

WEBSITE EVALUATION – A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH

There are two basic ways to evaluate WWW resources—the checklist model and the contextual model.

An example of the checklist model is linked in a couple of places from the Bankier Library Home Page. This is a good starting place if you have never asked any questions about the sources you find on the Web because it will give you a few questions to ask about the website. But this type of model is what is known as “an internal method of evaluation. It concentrates on the internal characteristics of the website in question—who wrote it, is it authoritative, when was it written—to decide if the site should be used in a research paper” (Meola).

A contextual model uses information outside of the website to assess the value of the source for a particular need. Two techniques that are used in this model are comparison and corroboration.

COMPARISON

As Meola has written, “[c]omparative thinking plays a key role in evaluative judgments. When we evaluate something, we assign a measure of quality to that item based on a reference point.” What can you use as a reference point? Try another web site on the same topic. One site may contain information that has fuller meaning, that goes into more depth on the topic. It may reveal controversies or bias. It may include information like photographs or videos that are found nowhere else, that are primary sources.

CORROBORATION

Meola discusses this method of evaluation as a way “to verify [information] against one or more different sources. . . [t]he more sources that can be found to corroborate the information, there is a greater probability that the information is reliable.”

“ . . . a greater probability . . . “ But sometimes even the experts are fooled by the presentation of information. A recent example of this can be found in the medical literature. *The Lancet*, a medical journal from Great Britain—one that emphasizes research—recently published a formal retraction of a 1998 published study that has been characterized as “deeply flawed.” The study suggested a link between the MMR (Measles-Mumps-Rubella) vaccine and autism. Listen to the NPR (National Public Radio), “On the Media,” segment titled “[A Shot of Reality](#),” that aired on February 5, 2010, for more on this story. Discover how this has changed how “the journal will deal with the scientific community and the media.”

Where will you find information to help with this process? Use a variety of sources. Subscription database articles, such as those from Expanded Academic ASAP or Academic Search Premier, include peer-reviewed articles. Use documents from government websites. Try to find primary source materials. Include books on your topic from an academic library.

If you need help finding a variety of sources that will help you compare and corroborate information for your research, just ask the librarians. There is nothing we like better than helping you reach your goals!

[Information for this handout has been adapted from "Chuckling the Checklist: A Contextual Approach to Teaching Undergraduates Web-Site Evaluation," by Marc Meola. In portal: Libraries and the Academy 4:3 (2004) 331-344. Accessed: 5 Oct. 2004 <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/portal_libraries_and_the_academy/v004/4.3meola.html>]

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