

Deciphering Fact from Fiction on the World Wide Web

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Scholars, students, and others throughout the world use the Internet to access information. Up to 60% of this information, however, is inaccurate or fraudulent according to several research studies. Unsuspecting users unintentionally perpetrate and continue mistruths, myths and lies. This phenomenon erodes the credibility of the Internet and of scholarly work produced from Internet resources. This potential crisis is explored and practical techniques to decipher fact from fiction are offered to concerned readers.

Ovierview

The Internet offers a remarkable universe of seemingly infinite information. Most is useful, while some is useless. Becoming a critical consumer, therefore, is one of the most important, and least talked about, ingredients to academically sound Internet use.

While an owner's manual accompanies most new products, the Internet is thrust on many unsuspecting souls with few instructions. In fact, anyone and everyone with the appropriate technology and an access point, can become connected and actively engaged in the world community. There are neither initiation rites nor membership fees. Age, race and gender prerequisites are absent. It's a nondiscriminatory and free society.

Participants are also invited to share their views with others through various websites. While international and national laws restrict absolute freedom, content censorship is limited to grossly inappropriate abuses. Internet community members, therefore, are free from substantial interference and direct accountability with enforced consequences.

Any contribution failing to violate the law, regardless of truth or bias, may be universally transmitted to everyone. Information derived from Internet sources is initially deemed suspect due to this phenomenon. The best and worst sites stand side by side with no indication of quality. Assessing and filtering the sites leads to academically and professionally responsible Internet use.

Multiple Internet sites and other media (i.e. books, magazines) tout ways to effectively navigate the information galaxy while seamlessly separating fact from fiction. (Most are useful, some are useless.) Many of the following suggestions are compiled from the best sources. Some are updated and expanded.

Combining several of the following suggestions in your assessment will enhance reliability. Websites failing two or more suggested criteria should be discarded. Those passing should be consulted often, liberally cited and added to your personal array of reputable Internet sites.

Suggestions

Author's Qualifications and Expertise

Opinions are like noses, everyone has one. All opinions are certainly respected, however, some opinions are more equal and valuable than others. For example, facing serious surgery, family members and friends will offer opinions if asked. The "opinion" most respected, however, will ultimately come from a Board certified and trusted surgeon. On the other hand, a respected auto mechanic will trump a surgeon's opinion on questions involving a car's faulty transmission. It's just common sense.

Assessing an author's qualifications, therefore, is necessary. Sometimes a hyperlink embedded within a web page titled "About Me" or some other similar heading will allow you to begin your discovery. Whether it's there or not, you need to go further. Type the name of the author into ask.com and google.com in three ways: the name in quotations; the name without quotations; and the name in quotations with a * between the first and last names. (The "*" designates any middle name or initial in Google only.)

This research will yield important biographical information, a list of prior publications or other pertinent information. If information is missing, inconsistent or incomplete, continue searching until you reach a defensible conclusion about the author's qualifications.

Once you have solidified the author's background (i.e. degrees earned, professional positions held), determine if the writing is within the author's expertise. Professors of Philosophy or Literature from Oxford University may hold impressive credentials, but are they the most qualified to offer recommendations on brain surgery? A doctorate earned from a prestigious university affirms expertise in a selected area, not in every discipline.

Remember, opinions are like noses . . . Only use the most verifiably qualified authors writing within their area(s) of expertise.

Accuracy

Facts are facts. Debating whether something is intentionally or unintentionally false or misleading is futile.

Credibility quickly unravels or soars as consistency is examined. Triangulating factual information through several reputable sources is one of the most accepted professional practices to determine accuracy. Use a variety of references (i.e. books, encyclopedias, professional organizations).

Furthermore, does the website include verifiable and comprehensive citations and bibliographies? What is the quality of these citations? Do they include recognized leaders and organizations in the given field of study? Is information cited from these sources quoted completely and accurately?

Finding statistics about the website can also assist in gauging accuracy, Type the URL into the search box of alexa.com. Results include subjective reviews, ownership data and a listing of other pages linked to this site. Sites with multiple linkages to it indicate a high level of confidence.

Objectivity

Competent authors sharing their expertise may be biased. The information presented may be technically true, but it may present only one side, incomplete or misleading propaganda.

Start with your own intuition. As you survey the content, does the author offer a balanced and moderate view, free from exaggerations and emotional extremes? Are statements reasonable, reality-based and compatible with other credible sources?

Next go to the heading labeled "Mission Statement" or "About Us." What insights can you glean from their statement? Is there primary purpose to promote only certain views (to the detriment of others)? Is their site designed to inform, entertain or sway opinion? Is their purpose aligned with your research objectives?

If a mission or similar statement is missing, or if you suspect incongruence between their vision and reality, go further. Look at the three letter suffix in the URL. This designates the URL's host. Here is a list of domains and appropriate uses: .edu for educational institutions; .com for commercially-sponsored sites; .gov for government resources; .biz for business organizations; .org for nonprofits; .net for networks; and .info for unrestricted use. Is the domain consistent with the information offered?

You can also trace the URL back to the sponsor. Begin at the right side of the URL and delete letters until you reach a slash (/). Press enter and review the information. Continue with this process until you delete all slashes. Remaining is the name and the site domain (i.e. walmart.com). Investigate further by entering this URL stem into a reputable search engine to continue your search exploration.

Currency

One of the most significant advantages of the Internet over other media is the opportunity to update information nearly instantaneously. Using outdated information, therefore, is totally unnecessary and inexcusable.

As you view the website, check when the page was created and when it was last updated. Recent updates are reassuring, however, they rarely reveal how much of the site was updated. So, you must go beyond these superficial date checks. Are dates within the website recent? Are citations and references current? Are all hyperlinks active and current?

Website Presentation

The most reliable, useful and popular websites share common characteristics. They are user friendly and organizationally uncluttered. Navigation buttons are logical and consistent throughout the site, graphics are rich, text is grammatically correct and free from unnecessary jargon and links to other sites are relevant and valuable.

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