

The Web: Can It be Trusted?

Evaluating Sites on the World Wide Web

Anyone with Web access and a little bit of computer know-how can put **anything** on the World Wide Web. No one checks to see that information is reliable or worthwhile before it is permitted to appear on the Internet. In this way, Web publishing differs from most publishing in print form, where editors intervene to select what things will be published and these undergo review and revision before they become available to the public. There is a lot of valuable information on the World Wide Web, but there is also a lot that is absolute junk! You need to be able to tell the difference. You must use your critical judgment to decide which Web sites are reliable sources of information. This guide gives you some pointers for evaluating Web sites and also lists some ways to find Web sites that have already been evaluated and judged to be worthwhile.

EVALUATING WEB SITES

When judging a Web site, ask yourself these questions:

1. Who wrote it?

At the very least, the person or organization who put the information on the Web should be identified by name. (Would you trust an anonymous letter?) Also, look to see if the site gives information such as the author's education, employment, and previous accomplishments; this helps you decide whether the person is qualified to disseminate information on the subject. Does the Web page offer a means of contacting the author to give your feedback (for instance, an e-mail address or link)? Are there ways to check the person's qualifications (for instance, contact information for his/her place of employment)?

2. What sort of organization put it on the Web?

The **domain**, which is part of the Web address, offers clues as to the nature of the organization responsible for putting a page on the Web.

.edu/ indicates an educational institution. Pages with this domain often are put on the Web by faculty or research institutes at colleges or universities; the information they provide which falls within their areas of expertise is likely to be reliable. However, beware of the fact that many students, who may well be less knowledgeable or intelligent than you are, have Web pages or post information in an **.edu/** domain.

.gov/ indicates that the page is put on the Web by a federal government organization. The government collects statistics and provides information on many topics of public interest and concern. This information is generally considered reliable.

.mil/ indicates a military site. You would probably evaluate the information in much the same way as you would judge government information. But an extra factor to

consider is that a military site might withhold certain information if it is considered a military secret.

.org/ indicates that the page is put on the Web by an organization. Take into consideration the purpose of the organization and ask how that might slant the information presented.

.com/ indicates a commercial site. Be aware that information on these pages is likely to be advertising or publicity or that the page may be attempting to sell you something.

.net/ indicates a networking organization that provides Internet access. People pay to be able to put their personal or organizational Web pages at this domain. Therefore, things in this domain must be carefully evaluated to determine their reliability.

3. Does it have an axe to grind?

Does the creator of this page have a special purpose or a particular bias, which might affect what information is selected to appear on the page and how it is presented? Here are some things to watch out for:

Advocacy: If the organization or person who creates the Web site advocates a particular point of view, you cannot expect to find balanced information that might support the other point of view.

Advertising: If the site aims to convince you to buy something, it will probably not give an unbiased account of its pros and cons!

Humor or satire: A lot on the Web is written tongue-in-cheek. Don't mistake it for straightforward fact!

4. How timely is it?

If a Web page is well designed, it ought to give the date when it was last updated. Note when that was, and ask yourself whether the facts are likely to have changed substantially since then. If the date is not given, be suspicious of any information that might be subject to change over time.

5. Are you still at the same place where you started?

When you are using the Web, there is one other thing to keep in mind that is not likely to be an issue when you use print material; that is the Web's **hypertext** nature. One click can

carry you to an entirely different Web site. At that point you must begin the evaluation process all over again!

FINDING GOOD WEB SITES

Web search engines cast a wide net. They pull in a lot of junk, along with the useful sites. It is often helpful to start your search for a good Web site in a context where someone has played the role of editor, deciding what the site was about and whether it was a useful source of information. Here at Georgia Southern, you have access to several search tools which will do this for you.

We at the Henderson Library have selected a number of sites that you might find useful for research in a variety of subjects. They are listed under “Zach’s Bookmarks” when you click on “How to Use the Library,” or in EagleSource. Some Web sites are also listed in GALILEO. Moreover, whenever you find a reliable Web site, it is likely to lead you to other reliable Web sites.