

Evaluating Internet Sites for Academic Use

Briefing Paper 2

A checklist for students (and teachers)

Integrating the World Wide Web into teaching has many advantages, but one major disadvantage is the newness of the medium, coupled with the fact that anybody can publish anything on the Web. Unless a course integrating the WWW provides a set list of specific websites selected by the tutor or some other scholarly authority, the problem of evaluating the usefulness of websites and their content will arise.

In some respects, this is no different from the problem of evaluating any other publication. Everybody has had to learn how to distinguish an academic textbook from a populist paperback on the same subject. Somewhere along the line, we all (hopefully) have come to realize that a feature about William Wallace in the *Scotsman* is of less academic value than an article in the *Scottish Historical Review*. Conscious or not, criteria have been established in most people's minds by which they judge the likely value of a print publication even before they have read it.

Some of the markers associated with print publications are lost on the Web, e.g. glossy magazine versus book format, a respected academic publisher's name versus a tourist-board publication. But some of the information needed for value judgements is present on webpages, too, if you know where to look for it. In addition, it is possible to build up a reasonable set of criteria based upon common sense.

A number of webpages deal with this issue. Amongst the most useful are the [Evaluation Criteria](http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html) published by Susan Beck at New Mexico State University at <http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html>, and [Thinking Critically about World Wide Web Resources](http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/index.htm) by Esther Grassian at UCLA at <http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/index.htm>. Both sites offer very comprehensive lists of criteria which have been valuable for this paper. A very good site which includes examples of reliable and unreliable websites and even a quiz is the [Guide to Critical Thinking About What You See On The Web](http://www.ithaca.edu/library/Training/hott.html) at <http://www.ithaca.edu/library/Training/hott.html>. It also offers an extensive bibliography. Closer to home is Internet Detective at <http://www.sosig.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html>, an interactive tutorial on evaluating the quality of internet resources.

The keystones of website appraisal can be said to be: Accuracy, Authority, Objectivity and Currency. Accuracy is of course the main concern of academics, and it could be argued that Authority, Objectivity and Currency are primarily useful as *pointers* towards the likelihood that the content of a website is accurate.

Accuracy

This can only be truly judged on the basis of some prior knowledge. If you have done preliminary reading, you are in the best position to judge whether a site contains enough accurate information for its new assertions to carry some weight with you. You can also judge whether the amount of information given is adequate, and whether all sides of an argument are shown.

But if you come to a site unprepared, consider the following:

- ❖ Is it clear who wrote the content, and how to contact them? Do they give information about their background and qualifications?
- ❖ Is there an editor, and if so, who is it? If there is no author or editor information, why is the site owner so keen to remain anonymous?
- ❖ Is the aim of the site stated clearly and does the content match that aim?
- ❖ Do the spelling, grammar and composition conform to accepted standards? If they can't even get that right, do you trust their ideas?
- ❖ Do the external links lead to sites you know to be trustworthy? Do any trustworthy sites link to this one?
- ❖ Is the information given verifiable – does the writer quote sources?

A site does not have to fulfil all of these criteria to be considered respectable or useful, but if you have to answer 'no' to more than a couple of these questions, you should definitely treat it with caution and try to verify its claims elsewhere.

Leading on from this, you will want to consider the question of authority next.

Authority

This very traditional approach to evaluating quality is not always valid with regard to web-based information. A person can have very thorough knowledge and worthwhile ideas without the sanction of a recognized institution. However, as a rule of thumb, looking for indications of institutional support for a site can do no harm.

Ask yourself:

- ❖ Where is the site hosted? Is it in an educational domain (eg .ac.uk or .edu) or any official domain (e.g. .gov), or is it hosted by a commercial organisation (e.g. .co.uk, .com, .net) or even by GeoYahoo, a free server which will host pages from anyone at all (geocities.com)? You can tell by looking at the last part of a site's address before the single forward slash. The Subject Centre, for example, is at <http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/> - the .ac.uk indicates an academic site in the United Kingdom.
- ❖ If the content of a web page wasn't originally created for the web, can you tell where it came from? Did it come from a print publication, from a course handout, or from notes scribbled on a beermat?
- ❖ Does the site carry advertising – how much and by whom? Is anybody trying to sell you anything? Who, if anybody, sponsors the site, and what might their agenda be?

This last question leads to another consideration - that of objectivity.

Objectivity

Use your common sense. Does the content of the site sound like special pleading? Can you detect a bias? Is the bias openly stated? Bias doesn't mean that a site is useless – published academics have biases, too, even if they deny it. But it does mean you have to be more wary of accepting anything you find at face value. Or does the site at least acknowledge that there are two sides to an issue (most historical issues have two sides!)? Or is the author trying to sneak something past you?

This may be a vague area where you have to rely on your own judgement a lot, but it's no more difficult than dealing with a dubious academic article.

The final criterion is much easier to pin down - Currency.

Currency

Once something has been put on the web, it generally stays there. People move on, but they rarely take down their old sites. They don't update them, either. You may find a site that looks great, but was last touched in 1996. Depending on the subject, this may or may not matter – make up your mind.

These are some means by which to tell the currency of a page:

- ❖ Is there any indication when it was constructed, and (more importantly) when it was last updated? (If not, you can get little programs called 'applets' that will tell you anyway at <http://www.bookmarklets.com/>). Are we talking weeks or years here?
- ❖ Do the external links still work? If many links are dead, the site may be quite old, and it is most definitely of less use than it could have been.
- ❖ If there is an email link to the author, does that still work, or has the author moved on?

Finally, spare a few thoughts for the format. If a site has pink writing on turquoise, is full of bright pictures and little animated signs, if it uses several different font faces and dozens of frames, carries more advertising than content and tries to deploy a few hundred cookies on your machine, you've probably hit either the home page of a seriously lifeless individual, or the online equivalent of the *Sunday Sport*. While academics can have atrocious taste and can also get carried away with clipart, content is generally the main focus of truly academic sites and distractions will be few.

In the end, there is one crucial question left: Should you be here at all? What kind of information are you looking for, and do you think the web is really likely to provide it? Would you find your information more quickly and reliably elsewhere – in the library, for example, or in a reference work? The web is a useful repository of resources, but depending on your subject, it may have less to offer than traditional resource collections. ❖

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