The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, or, Why It's a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources

Last updated on
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Evaluation Criteria

| Accuracy | Authority | Objectivity | Currency | Coverage |

I. Accuracy

Is the information reliable and error-free?
Is there an editor or someone who verifies/checks the information?

Rationale

1. Anyone can publish anything on the Web
2. Unlike traditional print resources, web resources rarely have editors or fact-checkers
3. Currently, no web standards exist to ensure accuracy

II. Authority

Is there an author? Is the page signed?
Is the author qualified? An expert?
Who is the sponsor?
Is the sponsor of the page reputable? How reputable?
Is there a link to information about the author or the sponsor?
If the page includes neither a signature nor indicates a sponsor, is there any other way to determine its origin?

Look for a header or footer showing affiliation.
Look at the URL. http://www.fbi.gov
Look at the domain. .edu, .com, .ac.uk, .org, .net

Rationale

1. See number 1 above
2. It's often hard to determine a web page's authorship
3. Even if a page is signed, qualifications aren't usually given
4. Sponsorship isn't usually indicated
III. Objectivity

- Does the information show a minimum of bias?
- Is the page designed to sway opinion?
- Is there any advertising on the page?

Rationale

1. Frequently the goals of the sponsors/authors aren't clearly stated.
2. Often the Web serves as a virtual "Hyde Park Corner", a soapbox.

IV. Currency

- Is the page dated?
- If so, when was the last update?
- How current are the links? Have some expired or moved?

Rationale

1. Publication or revision dates not always provided.
2. If a date is provided, it may have various meanings. For example, 
   - It may indicate when the material was first written
   - It may indicate when the material was first placed on the Web
   - It may indicate when the material was last revised

V. Coverage

- What topics are covered?
- What does this page offer that is not found elsewhere?
- What is its intrinsic value?
- How in-depth is the material?

Rationale

1. Web coverage often differs from print coverage
2. Frequently, it's difficult to determine the extent of coverage
3. Sometimes web information is just-for-fun or outright silliness