

Smart Web Searching

Evaluating Information on the Internet

The Internet contains billions of web pages loaded with information. However, it can be difficult to see how reliable that information is. Anyone can create a web page and post whatever information they wish. It can be like walking into a library where all the pages from all the books are scattered across the floor. How would you know who is the author, and if the information is fiction or nonfiction, impartial or biased, out-of-date or new?

Below are some ideas to help you determine the reliability of information found on the Internet. Not all of these techniques can be applied to every site, but altogether they will help you to be more discerning about information on the web.

Before we get started, a good place to begin learning is to look at some web sites that are misleading, either maliciously or not. Visit these web sites to see what you find:

- <http://www.dhmo.org/>
- <http://www.martinlutherking.org/> – as opposed to <http://www.thekingcenter.org/>
- <http://www.whitehouse.org/> – as opposed to <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>
- <http://www.gatt.org/> – as opposed to <http://www.wto.org/>
- <http://www.dmv.org>

Examine the web address

Before you even look at the content of a web page, you can learn a lot about the site by simply examining the web address or URL. The web address can be seen at the top of your web browser in the address bar, or many times you can see it as part of your search results.

The parts of the web address can be seen in the example below:

<http://www.northcanton.sparcc.org/~technology/Tutorials/index.html>

http://	www.northcanton.sparcc.org	/~technology/Tutorials/index.html
This is the protocol which tells the web browser what type of page it is.	This is the domain name which is registered to a particular company, organization, or person.	This is the path to the actual web page on the web server, which may be inside of several subfolders.

Here are some items to consider concerning the web address:

What is the domain of the web site?

Each web site has to have a domain in its name that helps to classify the site, such as “.com” or “.org” or “.edu”. Some domains are restricted to certain types of groups. For example:

- .gov – This will be an official government site
- .edu – This will be an educational or academic site, such as a college or university
- .com and .biz – This will be a commercial site
- .org and .net – This can be any type of web site (Note: the misleading examples above are all .org sites)

In general, information should be more trustworthy on a .gov or .edu site. Although most .org sites are perfectly fine, that is a domain that is more open to misuse.

Is it a personal web site?

Although personal web sites may contain valid information, they are of course more open to misuse, since the information is not necessarily being approved by others. How can you tell if a web site is someone's personal page?

- Most blogs are personal pages – If the web address contains “myspace”, “xanga”, “blogger”, “blogspot”, or such, then it is a blog. A blog is someone's personal online “diary” and may not be accurate.
- Other words to look out for – Other personal pages will often have words in the address such as “users” or “members”, or they will have symbols including the tilde “~” or percent sign “%”.

Find out who owns or creates the site

Unfortunately web sites are not like books. They do not have a page at the front that lists author, publisher, and date. However, there are ways you can investigate the site author or owner:

Use Whois

Every web site has to be registered and owned by someone. “Whois” is an Internet service that tells you who owns a web site (as in: “Who is” the owner of this site.) There are many Whois sites available for use, but one good example is:

- <http://www.easywhois.com/>

Once you go to the site, just type in (or copy and paste) the address of the web site you wish to investigate. However, do not include the “http” or “www” part of the address. You will then get information on who owns it. You may then want to do a Google search on the person or company that owns the site to learn more about them.

- For example “martinlutherking.org” comes back as being owned by Stormfront Inc, which is actually a white supremacist group.
- Also, “gatt.org” is owned by a guy named Andy Bichlbaum from New York, whereas “wto.org” is owned by the UN International Computing Centre in Geneva.

Look for author info on the web site

Sometimes information about the author can be found on the web site itself. You can look for helpful links such as:

- About us
- Contact us
- Copyright notice
- Biography

Work your way “upstream”

If the web page you are reading has a long web address, you may be able to learn more about the author or owner by deleting parts of the address. Start from the right-hand side and remove part of the address back to the first forward slash “/”. Now press “Enter” on your keyboard to load the site at this new address. As you move up each level you may find out more about the web site. An example of working “upstream” may look like:

- <http://www.northcanton.sparcc.org/~technology/Tutorials/index.html>
- <http://www.northcanton.sparcc.org/~technology/Tutorials/>
- <http://www.northcanton.sparcc.org/~technology/>
- <http://www.northcanton.sparcc.org/>

Examine older versions of the web site

Web pages change over time. Older versions of a web site may tell you more about the purpose of the site. There are a few ways to see these old versions:

Use archive.org

Archive.org keeps copies of web sites from as far back as 1996. To use this service go to <http://www.archive.org/> and type in (or copy and paste) the address of the web site you wish to view. You will now get a listing of dates when archived snapshots were taken. Click on any date to see the old version.

