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Know Your Source : Assessing Credibility Online

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Introduction

Trust but verify. That's the way it is on the Internet and that's the way it is in life. I'm smart in some areas and quite gullible in others. As a child I was told that vanilla extract is poisonous (that's why you only add a little to recipe and only if the batter is baked), and it stuck as gospel in my mind into adulthood. I never doubted that fact, never tested it, and never did any research. When a friend introduced me to vanilla milk (a drink of simply vanilla extract and milk), I displayed my ignorance to a cruelly unforgetful world.

I suspect most people know that vanilla extract straight out of the bottle is not only edible, but quite good if enough syrup is added. Not all incorrect information is so patently obvious or even intentional. The problem is that if you quote misinformation or base an argument on it, you are wrong and culpable. If you are lucky, then it only ends up being amusing and people laugh at you, but the effects can be more severe. Your responsibility to find the truth runs a parallel trajectory to the repercussions if you are wrong.

General Assessments of Credibility

Credibility is the amount of trust that a resource, an argument, a piece of advice or a Web page engenders. It is the composite of the quality of research or observation and the reasoning or interpretation of the writer or speaker. With experience, researchers develop individual evaluation habits and techniques for assessing the credibility of print materials. These can be categorized broadly as (1.) a "feel" (an independent and personal on-the-spot judgment of a book truly by the cover), (2.) an assessment of the reputation of the author or publisher (a general community consensus

on the stature of a person or an organization), (3.) a referral (consideration of place in scholarly literature through citation indexes and reviews of a work), and (4.) a context (appreciation of the kinds of sources used in forming and supporting an argument). Competently using these four criteria to discern credibility relies on one's own scholarship and depth of knowledge in a field.

Searching in the Online Environment

Certain characteristics of the Internet facilitate tests of reputation and referral. For speed and convenience, the broad searching capabilities of online databases and indexes, specifically, and Internet search engines, generally, beat manually combing through their print counterparts. Web 2.0 capabilities such as reader comments allow the peer community to weigh in with praise or criticism. Also, a researcher can easily bounce from one site to another, exploring the time honored research method of serendipity. If a query leads to a dead-end, another strategy can be started quickly. Seductively smooth Web navigation plays on the interconnectivity of the sites. Part of the Google PageRank algorithm includes the number of links to the site as proof of the page's relevance and popularity.¹

The Internet complicates making judgments based on feel and context. The ease with which anyone from anywhere can mount a Web site creates a samizdat online environment without editors, proofreaders or citation-checkers. Some professional-looking sites have bad information, and subject hobbyists with poor Web design skills produce pages of high content quality. At a glance it is hard to tell which sites undergo

¹Google, "Corporate Information, Technology Overview" <http://www.google.com/corporate/tech.html> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

any formal review. Furthermore, few Web sites have reference lists or footnotes.

A best practice to compensate for any lack of expertise in a field is to begin an online search with a known and trusted online “publisher”--a library, major database aggregator or a professional organization rather than resort to a search engine search. Libraries offer databases judiciously selected by information professionals in the field, commercial databases seek to sell high quality products to fill a need, and professional organizations work to inform their membership and cultivate new members. Take advantage of the resources they review and compile; these recommended links are examples of a peer review process working online because editorial decisions are made about which links to include.

Law libraries offer a broad range of databases and tips on conducting legal research. For example, rather than type in a Google search for “Estonian constitution,” consider looking at the vetted databases and linked sites available from a library. The University of Georgia Law Library offers a database to its community that is focused narrowly on constitutions. A quick look in “Research Resources” and a click on “Foreign/International Resources” reveals a database of constitutions. The search for “Estonia” brings up an authoritative English translation of the Constitution of 1992 with amendments of 2005.² A search in Google for “Estonia constitution” yields results that are not as current. The three links to an actual online English language version of Constitution that appear on the first page were translated in the 1990s (or no date specified at all), and therefore lack several amendments.³

Online commercial databases and information aggregators have their very

² University of Georgia, School of Law Library, “Research Resources”
<http://www.law.uga.edu/library/research/index.html#Foreign> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

existence based on a branding of authoritativeness. The day that lawyers and students cannot quote a case from Westlaw with confidence is the day that Westlaw is no longer viable—same for LexisNexis and HeinOnline. If you have access, you are paying for the benefit of their efforts in collecting and digitizing primary materials.

