

Quality evaluation of resources on the Internet

The multiplicity of web pages on the Internet is both the greatest strength of the net and its greatest weakness. The strength is that you can find information on almost everything if you are good at searching. The weakness is that there is a lot of information which is of a poor quality and which in a worst-case scenario can be misleading if the information is used uncritically.

One of the reasons for the multiplicity on the net is that nearly everyone can publish material on the Internet. This is among others due to the fact that it has become relatively easy to construct web pages with the help of web editors and at the same time it has become cheap to buy a place on a server by commercial Internet suppliers.

The above combined with the fact that the circle of readers on the Internet has grown quite heavily has made the net an attractive place to publish and that is why you can see such a heavy spread in quality and level. This spread necessitates that you should evaluate each reference you find on the net.

Web resources are different from the printed media in several ways and it is therefore necessary to quality evaluate the resources from 3 criteria **credibility**, **content** and **functionality**.

Credibility

The reason that we have faith in information in printed material is that it is relatively difficult to get something published in a publishing house as a book – or to get an article published in a periodical. Most publishing houses have editors and experts employed within various technical areas that evaluate whether a text is qualified for publishing from a technical point of view. If there are faults and lacks these are often corrected before publication. This very important filter does not exist on the Internet as in principle you can publish everything you want on the net. This also means you are often the only filter in relation to the references you find on the Internet.

You can divide the information, which you can find on the net, into different types:

- Scientific documents
- Fact-like information
- Opinions
- Interpretations
- Stories

These types of information can have various purposes:

- To educate
- To inform
- Persuasion, sell
- To present an attitude
- To entertain

It will often be quite easy to determine which type of resource it is if you have the time to read the documents through. But there are some rule-of-thumbs which you can use as a help to evaluate the credibility of a resource.

There are **6 items** that might indicate whether a resource is credible or not. A website should include most of these items.

The author's name should be evident

The author's name indicates that he/she "assumes" a responsibility for the information.

The author's title or position

The author's title or position can indicate whether he is an expert or an interested layman.

The author's attachment to an organisation or institution

Which organisation or institution is behind the publication of this reference? Is the organisation or institution known to know something about the subject! You can often see by the URL itself whether it is an organisation, institution, public authority or a commercial site.

Com – commercial
Org – organisation
Mil – military
Edu – educational
Gov – government

Are mainly used by American servers.

Or you can find the home country of the server by the country code dk = Danmark, de = Deutschland.

Information on when the information was made

Is the information updated and actual – and is the information still maintained.

Possibility of contacting the author

The possibility of contacting the author through email, telephone or post provides the opportunity for asking questions if there are uncertainties in the information. It also indicates that he/she "assumes" responsibility for the information.

List of literature/references to other sources

List of literature/references to other sources give you the possibility of checking the sources which are the basis of the information.

Content

The content of the documents on the net are evaluated in much the same way as the content of printed media. You have to base your evaluation on what you already know and use your good sense and your critical sense.

You can e.g. use an evaluation method called CAFÈ, which is good at starting your critical sense. CAFÈ stands for challenge, adapt, file and evaluate.

Challenge

Try to ask critical questions to the found information: Who says so? Why is it said in this way? Why is this information written? Why must I believe in it? Why should I trust this source? Is this elaborated enough? Is the argumentation all right? Who supports the argumentations in the document?

Adapt

Adapt your critical questions according to the statements in the text. If views that lie within the common views are asserted/argued you should get the view verified in other places. On the other hand if the statements/information correspond to other information which you have found you do not have to be as critical to the found information.

File

Save the new information in your head do not draw conclusions too early. Compare to other sources, gather more knowledge and do not draw your conclusions until you have a total picture.

Evaluate

Evaluate and re-evaluate. The information is dynamic and is quickly changed. The information on the net is quickly updated and changed especially within technology, natural science, medicine and economy.

Functionality

One of the most important differences between print and web is that the usability of a resource is also dependant on the design and functionality of the website. A good design makes it easier to gather and find information on a website. A good design is a balance between a nice and clear layout and a good functionality. This is mainly controlled by the following design elements:

Structure/navigation

Is the information structured sensibly. Is it possible to jump up and down in the hierarchy of a website. It is inexpedient if you have to click to many times to get to overall information that should be easy accessible.

Clarity

Is it easy to get a general view of the structure of the website – without having to read the entire website to find e.g. a link to another site.

Typography

Is the text written in an easy readable text type? Are paragraphs (text blocks) used, as it is more reader-friendly when reading a text on a computer screen? Is there a suitable amount of headlines and sub headlines?

Graphics

The use of graphics is a kind of balancing act. Too much and too poorly compressed graphics on a website entails that it takes a long time to get the page. However, graphics also has a good visual and pedagogical effect that makes graphic indispensable on modern websites. Graphics can be used as decoration, navigation and to give you the feeling of being in a location in cyberspace.

Speed

Some of the things that can ruin the usability of a website is when it takes too long to get a website. Only few people have the patience to wait for several minutes to get one page, which might just be a "traffic site" which you must go through to get to the information you need.

Adaptation in relation to the screen

Some websites are not fitted for screen due to a poor resolution (640 x 480). Some web designers also make websites on which it is necessary to scroll a lot both horizontally and vertically to see the entire website. Especially horizontal scrolling is very inexpedient.

Multi media effects

Do the multi media effects have a function or do they just take up space and do they make you browser go down.

HTML standards

Does the designer use HTML standards so that the pages are stable (do not make the browser freeze/go down)? If the designer uses the standards the pages will also look fairly similar, irrespective of which browser you prefer to use.

The opening hours of the site

Is it possible to open the site during all 24 hours of a day?