Evaluating Internet Sources

Why do I need to evaluate the information I find on the Internet?
Standard resources you find in libraries and research institutions--such as books, journals, and dissertations--have been evaluated by scholars, publishers, or librarians before they get to you. The Web is different: anyone can publish a web page. The result is that dubious resources are available on the Web, as well as excellent ones. It's up to YOU to separate the good from the bad on the Web.

Why will understanding the syntax of an Internet address (a URL) help to evaluate the site?
Let's take as an example the address: http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~pedecord.
What can we understand about this site from the address?
• First, the page resides at an educational institution, as indicated by the .edu. It is therefore not a commercial site, so it is probably not trying to sell something.
• The homepage for the site is www-rohan.sdsu.edu. You may find out more about the organization, or even the author, by going "home."
• The tilde (~) indicates that someone has obtained PERSONAL space to load their site. Therefore, their viewpoints MAY NOT represent those of the sponsoring institution.
All of this information can help you evaluate whether the site is appropriate for your research needs.

What criteria should I use to evaluate Web pages?
Use criteria from these "4 Cs" - Content, Credibility, Currency, and Clarity - to help you evaluate websites.

I. Content
• What is the purpose of the site? Try to determine if it is attempting to influence public opinion, promote products, or present current information. Figure out which of these categories the website falls under: advocacy, commercial (selling, marketing), news, informational, or personal.
• How in-depth is the material?
• What information does this site offer that is not found elsewhere?
• Does the document include a list of references and/or is the information verifiable in some way?
• If the author’s treatment of the topic is controversial, does he or she acknowledge this?
• Are there reviews of this site? How many other sites link to this one? Who is linking to this site, and why? To determine who is linking to this site, go to the search engine, www.altavista.com. In the search box, enter link: immediately followed by the site you are investigating. For example, link:ford.com (Important: Omit the” http://www” part of the URL) will tell you who is linking to Ford's website.
• Does the content appear to be popular, serious, scholarly, or humorous? In other words, what is the intent of the content, and who is the intended audience?
• Are the links in the site inward focused (pointing to links within the site) or outward focused? If all links point back to the site itself, then it is a dead-end site, which does not allow for other points of view.
II. Credibility

• Is there an author?
• Is the page signed?
• Is the author qualified? You may have to search for information on the author on the Web or in standard library resources. Or the author may have supplied his or her biography, or a link to it.
• What organization sponsors the page? Does the organization have an "agenda"? You can sometimes figure out who the sponsor is by returning to the main page, which ends with the type of domain, such as .edu or .gov.
• Is the sponsor reputable? You may have to search for information on the sponsor on the Web or in standard library resources. Or the organization may have supplied information about itself from its own page.
• Does the author of the page appear to be biased? You may be able to tell from the sponsoring agency. Or, if the links from the author's page return BACK to the author's page, he or she is operating in a closed circle that does not entertain other modes of thought. Also, does the author offer a list of references at the end of the web page, which would indicate that some impartial research was done?
• What can you discover from the URL of the document? Does it have a political or philosophical agenda? Is it extremist? Is it a .com, or corporate site, that may only present information on itself in the most positive light?
• Does the author display knowledge of the schools of thought in his or her subject field? Look for known theories, philosophies and techniques in his or her treatment of the subject.

III. Currency

• How current is the website? Check throughout the page, especially the bottom of the page, for the "last updated" date. In addition, by reading through the site, you can sometimes spot dated information. If no date is given, you can view the directory on which the site resides, and read the date of latest modification.
• Are the links from the site to other sites kept up-to-date? Check for dead (inactive) hyperlinks, by clicking on them.

IV. Clarity

• Does the author use jargon unknown to the average user?
• Is the text written well, with acceptable grammar and spelling?
• Is the site well organized and easy to navigate?
• Is there a table of contents or index that can be used to navigate the site?
• Is the structure of the site stable, from one visit to the next?

What do I do if I am still not sure about the reliability of my source?
Whenever you are in doubt, please feel free to ask one of the Reference Librarians to help you. Reference Librarians are trained to discern whether information is credible, and can show you other credible sources, as well.

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