Another good starting point is a professional organization or government agency Web site. These sites can offer links to their publications, journals, and their conference pages. Depending on the organization, some of their publications may be provided full-text online. Contact information might be listed to help locate an expert for assistance. For an illustration of the benefit of starting with a library or organization, consider a search for “informed consent” issues in the medical field. Looking first to the American Medical Association site and searching just the site for “informed consent” yields a statement of ethics related to informed consent and a long list of related code of medical ethics opinions issued by the association. The site also offers, and a link to an entire issue of the AMA’s ethics journal, *Virtual Mentor*, from August 2008 devoted to informed consent and health care providers’ responsibility.⁴

Web sites encountered through search engine queries inspire less immediate confidence, but that absolutely does not mean that no good information resides on the Web. Researchers just need to know how to judge the page before them. If a “cold call” via a search engine still seems like the best route, at least give preference to sites maintained by libraries, educational institutions, government agencies, and professional organizations rather than individuals or unknown organizations. In the earlier informed

³ Estonian President’s site and ICL, which appear as first two hits are outdated and LegalText site has no date.

⁴ American Medical Association, “Home Page” <http://www.ama-assn.org/> [accessed 2 Mar. 2009].

consent example, a Yahoo search retrieves the AMA site.⁵ Don't ignore it.

The American Bar Association issued best practice guidelines for Web site *providers* in 2003. Although the ABA compiled them for creators not consumers, these guidelines provide a useful checklist for assessing new legal Web sites. Removing all law-specific references in these points provides a rubric for evaluating any site in detail.

- Does the site provide contact information for the site's author(s)?
- Is it obvious when the site was last updated?
- Is the jurisdiction clear?
- Is there a clear distinction between legal information and legal advice?
- Does the site offer links to further help users?
- Does the site offer relevant citations to case law and legislation?
- Does the site offer referrals to contacts for legal advice?
- Is the site clear of copyright violations? Is the information properly attributed and permissions obtained?
- Are terms and conditions of use clearly explained?
- Is a privacy statement conspicuously provided?⁶

Performing an I.R.S. Audit

The system that I will share incorporates and distills these criteria and helps to frame the critical thought process when encountering a new site without any obvious redeeming credentials. Since this is tax time of year, this system is named the I.R.S. audit: Identification, Reputation, and Sources.

Identification

Before reading the page, a researcher should know who did the writing or selecting of data. Many sites have an "About" or "History" section that allows readers to find out more information about the person or organization that developed the site.

⁵ Yahoo, "Search Page" <http://www.yahoo.com> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

⁶ American Bar Association Law Practice Management Section, "Best Practice Guidelines for Legal Information Web Site Providers" <http://www.abanet.org/elawyer/tool/practices.shtml> [accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

Always take advantage of these tips and make a note of any names. If the site creators are less candid, try a domain name registry like NetworkSolutions.com, Whois.net or Whois.domaintools.com. All domains (the internet address short of the first slash) do not show up, but when one does, the results give the name of the person or body who registered the site. DomainTools also gives the site's hit ranking and how many pages on Wikipedia link to the site.

Researchers should use professional directories, law practice Web sites or law school sites to identify the correct person behind the name (there are lots of John Smiths) and to verify stated or implied professional affiliations. Just because an author lacks a degree does not mean the work is without merit, but lying about or overstating one's expertise is a damning flaw when trying to build credibility.

If an organization produces the site, check and see if they have a relationship with a known and trusted group—a firm or professional committee. Search for any articles, news reports that mention the group. A deafening virtual silence is not a tacit endorsement. If nothing can be found, consider moving to another source of information. It is important to have as complete an understanding of as possible of the origins of a work.

Reputation

Reputation—everybody has one even if no conscious thought has been given to cultivate it. It is simply the majority of opinions about something or someone. So, do an internet search for the author(s) of a Web page and skim what sort of information comes back. See if the person has published articles or books on related topics. For quick feedback, go to SSRN.com (Social Science Research Network) if you are a member or Amazon.com. The peer or public review of papers and publications can be very useful

(keeping in mind that you don't always know the credentials of the reviewer). Searching a professional directory to verify credentials and involvement also might be useful, and keep in mind the utility of print book reviews. A Ph.D. or J.D. doesn't guarantee that everything a person writes is credible—especially if the situation demands balanced information and the person is known to have a particular agenda.

The same caveats apply to organizations. Eight years ago when I started serious research into the use of online sources in scholarly historical literature, I framed the hypothesis that .edu is a respected extension and .com and .org sites were suspect in research. Those tidy boundaries did not exist then and do not exist now, and many more extensions have been added like .net and .info. Scholars in the United States are also more likely to find references from foreign sites as well (for example, .ca, .uk, .de, and .fr). Except for government sites (.gov), there are no shortcuts. A researcher needs to evaluate every site on its own merits and shortcomings.

Take whatever names and affiliations are available for a site, search online for it, and read what comes back from the peer community. Ask yourself: Does the organization have mission that would make it less likely to present balanced reports? From where or whom does the organization gets it funding? How long has it been in existence? Although no answer to these questions is a disqualifier, they help in the appreciation and interpretation of the statements.

