TITLE: Internet 101: How to find the good stuff
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Anyone who has conducted research on the Internet knows that there is an almost overwhelming amount of information online. The electronic era has brought such unfettered democracy to publishing that anyone with a modest computer setup can post information on the Web. That means you're just as likely to find an insightful and well-documented research article as you are the demented ramblings of someone who, for very good reasons, has never been published in a more traditional venue.

Fortunately, to help Internet users deal with what can be a cacophony of information, a number of Web sites have been developed—many of them by librarians—to help people evaluate the sources they find as they conduct online research. As more and more of the research that students do these days is conducted on the Web, it's crucial for them to develop the analytical skills they need to make sure they're not using unsubstantiated junk as key sources in their school work. Here are some tips from one expert, along with a listing of some worthwhile Web sites that provide even more information.

Robert Harris at Southern California College in Costa Mesa offers what he calls the "CARS checklist" as a straightforward means to evaluate Web resources. Not every source will meet every CARS criterion—credibility, accuracy, reasonableness and support—but the criteria can help distinguish the good from the bad, Harris notes.

Credibility includes aspects such as the author's credentials (for example, who is the person or organization and are they known and respected), evidence the information has been through some system of quality control (such as a journal peer-review process) and ratings or reviews from others. Among the clues that something might lack credibility, Harris says: anonymity, lack of quality control and poor grammar.

Accurate information, he explains, should be up to date, factual, detailed, exact and comprehensive. Suspect sources might lack a date or have an old date on information that changes rapidly, include vague or sweeping generalizations and express very one-sided views that don't respond to or acknowledge opposing views.

Reasonableness includes fairness, objectivity, moderateness and consistency. Harris suggests that readers do a reality check: Is something really believable? Signs of a lack of reasonableness, Harris notes, include intemperate language ("stupid jerks"), exaggerated claims, sweeping statements and conflicts of interest (the health claims made by tobacco companies, for example).

Support for Web documents, as with any research source, should include good documentation (especially for statistics) and bibliographies, corroboration from other sources, and external consistency with what we already know. Harris's warning signs in this area include no sources for numbers or statistics, absence of documentation when it's clearly needed, and a lack of other sources that support the same information (no corroboration, in other words).

ADDED MATERIAL

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