

Evaluating information from the Web

So much information is available via the Web. It is a useful tool, but should be treated the same as any other book, magazine or database you use for your research, that is, be critical about what you use and how you use it.

The 'Free Web' versus the 'Deep Web'

When you use a search engine such as Google ... you are searching the Free Web. Google and other search engines collect data by spiders that trawl over the free web.

The Deep Web (or Invisible Web) is approximately 550 times larger than the information that can be located on the Free Web. This material cannot be found by search engines, such as Google.

What would you expect to find on the Deep Web? The material found here is not indexed by search engines, e.g. library databases and pages that belong to private networks and organisations. Therefore, you need to become familiar with the Library's databases, where a User Name and Password gives you access to material you will not find on the Free Web.

Become a critical researcher on the Free Web

Of course you want to use the information found on Internet and a few quick tips will make sure you are using reliable and accurate information.

Before starting to read or download information check the URL. The domain will tell you if it is a more likely to be a reliable place for you to search. For example the following domains can usually be trusted:

- .edu Educational institutions
- .gov Government
- .org Organisation or association

If you saw the domain .com this would tell you straight away that this is a commercial site and any information found here should be treated with caution.

According to a recent study the following are largest databases in the world. (Focus Inc., 2012). How many have content available by searching on the Free Web?

- Library of Congress
- CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)
- Amazon
- YouTube
- Lexus Nexus [Acquires information about people in America. This data is then sold to the highest bidders, including the American government]
- Sprint [A large telecommunications company]
- Google
- AT&T [The U.S.'s oldest telecommunications company]
- NERSC (National Energy Research Scientific Computing Centre)
- World Data Centre for Climate [Operated by the Max Plank Institute for Meteorology and the German Climate Centre]

Evaluating information from the Web

Apply the following checklist to what you use online

Authority

- Who is responsible for the page? Why has the site been created?
Check the "About Us" link.
- Can you contact the site online, or via an address if you require additional information
- Is the site or the person writing the material qualified to write about the topic?

Accuracy

- Can you verify that factual or statistical information found on the site?
- Is it very clear who is responsible for the accuracy of the information?
- If it includes statistical information in a graph or chart is easy to understand with clear labels and headings?
- When you check with other print and online sources does there appear to be mistakes in the data on the site.

Objectivity

- Is the information provided free as a public service?
- Is it free of advertising?
- If the site does include advertising is it separate from the main information presented on the page?
- Is it free from bias? Who has created the site and for what purpose?

Currency

- Can you verify when the page was written?
- When the page was first placed on the web?
- If the page has been revised, updated or edited?
- Are there any dead links on the page
- Is there any other way to check if the material is updated frequently?

Coverage

- Is the page completed or does it appear to be still under construction?
- If there is a print equivalent to the Web page, does it indicate that the online version is a complete or abridged version?
- Does it cover the subject adequately?

Five criteria for evaluating Web pages, 2010, Olin & Uris Libraries, <http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/webcrit.html>, viewed 4 December 2014

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Top 10 Largest Databases in the world, 2012, Focus Inc. <http://realitypod.com/2012/03/10-largest-databases-of-the-world/> Downloaded 6 December 2012

Sites you can use to find out more about searching the web:

Harvard Guide to Using Sources

<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70847&pageid=icb.page346375>

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<http://www.lib.vt.edu/instruct/evaluate/>

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