**UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL ABIERTA
DIRECCIÓN DE INVESTIGACIONES Y POSTGRADO**

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF INFORMATION SOURCES

Critical Evaluation of Information Sources

True or false:
Information that is published can be trusted because someone other than the author - an editor, a peer reviewer, a publisher, an institution - has reviewed it first.

Most would probably agree with this, except perhaps when referring to the Internet (where many would probably disagree). In reality the world of information is rarely so black and white, but rather a variety of shades of gray. Consider the following:

- In the mid-1990s, a story started circulating around the Internet about the Oregon Department of Transportation's attempts to use dynamite to dispose of a dead whale carcass. This story happens to be true, incredible as it may seem, although it happened in 1970.
- Also in the mid-1990s, a physics professor named Alan Sokal submitted a nonsense article to Social Text, a peer-reviewed journal of cultural studies, which subsequently published the article. He revealed the prank soon after in another journal.
- A web site that appeared to be sponsored by the Mankato Area Chamber & Convention Bureau extolled the various area attractions, which included whale watching on the Minnesota River (okay, let's just think about that one for a minute). In reality, the web site was created in 1999 by a professor at Mankato State University to underscore the importance of critically evaluating information found on the Internet.

These examples are intended to underscore that there is no substitute for personal evaluation of information sources, whether in print, online, or in some other form. The questions below are ones you might ask about an information source - article in a journal, newspaper, or encyclopedia, book, web site, pamphlet, government document, food container, poster, interview subject, or any other

source upon which you're relying - in order to determine its credibility and suitability for your particular project. Not all questions will apply in all situations, and not all responses need to be positive ones - this is not a scorecard. The questions are merely intended to help you think critically about information sources.

	Ask the Questions	Determine the Answers

Authority	• Who is the author?	• Most common places to find authors' names listed:
		   o Title page (book or report)
		   o Title information at top of first page (articles, book chapters)
		   o End of the article (encyclopedias)
		   o Top or bottom of page (web pages)

	• What are the author's credentials?
	   o Relevant university degree
	   o Institutional affiliation (where does he or she work?)
	   o Relevant field or employment experience
	   o Past writings
		• Examine the item for information about the author
		• Look in biographical sources
		• Look in directories, e.g.
		   o Who's Who
		   o National Faculty Directory
		• Search the web for the author's home page
		• Search article indexes and the online catalog for other works by the author

	• What is the author's reputation among his/her peers?
	   o Cited in articles, books or bibliographies on the topic
	   o Mentioned in your textbook or by your professor
		• Look in annual reviews
		• Use citation indexes to find articles citing your author
		   o Web of Science (Social Science Citation Index and Science Citation Index)
		   o Arts & Humanities Search

	• Who is the publisher?	• Look in directories, e.g.

	o Commercial, trade, institutional, other o Known for quality and/or scholarly publications o Basic values or goals o Specialization o Editorial board o Blind review process	o Writer's Market o Literary Marketplace o Directory of Corporate Affiliations • Search the web for the publisher's web site • Look for editorial guidelines or author instructions in journals or on the publisher's web site
	• Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization? o Organizational mission o Basic values or goals o National or international o Membership	• Search the web for the organization's web site • Look in directories, e.g. o The Encyclopedia of Associations o Research Centers Directory
Objectivity	• Does the author state the goals for this publication? o Inform, explain, educate o Advocate o Persuade or dissuade o Sell a product or service o Serve as a soapbox	• Read the foreword, preface, abstract and/or introduction
	• Does the author exhibit a particular bias? o Commitment to a point of view o Acknowledgement of bias o Presentation of facts and arguments for both sides of a controversial issue o Language free of emotion-arousing words and bias	• Read the abstract and/or introduction • Examine the work for o Inflammatory language o Images or graphic styles (e.g., text in color or boldface type) to persuade you of the author's point of view o Propaganda o Author's arguments or supporting facts o Author's conclusions o Bibliography that

