do-it-yourself: Evaluating Web Sources

1. **Step 1: What can the URL tell you?**

   - **[.org] — Advocacy**
     The primary purpose of this type of page is to influence public opinion. The .org extension signifies an organization. A single person or group may be responsible for this page. Beware of biases/opinions! Example: [http://www.greenparty.org](http://www.greenparty.org)

   - **[.com] — Business**
     The primary purpose of a commercial page is to promote or sell products or services. Example: Amazon.com [http://www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

   - **[.com] — Entertainment**
     The primary purpose of an entertainment page is to provide amusement and enjoyment. The URL may have a variety of endings. Example: the Internet Movie Database [http://www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

   - **[.com] — News**
     The primary purpose of this page is to provide current information on regional, state and local events. Example: The New York Times [http://www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

   - **[.gov] — Informational**
     The primary purpose of an informational page is providing factual information such as census data or research reports. The .gov extension stands for a United States Federal Government agency. The information on these sites is regarded as credible. Example: the National Gallery of Art [http://www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov)

   - **[.edu] — Informational, Educational**
     The primary purpose of these pages is to provide information about or by educational institutions. The information on these sites is regarded as credible. Example: Mary Baldwin College [http://www.mbc.edu](http://www.mbc.edu)

   - **[~] — Personal**
     Personal pages are diverse and may be devoted to a hobby or favorite activity. The URL may have a variety of endings, but they usually include a “tilde” ~ followed by a name. Example: [http://www.mbc.edu/~janesmith](http://www.mbc.edu/~janesmith). These pages may not be maintained as strictly as institutional pages. Be sure to check their date.

2. **Step 2: Authority**

   - Who is responsible for this website? _____________________________
   - What are the author’s qualifications/credentials?

   Scan the web page for links that say About, About Us, Background, Biography, etc. If you do not see these types of links, go to the web site’s homepage. You can do this by cutting back the URL to each “/” and pressing enter.

   Look for the name or organization responsible for the page. Try doing a search for their name in Google. If the page seems to be the work of a hobbyist, or if you can’t find the author’s credentials, think carefully before using the page as a source.
Step 3: Purpose and Objectivity

- Is the purpose of the website clearly stated?  
  YES  NO

- Can you determine if there is a bias or opinion to the information presented?  
  YES  NO  CAN’T TELL

- Is the purpose of the website to broadcast an opinion?  
  YES  NO

- Is there advertising on the page?  
  YES  NO

Advertising might indicate the content of the page is designed to sell you something.

Why Opinions/ Biases Matter:
Biases and opinions are particular slants or prejudices in the content of media that are intentionally or unintentionally communicated. This could mean that there are important facts missing or that you’re not getting the full story. Make sure to watch out for subtle biases which may not be advertised.

Step 4: Content and Coverage

Choose your own adventure:

- How comprehensive is the web site? (choose one)
  a. The information on the page is new to me
  b. The information on the page corresponds to my previous knowledge on the topic
  c. The information on the page consist primarily of links to other websites

If you answered “c,” this website might useful in the direction it provides to other potentially useful websites rather than its information content.

If you answered “a” or “b”:

- Are there references or bibliographies posted on the page?  
  YES  NO

- Is the information on the page based on research or documentation?  
  YES  NO

If you answered “YES” to both questions, check the validity of the bibliographies/references.

If you answered “NO” to both questions, be sure to compare several different sources to make sure the information on the page is accurate. With statistical information, this is especially important.

- Is the website free of grammatical and spelling errors?  
  YES  NO

If you answered “NO”, this reflects poorly on the credibility of the website.

Step 5: Currency

This web site was last updated on:______________________

Do not use factual or statistical information from an undated web site. A recently dated web site may indicate the information is current.

QUESTIONS? ask@mbc.edu