Evaluating Web Sources

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Using and Evaluating Internet Sites for Research

With the many quality databases available through Bell Library, it is generally not recommended that students use the internet as a primary source for finding articles for term papers etc. One problem is that it is often difficult to assess the accuracy of information that one finds on internet websites. One example is the popular site of Wikipedia, where anyone at any time can make changes to an article using the Edit this Page feature, though the open editing process also often leads to the quick correction of errors by the user public. In this view it was easy to have Corpus Christi replace Austin as the capital of Texas using the editing feature!
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As can be seen, it was simple to change the capital of Texas in Wikipedia from Austin to Corpus Christi with the Edit the Page feature which is open to everyone.
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There are some tips one can use when evaluating whether websites are useful sources of information for research. One should consider the following when evaluating a website for research: **Accuracy, Authority, Coverage, Currency, and Objectivity.**

**Accuracy**

- How accurate is the information provided when checked against other sources or Web sites?
- Is the Web page free of spelling or grammatical errors?
- Are there footnotes, a bibliography, a works cited page, or links to sources?
- Is the information on the site from peer-reviewed, or creditable scholarly sources?
- One example of a website full of spelling errors and inaccurate info is: “AIDS FACTS” [http://147.129.226.1/library/research/AIDSFACKTS.htm](http://147.129.226.1/library/research/AIDSFACKTS.htm)
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Authority (Author/Publisher/Producer)

- Who is the author, publisher, or producer of the Web page?
- Is it clear who is sponsoring the page?
- Can you contact the author, publisher, or producer?
- What are the person's or organization's qualifications on the subject covered by the page (credibility)?
- Look at the header or footer for information showing affiliation.
- Look closely at the URL and domain name for clues.
- One website with a URL that appears legitimate at first glance but further investigation shows lacks credibility in terms of a legitimate author/publisher is the fake White House website at http://www.whitehouse.net/
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Coverage (Level of Depth/Comprehensiveness)

- Is the site in-depth or a brief summary on the subject?
- What does this page offer that is not found elsewhere?
- What range of topics does this site cover?
- Are there things Not covered that should be covered?
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**Currency (How up-to-date is the information on the website)**

- When was the page created or last updated? (The footer often gives these dates)
- Is the information listed out-of-date?
- If there are links, have they expired or moved?
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**Objectivity**

- What goals or objectives does this page meet? Is it written from a certain point of view?
- Is the page free of advertising?
- Does it cover multiple sides of a topic, or does it promote only one viewpoint?
- One example of a website lacking objectivity and intended to persuade viewers is the Beef Nutrition website from the Cattlemen’s Beef Board and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association: [http://www.beefnutrition.org/](http://www.beefnutrition.org/)
How to Find Quality Web Sites

Something that can help a great deal in Web searching is to use portals that link ONLY to well-reviewed resources. The following are some examples of such websites:

• The Librarians’ Index to the Internet  http://lii.org/

• About.com Guide to Web Search  http://websearch.about.com/

• Infomine  http://infomine.ucr.edu/
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