

# EVALUATING WEBSITES

## Why does it matter?

The internet is a great place to find information and there's so much of it out there! But it's easy for *anyone* to put up information on a website, even if they don't actually understand the topic they're writing about. Businesses or people with an agenda may put up only the information that supports their cause and ignore any information against it. Published books and journals like you find in the library have usually had to pass editors who weed out wrong information, but a lot of the information on the internet has never been checked for accuracy or quality.

Because of this, it is important that you take a sceptical look at all the information you get from the internet to make sure it really is true by doing the following checks.

## Is the information accurate and good quality?

Questions to ask:

- **Does the information agree with what you've learnt from other sources?** If not, does it have good justification for doing so?
- **Is there a reference list?** Where did the author get their information? There should be footnotes or a reference list so that you can see where they got their ideas from, just as in a scholarly article. (Newspapers are an exception.) Are the references accurate? Are they real? Do they reference reliable sources?
- **Are there links to other resources on the topic?** Are these useful? Do the links work?
- **Is the information biased?** Do all the references and links go to other sites stating exactly the same views? Good quality information should acknowledge other points of view.
- **Is it well edited?** Or are there lots of spelling and grammar mistakes, poor formatting, or broken links? If the text is poorly written, then the website hasn't been edited well; this may mean that information hasn't been checked either.

## Who wrote it?

Can you tell who wrote the page? If there's no author, it is less likely to be reliable. If the page has authors, who are they? A Professor from Harvard University probably knows more about business strategy than a student from the local high school! You want information from an expert, not just a rant from someone who holds a strong (and not necessarily accurate) opinion.

Questions to ask:

- **Who wrote the page?** Are they qualified to write on this topic?
- **Is the author associated with a reputable organisation?** (e.g. a well known university or a government organisation)
- **Is the publisher reliable?** Do they have a good reputation?
- **Is contact information for the author or organisation available?** People who don't want to be contacted are often frauds.

## Is the information objective?

Questions to ask:

- **What is the purpose of the website?** To provide scholarly information? To educate? To advertise or force you to change your beliefs? Advertising sites are usually biased.

- **Does the site provide objective information?** Factual information should be provided in a balanced way to show multiple viewpoints. **Or does the site offer subjective information?** Lots of opinions which are not backed up by references and genuine facts do not make for quality information. A website for personal, political or ideological opinion may be highly biased.
  - **Are the arguments well-supported?** Are they presented in a balanced, rational manner? If they're not, the information is probably biased.
  - Are there lots of sponsored links from people trying to sell goods or ideas about your topic? They may be trying to influence your opinion, which makes them biased.
- 

## Is the information up-to-date?

If you are working on a topic that requires recent information then you need a website that has been updated recently. Even if you are doing an older topic, a recently updated website is more likely to be accurate because someone has hopefully corrected any mistakes.

Questions to ask:

- **When was the website last updated?**
  - Is the site well-maintained? **Do the links work?** If the links don't work, the site hasn't been updated recently.
  - **Does the reference list include current information?** If the newest reference is twenty years old, then the information is probably out of date.
- 

## Predatory publishers

"Open access" journals are available for anyone to read if the author pays a fee, so you can read them directly online. Many of these are legitimate, peer-reviewed journals and make excellent references for your assignments. Unfortunately, there are some journals which use the open access system as a scam to make money. These journals are usually not peer-reviewed (that is, they haven't been edited to pick up mistakes) and may be blatantly wrong or plagiarised. Referencing one of these journals in your assignment will not look good!

How to avoid fake journals:

- **Use the library databases.** The journals included in the databases are screened to keep out predatory journals. Google Scholar, on the other hand, may include these journals because it tries to include everything.
  - **Don't use research from journals on Beall's list:**  
<http://scholarlyoa.com/2015/01/02/bealls-list-of-predatory-publishers-2015/>
  - **Identify fake journals.** They:
    - Promise to accept or publish articles in just a few weeks (it takes longer than this to edit an article).
    - Have author fees but don't tell you what they are.
    - Have a journal name that is almost the same as a well-respected journal.
    - Give false information about location or editors.
- 

Need more information? Contact us:

### Library

IPU New Zealand Tertiary Institute  
57 Aokautere Drive  
Palmerston North 4472  
New Zealand

Tel: 06 350 2855

Email: [library@ipu.ac.nz](mailto:library@ipu.ac.nz)

Web: <http://www.ipu.ac.nz/library.html>

Last updated: January 2016