

Evaluating Internet sources

Evaluating sources of information is an intrinsic part of all academic work. Whether or not you are aware of it you will naturally make judgements about a book, for example, before deciding whether to use it for an assignment or other academic purpose. But evaluation is more essential for web resources than for any other type. There is a simple reason for this: the Internet is an unregulated environment. There are thousands of sites containing poorly researched or biased information and even outright bigotry. If you are going to make use of the Internet for academic research you need to know some techniques for filtering out the less reliable sites. You need to consider:

Ownership

Currency

Accessibility

Ownership

Who owns and runs a website – whether individual or organisation – is the first thing to check when evaluating a source. This can often be done by interpreting the Internet address (Uniform Resource Locator, or URL) before even connecting to the site.

A **host name** often appears in the middle of the URL and this can sometimes be an obvious clue to the identity of the owner

e.g. <http://www.bbc.co.uk>

This host name is instantly recognisable and is regarded as a reliable source for many purposes.

e.g. <http://www.port.ac.uk>

This host name is known to us but may not be at all obvious to someone outside the University...

...so you can use the **domain type** (here **.ac**) to judge the nature of the organisation and perhaps therefore the reliability of the information on the site.

Some standard domain types are:

- .ac an academic (e.g. college or university) site in the UK
- .edu an educational institution (outside the UK)
- .co a company or commercial organisation (normally in the UK)
- .com a company or commercial organisation (any country)
- .gov a government (local or national) site
- .org a non-profit organisation
- .net originally for administrators, now more widely-used

Checking domain types *might* be useful in judging any bias the site might have.

Another way you might be able to assess the credentials of a site's host organisation is by seeing what they have got to say about themselves. Look, on the homepage or soon after, for an **about us / who is...? / information about...** button.

Beware sites that include a lot of advertising. It is usually indicative of organisations with commercial rather than academic interests.

You may need to assess the authority and objectivity not only of a site's host organisation but also of any named **authors** who have written materials on the site. Look for:

- Authors' credentials e.g. where do they work and what qualifications do they have?
- Citations and/or references to support factual statements made by the author
- Whether material is peer-reviewed or edited – and if so by whom?
- The type of sites to which any links lead
- Obvious one-sided argument or bias - the site may still be useful, but be aware of it!

Currency

How up-to-date the information on a site is can be of great importance for many research purposes. Ideally any material on the site should be clearly dated. At the very least you should be able to check when the page was **last updated**.

You can download a 'bookmarklet' allowing you to find out when any webpage was last updated from <http://www.bookmarklets.com>

One clear sign of a page that has not been updated for some time is links that do not work. Sites with many such **broken links** should be treated with caution.

Accessibility

It is untrue to say that only easily accessible sites contain reliable information. Nevertheless, accessibility – meaning how efficiently you can get into and then use and move around the site – can be a reasonable indicator of overall site quality.

'Good' sites should:

- Provide a clear 'contents' list that summarises what the site is all about
- Provide consistent links on every page that allow you to navigate the site efficiently
- Allow you, if the site is large, to search for specific information within the site
- Offer a help button, especially if the site is large or complex
- Avoid the over-use of distracting graphics, animations and different font style

The most important single thing you can do when researching using the Internet is to **think critically**. This means you should not accept content at face value. By asking yourself questions about the **authority, accuracy, objectivity** and **currency** of the information you find you should be able to filter out unreliable and unsuitable material.