*, full library resources, etc.
- Diverse coverage of local versus national versus international issues. You can get content from your favorite TV station in your hometown or read sites that were produced in other countries. After you graduate from UT, you can continue to read the *Daily Texan* online.
- More dissenting opinions available as a result of easy publishing on the Web.
- 24 hour publishing cycles. Information can be up-to-the-moment, rather than daily, weekly, bimonthly, etc.
- On demand – don't have to wait for paper to arrive or local news to come on to get information.
- Multimedia- the Web offers sound, photos, video and those features are being improved with improvements to bandwidth.
- Interactive – Links to other resources, contact information for authors, discussion forums are all valuable resources and can impact the nature and coverage of issues. Offers great potential for community journalism.

Disadvantages or differences:

But the Internet differs from print on several counts:

- Anyone can publish. It is often hard to assess credentials of online authors and sites.
- The Web makes it easy to develop a site that appears to be affiliated with a credible news source, through logo creation, similar domain names, design and format may be misleading.
- Economic Model of the Web is often transaction-based, could effect reporting and cause bias, i.e. product reviews or campaign material. Even respectable news organizations are grappling with this (age of mergers and alliances). Previous economic model was ad revenue and subscriptions, but people are not willing to pay for much of the content on the Web. It is possible that the prints reputation can influence that of the online version, but it is also possible that not paying attention to the same standards online as in print can have the effect of influencing the reputation of the print. Brand reputation and value will become very important in both print and online environments.
- Sites could have hidden sponsorships or corporate affiliations – conflicts of interest could arise.
- Advertisements can be presented to appear like news. Can't always tell the difference between news, editorials and ads, which is more distinct in print publications.
- Search engines often drop you in the middle of a sites content with little reference of source or credibility.
- Information might be out-of-date and it is sometimes difficult to assess when a site was published and updated.
- Information might be inaccurate or falsified – rumors spread easily on the Web.
- Digital images might be easily manipulated (now using digital images in print as well). Debate on OJ photo, touched up to look darker.
- Difficult to enforce standards due to widespread nature of the Web. Media and reporters are expected to self police.
- Easy to change or update. News can disappear. The potential exists to change coverage in an article.
- Lots of information. Many are overwhelmed by the glut of what is available. Hard to find what you are looking for.

Summary: Now you have the tools to make critical decisions about information you find on the Web. While there is much benefit to using the Web for research and information, one must approach it with a critical eye. If you have any questions of individual sites or sites that would be of interest for our class to evaluate, please bring them to my attention.

Evaluation Checklist

Consider the following questions when evaluating the content of a Web site. Keep in mind that not all sites will have all the features being evaluated and that new developments in the Web may require new rules or modifications of current rules in future evaluations.

Content

1. Is the page complete or still under construction?
2. What is the title of the page?
3. When was it created, last updated?
4. Who is the audience, is there any obvious bias or slant to the information?
5. Are other sources of information available from the site? Are the links for the site internal or external sources? Do they all work properly?
6. Do outside sources support the information? (journal articles, scholarly material, other news sources)

Authority

1. Who created the page? What are his/her credentials?
2. Is there a means to contact the author? Email, phone, address? Discussion forums or other interactivity?
3. What are their associations or affiliations? Does the site make that clear?
4. Who is sponsoring the site? Is that clearly stated?
5. What does domain name tell you about the site? Is it a .com, .gov, .edu, personal Web Page?
6. Can you backtrack in the url to get more information about the site or author?
7. Can you tell if the site is accurate? Are there references to outside sources of the information?
8. Is there a non-Web version of the site? If not, this is not necessarily a detriment but can add or detract from credibility based on the reputation of the print medium.

Presentation

1. Is the site professional looking?
2. Is it free of grammar, spelling and punctuation problems? Is the writing style appropriate for the topic?
3. Is the format of the site meaningful and easy to use? Are there appropriate headings? Is navigation useful?
4. How do images and sounds work on the site? How do they support the content? Could they have been edited?
5. How did you find the site? Consider how the search engine works? For example, Alta Vista searches meta tags that are assigned by the author in the code and Yahoo uses a registration by author.
6. Can you tell if news, editorial, and advertisements have separate presentations on the site?
7. Look at the source code of the site. Is there anything in it that influences your impression? Meta tags, dates, comments, etc.

Exercise:

You will be divided into three groups, one each for Content, Authority, and Presentation. Go to the Titanic Statistics site, <http://www.anesi.com/titanic.htm>. Review the site for your assigned area. Discuss within your group. Pick one person to present your findings. Was there anything that surprised you once you did some more research? What does this tell you about Web credibility?