

## **Evaluating Information Resources** *Bilgi Kaynaklarının Değerlendirilmesi*

**Margaret MELUN\***

### **Abstract**

*Librarians have traditionally been familiar with the techniques of critically analysing the value of individual books and periodicals. This has been necessary for a variety of reasons: to order appropriate titles for the library collections; to include items in bibliographies; and to recommend titles to readers and scholars. With the advent of the Internet and its subsequent use as a research tool, the evaluation of Internet sites has become increasingly important. Since pages can be posted on the Internet without any editorial review or approval, it is vitally important for users to know how to appraise these information resources. This article presents a brief overview of ways to make these evaluations.*

**Keywords:** *Research methodology, Library research, Computer network resources, Internet research.*

### **Öz**

*Genelde kütüphaneciler kitap ve süreli yayınlara ilişkin değerlerin eleştirel analizine ilişkin teknikleri bilirler. Çünkü koleksiyona uygun yayınlar sipariş edebilmek, bibliyografyalara künye eklemek, normal okuyucu ve akademisyenlere eser tavsiye edebilmek gibi birçok neden, bunları öğrenmelerini gerektirmiştir. İnternet'in bulunuşu ve bir araştırma aracı olarak kullanılması ile birlikte internet sitelerinin değerlendirilmeleri gittikçe artan bir şekilde önem kazanmıştır. İnternet'e sayfalar hiç bir editör incelemesi veya kabulünden geçmesizin gönderilebildiğine göre kullanıcıların bu bilgiyi nasıl değerlendirebileceklerini bilmesi yaşamsal öneme sahiptir. Bu makale, böylesine değerlendirmelerin yapılabilme yollarından kısaca bahsetmektedir.*

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Araştırma yöntembilimi, Kütüphane araştırması, Bilgisayar ağı kaynakları, İnternet'te araştırma.*

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\* Information Resource Officer, U.S. Department of State, American Embassy, Rome, Italy (MelunME@state.gov).

## **Evaluation of Resources**

From time immemorial, mankind has been making judgments. Life is full of choices. One must be well informed to make wise choices—no matter whether the choice relates to something personal, professional, educational, financial or recreational. Sometimes one innately knows what choice to make, other times one must ask advice from a respected person or do research to get the proper information to make a wise decision. Selecting research resources is no different from other material things. They must be evaluated. There are indeed certain and specific norms for this evaluation.

Academic institutions in the United States have long recognised the need to provide students and scholars with the background that will be needed to produce research papers. Thus exposure or training in library research methods often begins in secondary school. The school library is the place where students first learn to consult bibliographies and to search catalogues and indexes to identify materials that support a thesis for a research paper. The secondary school librarian, usually in cooperation with an English or History teacher will provide this orientation.

However, not all secondary schools provide this orientation. Sometimes not all students take advantage of it when it is available. So the burden often falls upon the institutions of higher education to insure that students know to find and evaluate research materials to enhance their studies and their research papers.

Virtually all institutions of higher education in the U. S. (universities and colleges) require students to take courses or follow programs which will give them the necessary background to produce research work in all fields. For undergraduates, this is most often a class or program that introduces them to the library organisation and the tools at their disposal to identify needed resources.

This would include use of the book catalogue (cards or on-line); use of indexes (printed or on-line) and the existence of special collections. This enables students to find scholarly books and articles. These programs now include instruction on how to use commercial database and electronic products that now supplement most libraries' print collections. These resources are accessed through the Internet. And finally, students must have an orientation to searching and verifying resources that are freely available on the Internet.

For graduate students, courses in research methodology in their field are required. This type of course focuses on the important literature and bibliography of the field and methodology of using it appropriately.

**Print Resources**

The western world has had a print publishing industry for more 500 years. During this time, there has developed a tradition of how a book or an article comes into print. The author writes the piece then submits it to an editor or a peer review board. These experts in the subject area will recommend changes that may be necessary to insure accuracy, objectivity, currency, etc. Thus the written word had gone through a review that provides the reader some assurance. Whether the writing is scholarly or popular, it has been reviewed and critiqued by professionals who know what the standard are for the audience to which the writing is indented. Obviously, the standards and criteria for writing will differ according to the type of publication: a political journal may well be slanted toward the philosophy of a particular party, thus abandoning objectivity in articles that it publishes; a mystery novel may change the location of buildings in a city, thus abandoning accuracy; a history book is rarely concerned with the currency of it material.

Librarians, as well as many readers, have come to recognise the hallmark of many publishers and the quality and type of materials that they publish. For scholarly materials, the university presses in the U. S. and throughout the world are widely recognised as authoritative sources for monographs and serials. Many publishers who specialise in particular fields such as law, science, medicine, literature, art, etc. have established reputations and their works are acquired or ignored, based on this reputation. Among the popular publishers, most tend to specialise in particular areas, such as fictions, romance, literature, self-help, mystery, science fictions, adventure, etc.

Evaluating print resources involves more than recognising and knowing the merits of the publisher. It is important to know something of the author and his/her credentials. One must discern if the writing is opinionated or balanced. The style of writing, including level of vocabulary is important.

**The Internet as a Research Tool**

Libraries now subscribe to journals and books in electronic format. Students and patrons of the libraries have access to these materials via the Internet. A password or identification number gives access to these materials which are subscribed to by the institution. Although available through the electronic medium of the Internet, these commercial databases contain works that have originally been made available in print format. So we know that they have been through an editorial review process, just as their print versions.

