EVALUATING WEBSITES

When doing research on the Internet, it is crucial that you evaluate the information you find before using it as source material. Unlike most articles published in reputable journals and books, many websites do not undergo a rigorous review process. Instead, it's up to you to evaluate any information you use from the Internet.

Audience

All websites are written with a particular audience in mind. To determine this audience, you may need to do some investigating. Here are a few things to consider:

- Is the level of the site geared toward general readers, students, or specialists in the field?
- Does it use technical or scholarly language?
- Does it assume the reader is well-educated in one particular discipline?
- Does the content of the site touch on several different topics or explore one issue or topic in detail?
- Is the website biased towards a certain viewpoint?

Accuracy

Accuracy refers to whether a website provides verifiable and reliable factual information. Here are some questions you might ask as you investigate the accuracy of a site:

- Are there errors in the information presented? Minor mistakes might be acceptable, but too many errors could undermine the information offered.
- Are there theories that have since been disproven on the site? This is especially important to determine for scientific issues, and may indicate that the entire site is outdated.
- Does the text generally agree with other sources for the same information?
- Is there documentation or evidence presented for the information provided? Look for in-text references and citations or a link to research methods and materials consulted.
- How is the site created, maintained, or managed? Is it a social media-based site like Wikipedia? A blog?

Wikipedia can be a valuable resource when beginning your research, but should almost never be used as a source for a research paper. On Wikipedia, any given entry is vulnerable to false information or even malicious hacks. When using Wikipedia and other social media sites such as blogs, podcasts, and discussion forums, remember:

- Consider the information found on Wikipedia and blogs as a surface-level introduction to your research topic that may or may not be accurate. To find out for sure, you will need to dig deeper.
• As with other sites, compare the information provided with other, more reliable resources, and cite these other resources, not Wikipedia or a blog, in your research.

• Look for documentation of the information provided. Wikipedia articles often contain footnotes at the bottom of the article page, which can often lead to valuable print and electronic sources that may be more reliable than the entry itself.

• Take advantage of the variety of opinions available on social media sites, but make sure to check out the varied references they cite.

Bias

Depending on a website's purpose, information may be presented from different viewpoints and may contradict information found on other websites. The purpose of the parent institution's site may influence the validity of your source. Here are some tips to help you determine if there is any bias in the site's information:

Check the domain type, as it might influence the nature of the information you are viewing.

• Commercial sites usually end in .com. They might be trying to sell you something or promote their own product, so beware of self-promotional language and potentially incomplete or biased information or statistics.

• Academic sites end in .edu, but examine the URL and the page's content. Is it a library web page, or a student's personal project?

• Government-related sites end in .gov. These are generally reliable because the document is from a U.S. government-affiliated site. Keep in mind that reports, data and statistics, and official documents may be more reliable than general interest pages.

• Non-profit groups such as public interest organizations, religious groups, and think tanks use the .org domain. These sites may be biased toward the organization's point of view.

Many organizations publish research reports on their websites. While these can be a valuable source of information, remember that many organizations have a political agenda. It's important to be aware of any agendas that might exist, whether they are conservative or liberal.

• Some organizations, like the Heritage Foundation, make it clear what their underlying philosophy is, either in the very title of the organization or through an "About Us" section or a "Mission Statement."

• Other organizations, like the Urban Institute, may not be as clear with their political agenda, so you'll need to explore the site further.

• It may be helpful to read a description of the organization at a site like the Annenberg Foundation's Annenberg Classroom critical thinking resources page.

As you examine a site for bias, ask yourself:
• What other issues does this organization research?
• Do the policies or solutions they propose have a similar theme?
• Who heads the organization and what is their background?
• Who are the major donors? Do they have any overt political leanings?

If you are still unsure about the objectivity of an organization, consult with your instructor or a reference librarian.

**Credibility**

Determining the credibility of a source takes a critical eye. For websites, take a look at the website and the author:

• Examine the URL. Is there a tilde (~) in part of the URL? This implies that a web page is a personal page, even if it's linked to a larger institution. It may not be held to the same standards as the institution's pages, or reflect the institution's views.

• Look for an "About this Site" link to learn more about the individual, organization, agency, or corporation hosting the site.

• Look for an "About the Author" link. What are the author's credentials? Check a library database to see if the author has published books or articles in scholarly journals.

**Currency**

The issue of currency is important when evaluating factual information, since new research and information are constantly emerging. Note the date the website was created and updated, as the accuracy of the information contained in it may change with time. However:

• Just because a page was recently updated does not mean that the information is up-to-date. Look for clues that might help you date the information.

• Keep in mind that, for some types of information, currency is not an issue. For example, an article on current medical research or case law is more time-sensitive than an essay on Aristotle.

*Fran Devlin, fadevlin@ku.edu*

*Librarian for French, Italian, German, & European Studies*

*Watson Library, Rm. 519*