Teaching undergrads WEB evaluation

A guide for library instruction

by Jim Kapoun

Over the last year, I have noticed (in my undergraduate library instruction classes) that faculty members are demanding more Web usage from their students. In fact, some faculty members may exclude most print resources in favor of Web pages. If you are an instructional librarian, you know that the Web, in its ever-changing formats, is seemingly here to stay.

I have discovered that most undergraduate librarians (including myself) regard the Web as another tool to use in the arsenal of research materials. However, some of the students and faculty members who attend my instruction classes take on a different view, especially the traditional aged undergraduate college student. Their view is: "Web pages must be the correct source because it is the most current and easiest to access form of information."

The assumption is not true, of course, but it is an almost impossible task to refute. Students seem to gravitate to the Web first and grudgingly consult paper materials after. This report is not about the merits of the Web over paper; it is about trying to provide accurate ways for undergraduate students to evaluate Web resources for their research.

Five criteria for Web evaluation

When teaching the Web to students, I include a section on evaluation. I pattern my Web evaluation lecture like a librarian who evaluates print items for inclusion into a library collection. I base Web evaluation on five criteria that I use for print evaluation: accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage. To develop this model I had to first acknowledge that most students today tend to conduct research with speed rather than accuracy and rarely evaluate resources. So the criteria I present must be digestible and almost transparent to the student. In other words, the student must be trained to evaluate a Web document like second nature.

In the evaluation lecture, I present at least two but no more then four Web sites on a relevant subject for the class. One or more will be labeled a "good" Web site and at least one site will be labeled a "poor" Web site. I distribute a sheet of criteria (see chart on the next page) and have the students quickly evaluate the pages presented. You cannot get bogged down with details; the goal is to provide the student a quick but comprehensive set of criteria to draw conclusions as to the Web pages' quality. In some classes, outside practice assignments are helpful to enforce this skill.

In time I have noticed that some students who have been to my classes are evaluating Web pages on their own and without the aid of the handout; they just do it. The success of this teaching component is patience and practice by the student.

About the author

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Five criteria for evaluating Web pages

Evaluation of Web documents	How to interpret the basics
1. Accuracy of Web Documents • Who wrote the page and can you contact him or her? • What is the purpose of the document and why was it produced? • Is this person qualified to write this document?	**Accuracy** • Make sure author provides e-mail or a contact address/phone number. • Know the distinction between author and Webmaster.
2. Authority of Web Documents • Who published the document and is it separate from the "Webmaster?" • Check the domain of the document, what institution publishes this document? • Does the publisher list his or her qualifications?	**Authority** • What credentials are listed for the author(s)? • Where is the document published? Check URL domain.
3. Objectivity of Web Documents • What goals/objectives does this page meet? • How detailed is the information? • What opinions (if any) are expressed by the author?	**Objectivity** • Determine if page is a mask for advertising; if so information might be biased. • View any Web page as you would an infommercial on television. Ask yourself why was this written and for whom?
4. Currency of Web Documents • When was it produced? • When was it updated? • How up-to-date are the links (if any)?	**Currency** • How many dead links are on the page? • Are the links current or updated regularly? • Is the information on the page outdated?
5. Coverage of the Web Documents • Are the links (if any) evaluated and do they complement the documents' theme? • Is it all images or a balance of text and images? • Is the information presented cited correctly?	**Coverage** • If page requires special software to view the information, how much are you missing if you don't have the software? • Is it free, or is there a fee, to obtain the information? • Is there an option for text only, or frames, or a suggested browser for better viewing?

Putting it all together

- *Accuracy*. If your page lists the author and institution that published the page and provides a way of contacting him/her, and . . .
- *Authority*. If your page lists the author credentials and its domain is preferred (.edu, .gov, .org, or .net), and . . .
- *Objectivity*. If your page provides accurate information with limited advertising and it is objective in presenting the information, and . . .
- *Currency*. If your page is current and updated regularly (as stated on the page) and the links (if any) are also up-to-date, and . . .
- *Coverage*. If you can view the information properly—not limited to fees, browser technology, or software requirement, then . . .

You may have a higher quality Web page that could be of value to your research! ■