Evaluating web pages

The Internet has revolutionised research. Instead of looking only at print resources, it is now possible to have fast and easy access to the best and the worst on the Web. This may make you think that the Internet is a better source of information than books and journals. In fact you need to be *more* careful with information found on the Web because anyone can set up a web page. In contrast, publishers of print materials (even those available online) carefully control and check what goes out under their name. The online databases available through the library are evaluated and selected by University librarians. Studies have shown that most people judge a website on its *look* rather than its *content.* Be careful not to fall into this trap.

Evaluation of web pages
Accuracy   • Who wrote the page? Is there information that allows you to contact the person or organisation?   • Is the author qualified to write this page? What other works has this author published on this topic? If they are qualified in the relevant area, the information is more likely to be reliable.   • Can the accuracy of the factual information presented be verified from other sources?   • Does the information include citations to related or quoted sources? Are quotes attributed to specific commentators, researchers or institutions?
Authority   • Check the domain of the site. What institution or organisation publishes this page?   • Is there a way of verifying the publisher's legitimacy – a postal address or phone number?   • What credentials are listed for the author(s)? Are they known experts in *this* field? Do they work for a recognised institution? Are credentials relevant to the topic?   • Who else links to this page?
Objectivity   • *Why* was the site created? To provide information as a public service? To promote the ideas of a particular political, cultural or religious group? To advertise a product?   • Is the information free of advertising? If there is advertising on the page, is it clearly differentiated from the information content?   • Who is the intended audience for this information?
Currency   • When was the page produced? Check for a date on the home page.   • When was it last updated? Look for copyright or update information at the bottom of the page.   • How current are any hyperlinks or citations?
Coverage   • Is there an indication that the page has been completed, and is not still under construction?   • If there is a print equivalent to the web page, is there a clear indication of whether the entire work is available on the web or only parts of it?   • Is the information that is freely available complete, or is it a sample of something you have to pay for? If you do have to pay, is the full information available through a reputable database or library?

Adapted from Jim Kapoun 1998, *Teaching undergrads web evaluation - a guide for library instruction*.

Analysing a web address or URL

Think critically about the sources of the information you find on the Internet. You can tell a lot about whether an internet site is reliable or appropriate for your needs by analysing the URL (universal resource locator). The main part of the name (usually appears first, or straight after www) tells you the name of the organisation or host of the site (e.g. *monash*.edu or *monash*.gov.au).

The **domain** (usually one of the last parts of the main URL) tells you the nature of the organisation:
- **.ac.uk** or **.ac.nz** = academic (in Britain and New Zealand and similarly for a few other countries)
- **.biz** = business (usually commercial entities, but can be registered by anyone)
- **.edu** = academic (in Australia, USA and others; note that this can include personal pages of staff and students at the institution)
- **.com** = commercial (**.co.uk, .co.nz** in Britain and New Zealand respectively)
- **.gov** = government
- **.info** = Information – but anyone can register a .info domain so be careful.
- **.int** = international treaty-based organisations (e.g. NATO)
- **.mil** = military
- **.org** = non-profit organisation
- **.net** = network – anyone can register a .net domain.

It is important to be aware of who is providing the information, for example: information on research into smoking and lung cancer might be more reliable if it comes from an **.edu** site than if it is on a **.com** site related to the tobacco industry, or a **.org** site from an anti-tobacco group.

Sometimes it is important to consider the **country** in which the domain is registered (and pages are likely to be written), particularly where this is likely to relate to political perspectives, availability of resources or particular systems (e.g. health or education systems). Country codes appear at the end of the main URL and consist of two letters.
Common country codes:
.au = Australia
.cn = China
.my = Malaysia
.nz = New Zealand
.uk = United Kingdom
.za = South Africa

Absence of a specific country code suggests either registration in the USA, or an international entity (e.g. monash.edu).

> **Note that it is important to evaluate the *relevance* of the material on the site to your particular context. Also consider if more appropriate or academic sources are available for the same information. The first source you find isn't always the best one to use!**

If you need help with finding reliable information there are many resources available:
- *Library guides* contain searching and referencing information relevant to your subject or common academic requirements: guides.lib.monash.edu/
- *Developing a search strategy* (monash.edu/library/skills/resources/tutorials/searching/) is an online tutorial to help you search academic databases effectively.
- Useful citations in reading lists, unit guides, lecture notes, or articles you have already found.
- Visit a library and speak to a librarian.