Evaluating Information Sources

Background Information
The availability of information has increased dramatically in the last few years. I’m confident many of you use Google and Wikipedia frequently. You are now in college and are becoming professionals. As a professional you will be held accountable for the accuracy of all information you use or provide to others. You must now be much more selective in evaluating information sources.

Anyone is free to post anything they wish on the web with essentially no review. The general public may post any information they wish on Wikipedia. Therefore the web is generally the least accurate source of information. However, there are differences in the reliability of information within the web. The endings of websites give you some information about the source. “.com” indicates the site is commercial or for profit. “.org” indicates the site is a non-profit organization. However, The organization may have a bias or agenda. “.edu” indicates a school. These sites may include professors’ lecture notes as well as students’ sites. “.gov” indicates the U.S. federal government is responsible for the site. Some reliable data bases and information are available through government websites such as the USGS or NASA.

Books, newspapers and magazines are edited. This means they are reviewed for proper grammar and writing style. The authors are expected to exhibit journalistic integrity. In other words they are expected to use reliable sources. However, these publications are frequently targeted at the general public and are not reviewed by experts in the content subject area. These types of publications generally review and report on research conducted by someone other than the author. These types of publications frequently also publish editorials in which the author expresses their opinion.

The most accurate source of information is from journals that are "peer-reviewed” or “refereed”. The terms "peer-review" or "refereed" refer to a journal’s policy of having experts or a review board critique an article before publishing it. Peer-review insures that journal articles are considered valid contributions by scholars in a specific field. Peer-reviewed journals primarily publish original research. In other words the author is reporting the results of their own research. However, such journals may also occasionally publish articles which review previous research on a current issue or articles expressing a scientist’s opinion of a current issue. Research articles in peer-reviewed journals are written for specialist in a specific field of study and may be difficult for the general public to read and understand.

Basic Criteria for Evaluating Sources
Ask the following questions about your sources, whether they are in paper or on the Web.

<p>| Credible: | Who is responsible for the information? Is contact information provided for the author or source of the information? Who is the sponsor or publisher of the item? Is any information provided concerning the qualifications of the sponsor or publisher? Would this sponsor be expected to be knowledgeable on this subject? Are there any conflicts of interest? |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accurate:</th>
<th>Is the information correct and reliable and how do you know? Is the origin of the information provided or referenced? Is information cited correctly?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Objective:</td>
<td>Is there a bias? Is the material designed to sway your opinion in some way? Is it propaganda or advertising? Be on the alert for words indicating opinions or appealing to the emotions. Does the site have more images or text and is the purpose of the images to inform or to arouse emotions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage:</td>
<td>How thoroughly does it cover a topic? How much of the topic does it cover? Does it add anything new to the field, or is it a summary of others' research? Is the coverage balanced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience:</td>
<td>To whom is the author writing? Is it fellow scholars, non-experts who have a high level of knowledge about the subject, or the general public?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current:</td>
<td>How old is the information? Has it been revised? Has the webpage been updated lately? Are the links current?</td>
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Visit the Renfro Library’s website for more information on evaluating and finding information sources. From the Renfro Library’s “help” pull-down menu, click on “evaluating websites” and “scholarly journals versus popular magazines” for helpful information on evaluating sources. For helpful information on finding useful sources from the Renfro Library’s “help” pull-down menu click on the “research strategy” link.

**Complete the following assignment and bring the completed assignment to lab March 30. We will discuss your answers as a class on March 30.**

1. First read each of the following sources and answer the six questions below about each of the sources listed (both websites and articles).
2. Second rank the following sources (including both the websites and articles) from most to least credible in your opinion and explain why and how you selected the order you did. Include both the articles and websites in the same ranking. I am more interested in why and how you placed the articles in the order you did than in the actual order you chose. I expect you to read at least the abstract, introduction and conclusion sections of each article. You should base your evaluation and ranking of the articles on both their content and the source of the website or article, and explain in writing how you made your decision. Be specific. If you think an article is biased or trying to persuade you in one direction or another, what words or statements make you think this? You should explore websites sufficiently to know who is responsible for the website, how the site is funded, and something about the background of the people writing the information on the website. You should consider the qualifications and biases of both the publisher and authors of printed articles and websites. Your ranking and discussion can be hand written. However, I must be able to read your
handwriting. Your written discussion explaining why you ranked the articles in the order you did should be at least 600 words in length. Your written explanations should clearly demonstrate that you have read the articles.

Questions to answer for each source (both websites and articles)
1. Who is the author of the source? List any information provided concerning contact information or qualifications of the author? If no information is given try googling the author’s name.
2. Who published the source? List any information provided concerning the contact information or qualifications of the publisher? If no information is given try googling the publisher.
3. Is the publisher a for profit or not for profit organization? If the publisher is a not for profit organization does it advocate for a specific position? Are you asked to donate or sign up for anything?
4. Is the source of information cited or referenced and if so is the method of citation standard and correct?
5. List any words or phrases in the source that appeal to your emotions or indicate an opinion is being expressed.
6. When was the source published or updated.

WEB sites:
1. http://www.epa.gov/climatechange


Full text for the following articles may be found by
- Clicking on the “library” link in the upper right corner of the Mars Hill University homepage,
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