Use Google's cached pages option

Google also does archiving of web sites. When you do a web search with Google, along with your results you also get a "Cached" link. Clicking that link takes you to the most recent copy of that site that Google has recorded. While nowhere as extensive as archive.org, this service can still be useful, especially for sites not included at archive.org.

Look at who links to the site

If a man can be judged by the quality of his friends, then a web site may be judged by what links to it. You can learn a lot about a web site by seeing what other web sites point to it. By investigating this you can read what others are saying about the web site and what kind of companies, organizations, or people find it valuable.

Most major search engines allow you to run such a search. Typically you can just add "**link:**" in front of the web address. For example you could search for "link:www.martinlutherking.org". Search engines that allow for this type of search include:

- Google – <http://www.google.com>
- Yahoo – <http://www.yahoo.com>
- AltaVista – <http://www.altavista.com>

Common sense questions

Beyond technology solutions, it is always a good idea to simply apply common sense to the web site. Although the questions below are no guarantee of misinformation, they may warrant suspicious and a closer look:

- Does the information appear to be biased?
- Is the site trying to sell you something? Are there many advertisements to buy their product?
- Are there obvious grammatical or spelling errors?
- Is the content humorous, satirical, or in the nature of a parody?
- Are valid sources cited that you can click on to see first-hand?

Search for more trustworthy sites

Instead of trying to determine the validity of a questionable site, you may want to improve your search in the first place. Although Google is a powerful search engine, by default its results are unfiltered. There are other ways and other sites to use when searching for information which will yield much safer results.

Improve your Google search

One way to improve your results is to use Google's advanced search feature to limit the results to more reputable sources.

- Go to <http://www.google.com>
- Then click on the "**Advanced Search**" link.
- Now find the box labeled "**Domain**" and type in the domain you wish to search.
- A good search might be "**.edu**" which will only return matches from colleges and universities

Another option at Google is their “**Scholar**” search. This is a special Google search page that only searches through “peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and articles, from academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories, universities and other scholarly organizations”. Simply go to <http://scholar.google.com> to begin your search.

Use other search engines

As popular as it is, Google is not the only way to search. There are many other sites which search a smaller but more authoritative repository of information. Here are some examples:

- **Infohio** – All teachers, students, and parents in Ohio have free access to Infohio at <http://www.infohio.org>. If you do not have the password to access this site, please contact your school librarian. Through Infohio you can search:
 - **Encyclopedia Britannica** – Over 100,000 articles plus an atlas, dictionary, images, videos, and more.
 - **EBSCOhost** – Full-text articles from over 6,000 magazines and newspapers.
 - **AccessScience** – Over 7,100 articles on science and technology.
 - **American National Biography** – More than 18,000 articles about famous Americans.
 - And many more
- **Answers.com** – This web site (at <http://www.answers.com>) limits its searching to high-quality sources including Houghton Mifflin, Columbia University Press, Thomson Gale, Britannica, Barron's, Computer Desktop Encyclopedia, and more.
- **Ask.com** – This web site (at <http://www.ask.com>) used to be Ask Jeeves. However it has gotten quite an overhaul and is now very student-friendly. When you run a search at ask.com the results are not based merely upon popularity of the links, but instead based upon how “experts” rank them. Additionally ask.com helps you with your search by offering additional search terms to narrow your search, expand your search, and see related searches.

Learn more

There are many excellent web sites that provide additional help for evaluating information from the Internet. Below are a few examples to investigate:

- Evaluating Information on the Web
<http://www.lib.flinders.edu.au/services/infolit/web/eval.html>
- Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply & Questions to Ask
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>
- Bibliography on evaluating web information
<http://www.lib.vt.edu/help/instruct/evaluate/evalbiblio.html>

Questions, comments, concerns? Email me at:

ecurts@neo.rr.com or tech@northcanton.sparcc.org

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