

How to Evaluate Blogs and Online Information Sources

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With the huge variety of information sources available online, "critical thinking is more important than ever in sorting out what seems more reliable," says Doug Fisher, a former Associated Press news editor who teaches journalism at the University of South Carolina. Here are some tips to checking out the reliability of Web pages:

- **Look closely at the URL.** Many people mistakenly believe that an "org" suffix stands for something like "nonprofit organization," but in fact anyone can register an "org" domain, says Richard H. Hall, a professor of information science at Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla. By contrast, an "edu" suffix can only be held by an institution that has undergone some vetting by higher-education groups, he says. But even an "edu" page requires some caution, says Jeff South, associate professor of mass communications at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, because the page could come from a professor, a freshman-class project or anyone working at the college, he says.
- **Locate the main Web site.** When you pull up a Web page, it's usually a good idea to check back to the main site to find out more about whoever posted the information, says South. To do that, simply lop off anything in the URL that follows the main domain suffix (such as .com or .edu). **The main Web site should tell you clearly what person or group is responsible for its content.** If a Web site doesn't do this, don't trust it, says Jeffrey T. Hancock, associate professor of communications at Cornell University, in Ithaca, N.Y. Posting one's identity is a good sign of trustworthiness in cyberspace, he says. **"Can you Google this person or group and find out things about them?" If not, the Web site may not be trustworthy.**
- **Can a real person be contacted?** "Check to see if you can contact a real person based on the Web site information," says Hall. "If there isn't a pretty detailed 'About' or 'About Me' page" or contact information, then there's reason to be suspicious.
- **Are there additional links?** Good online information "usually has references and links to additional information," both on other pages of its own site and on external Web pages, says Hall.
- **Are there misspellings and typos?** Grammatical errors on a Web page potentially indicate untrustworthy information, says South. "If they're breaking a lot of rules at the micro level, what does that suggest about the information they're presenting?"
- **Are there links to other sources?** For blogs, another test for reliability is **whether writers cite or link to opinions of other writers that they disagree with**, says Larry Pryor, an associate professor of journalism at the University of California's Annenberg School for Communications. "The more reliable blogs will reach out to other points of view" or at least point readers to pages where they can learn about them.
- **How long has the blogger been at it?** A blog will usually state how long the writer has been blogging, and longer is better, says Penelope Trunk, a veteran blogger in Madison, Wis., who writes about careers in the online age. "It takes time to resonate with the blogosphere and make changes" to improve your work, she says.
- **How many topics does the blog cover?** Blog sidebars usually list the main topic categories that the blog covers, says Trunk. **"If there are too many and it's all over the place, then this is not an expert,"** she says.
- **What is the blog's format?** Formats can be clues to reliability too, says Trunk. Blogger Web sites generally have a default setting for organizing an individual blogger's page, and those who use the default may be less reliable "because they haven't put much time into" the project, says Trunk.
- **Young readers in the blogosphere operate in a very different world of information than traditional media**, Trunk argues. "Reliability" today means a writer who's developed a "personal brand" rather than one who operates under the "institutional brands" of the past, she says.