For the last ten years, students in the U.S. have been using freely accessed material on the Internet to supply information for their secondary school assignments and university research papers. They are

knowledgeable users of search engines and directories, and usually have little difficulty in finding material on their subjects. But the Internet is vastly different from print resources in that it has no editors or reviewers to accept or reject material that might be posted. Anyone can create a personal or organisational web site and post anything on it. There is no board of editors or overseers for Internet content.

Teachers, professors and librarians are often astounded at the dubious quality of materials selected by students for their research. To counteract this, it is a growing practice for University libraries to familiarise their students with ways to evaluate Web sites for use in academic research. Most often this is done via tutorial material on a website. Often it is a subject offered in librarian orientation programs.

### Criteria for Evaluating Web Sites

Discussed below are some of the most notable ways of verifying the authority, accuracy and objectivity of a website.

#### URL

The URL, an acronym for universal resource locator, includes the protocol (ex. HTTP, FTP), the domain name (or IP address), and additional path information (folder/file). The domain name provides the location of an entity on the Internet. Top-level domain names in the United States include *.com*, *.org*, *.edu*, *.gov*, *.mil*. In other parts of the world, the domain name includes a country symbol *.tk*, *.it*, *.uk*, *fr*.

Recognising these various domain names from U.S. sites will lead the user to know what type of material to expect from the site. Here is a further explanation of domain names:

*com* = a site sponsored by a commercial or business interest. Certainly, this is by far the most prevalent of domain names. When using such a site, one must be aware that the business interest of the sponsor may influence content.

*org* = a site sponsored by an organisation. This might be a non-governmental organisation which is charitable, medical, legal, voluntary, scholarly, cultural, political or sponsored by any number of other subject related organisations. Museums are usually in this domain. The overall quality and reputation of the organisation, if known, can provide insights when evaluating the site.

*edu* = the domain name for educational institutions. In the U.S. these can be sponsored by primary or secondary schools; colleges or universities and

research institutes. The most well known, prestigious and respected institutions are most likely to have the most useful and credible sites.

gov = a site is sponsored by the federal government of the United States. All 14 of the cabinet level departments, as well as all agencies, administrations, boards, bureaus, commissions, etc. of the federal government carry this domain name. A wide variety of informations relating to the operations and collections of government agencies are found on these Web sites. The content will vary according the mission of the sponsor.

mil = a domain name that could be considered a sub-set of the .gov domain, for all are U.S. military sponsored sites. These include the pentagon, all the branches of the uniformed services, their schools, research institutes, museums, etc. Their web pages are authoritative sources for statistics and documentation.

Most sites with .org, .mil, .edu, and .gov identifiers have sponsorship by groups that provide guidelines and editorial review to the content of their web pages. For this reason, we can feel some degree of confidence that the material has been reviewed for compliance to standard norms established by the sponsor.

Let it be noted that a personal name in the URL usually indicates that the site is sponsored by an individual, usually without any organisation as sponsor. While some of these pages are excellent, the user must be aware of the fact that there has been no organisational review or sanction on the content. Uncensored and unedited commercial, medical, political and personal opinions and biases are often found on such sites.

### **Authorship or Publishing Body**

Author/producer of the site should be identifiable. A group sponsor—a university, an organisation, a government entity – should provide an ‘about us’ page with details of their history, membership, funding, purposes, etc. If sponsored by an individual, the author should provide his/her biography, and credentials.

If this information is not provided on the website, the user can search for this information on the Internet. What can be known about the author or sponsor? Using a search engine like “Google” the user should be able to find some biography of the author—including education, past writings, experience—or the basic values and goals of the organisation. Has the author the appropriate credentials to be an authority on the topic? Is the sponsoring institution reputable? Is this organisation recognised in the specific area of research being pursued?

**Currency**

In printed documents, the date of publication is the first indication of currency. For some types of research material (historical essays, primary source material) currency is not a factor. On Web sites, one must look for the date of the original posting of the material or of updates. Or find the date of copyright or of updating on the documents posted on the website. Date of posting and/or most recent update should be found on a good website. This might be at the bottom of the home page, sometimes on every page. If no dates are provided, the user must do further research to determine if the source is current or out of date on the topic.

**Point of View or Bias**

In a narrative presentation, look for a point of view or evidence of bias. The source of the information should be clearly stated, whether original or borrowed from elsewhere. Is the information-covered fact, opinion or propaganda? Does the information appear to be valid and well researched, or is it questionable, unsupported by evidence? Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-arousing words and bias?

**Writing Style**

Proper grammar, spelling and sentence construction are essential elements that should be noted in web sites devoted to research. The inclusion of advanced and appropriate vocabulary is important. The material should be organised in a logical fashion and the main points clearly presented. The intended audience should be evident by the style, seriousness and level of the writing.

**Referral to Other Sources**

A web site of true research value should make reference to other resources on the same or related topics. These referrals can be a bibliography of printed books and journals, or a listing of Internet resources of on-line information. Internet listings should ideally be accompanied by the date on which all the links were found to be active.

**Conclusion**

The Internet will continue to grow as a research tool, as will the number of students who will turn to it as the source for much of their primary and secondary research material. It is incumbent upon teachers, professors,

instructors and librarians to introduce students to the necessity of evaluating Internet resources. Whether these skills are taught in an informal or formal environment may vary, but the exposure should be mandatory and the content should be inclusive.

This article is intended to be very practical and can serve as a guide for topics to be covered in a class on evaluating Internet resources.

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**Notes: Internet Resources on this Topic**

Here is a selected list of U.S. University Library web sites that are devoted to evaluating information found on the Internet. These sites provide more detail on most of the topics discussed above. All Internet links were active as of 18 March 2005.