Sources

When you cannot find any background for the first two points (identification and reputation), the third can stand alone or affirm impressions of respectability or spuriousness. The cases, legislative documents, treatises, articles, etc. that an author

uses or does not use to make his or her case, can be very telling. Even without making any interpretative judgments, a viewer can learn how current the research is. If the most recent source cited was in 1980, questions may be asked legitimately: is the page is still maintained and is the author still engaged in the topic? Old news can be just as harmful as false news.

Not all Web sites have bibliographies and relatively few have foot- or endnotes. While the omission of sources is uncommon in professional print scholarship, it is fairly common to have Web pages produced by pundits, who share their opinions and observations without specific citations to cases or legislation, much like a newspaper reporter does. The problem from the reader's perspective is that when there are no sources, they cannot be verified and evaluated. In practice, always hope for direct reference attribution on the Web, but carefully consider the first two criteria (identity and reputation of the author) before dismissing a site in their absence.

Practice with the Methodology

Now that we have described the three elements of site evaluation (identification, reputation, and sources), we will put this test into practice on two mock information searches one for Tunisian arbitration code and one for the symptoms of schizophrenia.

Arbitration In Tunisia

Assuming that you don't use a librarian to help conduct a search for information on rules governing commercial arbitration disputes in Tunisia, and instead, you type a Google search for "Arbitration in Africa' Tunisia." The first result is a web page dated June 2007 with a listing of key points about arbitration in Tunisia, including the

arbitration code, a roster of six arbitration bodies within the country, costs, and appeal assistance.⁷ If it covers the sought information, the next step is to identify what or who is “Norton Rose” and who leads the firm if it’s not already obvious to you.

First, check out to whom the site is registered at one of the domain name tools. Verify quickly that this Norton Rose site is part of the authorized or official site. Next, skim the site’s “About us” page. Unfortunately, this page assumes that the reader knows basically what the firm does. It contains executive director contact information, which we will note, and firm financial reports, which we will ignore. For more general background, look to the recruitment pages found under “Careers.” This section provides descriptions of the firm by the firm.⁸ It might help inform a broader Web search of the organization’s reputation, which is our next step.

The site has its own “Awards and Accolades” page, but again, it’s better to confirm off-site, so a search for the firm pulls up an article on Legal Work from October 2008 which describes the firm as having “one of the most prestigious pedigrees in [London],” “a respected operator,” and “UK’s twelfth largest legal practice by revenue” (a statement more digestible than all those financial reports on the Norton Rose site).⁹ Feel free to read through other hits until satisfied that Norton Rose is a legitimate, well-heeled firm known for commercial law and with a strong global base. If anyone could produce such an overview of Tunisia reliably, it should be someone in this firm.

The lack of sources found in the Tunisian document raises concerns. The site

⁷ Norton Rose, “Africa by Country” <http://www.nortonrose.com/knowledge/publications/2007/pub8622.aspx?page=070810112342&lang=en-gb> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

⁸ Norton Rose, “Careers—Legal” <http://www.nortonrose.com/careers/legal/default5543.aspx?lang=en-gb> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

⁹ LegalWeek.com, “Legal Week Wiki” <http://www.legalweek.com/Navigation/36/Articles/1000111/Norton+Rose.html> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

does list the specific section of the law that brought into effect the Arbitration Code and does provide links to major arbitration boards, but the specific points about the code appear without citation. Another cause for caution is the age of the information.

Schizophrenia Symptoms

Our next hypothetical information is for symptoms of schizophrenia. The first non-Wikipedia hit in a Google search is to schizophrenia.com. The section entitled “Overview of schizophrenia” has a long--by Web standards--piece covering a range of characteristics, risk factors, and treatments. Melissa K. Spearing, who holds a Masters of Health Science degree, wrote the article and two name doctors reviewed it, and the Institute of Mental Health, an agency of the federal government, published it.¹⁰ We have good positive identification for responsible people and publisher to check. A quick Yahoo search will verify Ms. Spearing’s degree and those of the two reviewers.

Although this work has good references, again a troubling factor is age of the work. The author herself alludes to rapid, recent advances in medicine and medical imaging at the time of publication ten years ago. It is reasonable to assume this might not be the most current science. To check for more recent scholarship, the original publisher is an obvious choice--the NIHM site. In fact, this site does contain a 25-page PDF version of a booklet published in 2006 with an addendum in 2007.¹¹

Conclusion

¹⁰ Schizophrenia.com, “Overview of schizophrenia” <http://www.schizophrenia.com/family/sz.overview.htm> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

¹¹ National Institute of Mental Health, “Schizophrenia” <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/schizophrenia/index.shtml> [accessed 3 Mar. 2009].

“Trust but verify” is a good mantra. This presentation has run through a very basic verification strategy keeping it all online and as convenient as possible, but the most authoritative sources for information on reputation can be found in tools like citation indexes and legal reviews. To recap, when possible start with a trusted academic, professional or government organization or database. If you have to rely on a search engine results list to get started, then be sure to conduct an I.R.S. audit by checking the identification, the reputation, and the sources behind the information.