		points of view
	• Is the viewpoint of the author's affiliation reflected in the message or content? o Organization's (e.g., government, university, business, association) point of view on the topic being discussed o Organization's mission and activities o Advertising is clearly labelled o Benefits to organization	• Search the web for the organization's web site • Look in directories, e.g. o The Encyclopedia of Associations o Research Centers Directory
	• Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched? o Reasonable assumptions and conclusions o Arguments and conclusions supported by evidence o Opposing points of view addressed o Opinions not disguised as facts o Authoritative sources cited	• Verify facts and statistics with a reliable source • Examine cited sources for authority and objectivity
Quality	• Is the information well-organized? o Logical structure o Main points clearly presented o Main ideas unified by overarching idea o Text flows well (not choppy or stilted) o Author's argument is not repetitive	• Look at the headings to indicate structure • Look for agreement among reviews o Magazines for Libraries o Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory o Book reviews o Internet Scout Report
	• Has the author used good grammar? • Are there spelling or typographical errors?	• Read carefully for errors
	• Are the graphics (images, tables, charts, diagrams) appropriate and clearly presented? o Clearly labelled o Descriptive title o Understandable without explanatory text	• Consider other ways to present the information
	• Is the information complete and accurate?	• Verify facts and statistics

	- Facts and results agree with your own knowledge of the subject - Facts and results agree with those of other specialists in the field - Documents sources - Describes methodology - Addresses theories and facts that may negate the main thesis - Avoids questionable assumptions	with a reliable source • Examine cited sources for authority and objectivity
Coverage	• Does the work update other sources?	• Compare publication dates and content to other sources you have found
	• Does it substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information?	• You should seek out multiple points of view and include a diversity of sources and ideas
	• Have you found enough information to support your arguments?	• Look for gaps in your arguments and evidence - Facts - Statistics - Evidence
Currency	• When was it published?	• Look for a publication or copyright date on the - Title page (books, journals) - Reverse of the title page (books) - Cover (journals, magazines, newspapers) - Table of contents (journals, magazines) - Bottom of the page (web sites) • Dates on web pages may indicate - When the page was created - When the page was published on the web - When the page was last revised

	• Is your topic one that requires current information?	• Topic areas requiring the most up-to-date information may include ○ Science ○ Medicine ○ Current events
	• Has this source been revised, updated, or expanded in a subsequent edition?	• Search catalogs and other databases for more recent editions ○ Worldcat ○ Books In Print ○ Amazon.com
Relevance	• Does the work address your research question or meet the requirments of your assignment?	• Review your research question and/or assignment
	• Is the content appropriate for your research topic or assignment? ○ Scholarly vs. popular ○ Fact vs. opinion ○ Format/medium (e.g., book, journal, government report, web site, etc.) ○ Subject coverage ○ Language ○ Time period ○ Geographical area ○ Audience ○ Primary (e.g., raw data, diaries, literature, photographs, first-hand accounts of an event, research reports, etc.) vs. secondary (information that has been analyzed and interpreted, e.g., literary criticism, most books, review of an art show or play, etc.) vs. tertiary (sources that compile, analyze and digest secondary sources, e.g., encyclopedias, CQ Researcher)	• Check the table of contents or scan the subheadings • Read the preface, abstract, introduction, and/or conclusion • Look for footnotes or endnotes and/or a bibliography • Look for reviews ○ Magazines for Libraries ○ Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory ○ Book reviews ○ Internet Scout Report

Further Reading

Ciolek, T.M. (1996). *The six quests for the electronic grail: Current approaches to information quality in WWW resources.* Retrieved 30 October 2004 from http://www.ciolek.com/PAPERS/six-quests1996.html

Standler, R.B. (2004, May 25). *Evaluating credibility of information on the Internet.* Retrieved 30 October 2004 from http://www.rbs0.com/credible.pdf

Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab. (2004). *The web credibility project.* Retrieved 30 October 2004 from http://credibility.stanford.edu/

Tillman, H.N. (2003, March). *Evaluating quality on the net.* Retrieved 30 October 2004 from http://www.hopetillman.com/findqual.html

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the many librarians who have tread this complex ground before me; I reviewed dozens of guides on evaluation sources in the preparation of this one. Some of the best sites I found are listed here:

- Critically Analyzing Information Sources (Cornell University)
- Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply & Questions to Ask (UC Berkeley)
- Evaluating Web Resources (Jan Alexander and Marsha Ann Tate, Widener University)
- Evaluating Web Sites (The Ohio State University)
- The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly: or, Why It's a Good Idea to Evaluation Web Sources (Susan E. Beck, New Mexico State University)

Created by Colleen Bell

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