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Do You Trust Me? : Assessing Credibility on the Web

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Do You Trust Me? : Assessing Credibility on the Web

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Do You Trust Me? : Assessing Credibility on the Web

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Introduction

A couple of weeks ago a friend forwarded a link on Luciano Pavarotti's death to me. I'm not an opera aficionado, but I caught the gross error in the site's reporting of Pavarotti's reappearance as a flesh-eating zombie.

I suspect most of the world would know that such claims are false, but not all incorrect information is so patently obvious, in such poor taste 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.

With experience, a researcher develops 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), and (3.) a referral (consideration of place in scholarly literature through citation indexes and reviews of a work). Success with these methods on the Web varies for many reasons, but mostly because of the ease with which anyone from anywhere can mount a Web site. In this samizdat online environment, some classy sites have bad information, hobbyists without related academic credentials produce pages of varying quality, and most sites do not undergo any formal review.

A relatively safe approach to finding authoritative information on the Web is to begin with a known and trusted database or pathfinder.¹ Commercial databases have

¹ A pathfinder is an online list of linked Web sites vetted by a person or editorial board on related topics.

their very 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. Pathfinders are examples of a peer review process working online because editorial decisions are made about which links to include. Many government, library, and professional Web sites often have pathfinders or online directories that lead to recommended sites.

Web sites encountered through search engine queries inspire less immediate confidence. 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.

1. Does the site provide contact information for the site's author(s)?
2. Is it obvious when the site was last updated?
3. Is the jurisdiction clear?
4. Is there a clear distinction between legal information and legal advice?
5. Does the site offer links to further help users?
6. Does the site offer relevant citations to case law and legislation?
7. Does the site offer referrals to contacts for legal advice?
8. Is the site clear of copyright violations? Is the information properly attributed and permissions obtained?
9. Are terms and conditions of use clearly explained?
10. Is a privacy statement conspicuously provided?²

Performing an I.R.S. Audit

The system that I will share incorporates these criteria and helps to frame the critical thought process when encountering a new site. Since this is tax time of year, this system is named the I.R.S. audit: Identification, Reputation, and Sources.

² American Bar Association Law Practice Management Section, "Best Practice Guidelines for Legal Information Web Site Providers" <http://www.abanet.org/elawyerin/tool/practices.shtml> [accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

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. 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.

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. Seven 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 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 search engine. Ask yourself: Does the organization have mission that would make it less likely to present balanced reports? From where or whom does the organization get its 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 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 three sites: one accessed through a pathfinder and two found through a Google search.

MERLOT

Merlot.org is portal created for college and advanced high school educators in the United States. Almost a decade ago, it was one of the very first sites that offered a seal of approval to vetted sites, and it is still going strong. The site is attractive and covers much territory, but substance is the key, not appearance. I trust MERLOT, but I want you to see why. To address the first letter "I" for Identify, click on the "About Us" page, which refers to a registered editorial board.³ On the left navigation column, the first button is labeled "Who we are."⁴ Under this category appears the membership of the editorial board (an impressive list of higher education professors and administrators from across

³ MERLOT Web site, MERLOT Editorial Boards page <http://taste.merlot.org/editorialboards.html> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

⁴ MERLOT Web site, Who We Are page <http://taste.merlot.org/whoweare.html> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

the United States, even representation from the University System of Georgia), the history of the project, and the host institution for the site, the California State University Center for Distributed Learning. A quick search on Networksolutions.com confirms this affiliation.

MERLOT as a portal has passed evaluation, but with such a wide menu a researcher will want to look critically at its law material. A search for “famous trials,” assuming the information need is for a quick overview of major historic trials, pulls up a site with the title “Famous Trials.”⁵ It had been nominated for inclusion into MERLOT, but the person who nominated it has a marketing background, and there are no peer reviews of it.⁶

Going through the I.R.S. audit, first identify who is responsible for the site. Fortunately, the author is upfront with his identity and offers a whole page devoted to his philosophy about the site.⁷ While this example has a very frank level of detail, it is not unusual to have some description of the site’s origin and purpose. The author’s name, Doug O. Linder, should be checked in a search engine or professional directory. The site for the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law verifies that Professor Linder is currently on faculty and lists additional academic and legal credentials.⁸ As for his reputation, a search on SSRN reveals a good volume of downloads of his articles.

The last check is for the sources he references. Clicking on the latest trial, Zazarias Moussaoui, shows a link in the middle to documents and a button at the

⁵ Douglas O. Linder, Famous Trials <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/ftrials.htm> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

⁶ MERLOT, Cathy Swift member profile <http://www.merlot.org/merlot/viewMember.htm?id=11397> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

⁷ Douglas O. Linder, Goals and Purposes of the Famous Trials Site <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/trialsgoals.html> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

⁸ University of Missouri—Kansas City Law School Web site, Douglas O. Linder page <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/linder.htm> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

bottom to click for more links, however, within the article, he attributes quotations without any traceable references. An evaluation of the site would be easier if the quotations were verifiable (by treatise or court document and page or section number), but this site is a current work by an established legal historian.

The Sentencing Project

Switching to a new hypothetical research topic, a Google search for “sentencing” retrieves The Sentencing Project (www.sentencingproject.org). The “About” page clarifies that the purpose of the site is advocacy, not pedagogy like the earlier site.⁹ Having an agenda doesn’t invalidate the information on the site, but it is a caution that the authors will make no attempt to be balanced. Checking the site in Whois.domaintools.com reveals that the site has a fair-sized Web footprint (places link to it and it links out) and has been fairly stable for its ten years of existence. The site is registered to the organization, but the Web site lists the staff, including Marc Mauer, the executive director.¹⁰ His credentials are available on the site, but it is a good idea to verify them elsewhere.

A Google results list shows that Mr. Mauer is a polarizing figure; he makes a profession out of lobbying for judicial reform. The list includes information about a presentation that he gave at University of California—Santa Barbara in 2003.¹¹ It also provides titles for two books he has written. A search on Amazon reveals decent peer reviews of his works and positive excerpts from reviews published in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Publisher’s Weekly*. In sum, The Sentencing Project appears to be a serious

⁹ The Sentencing Project Web site, About page <http://sentencingproject.org/About.aspx> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

¹⁰ The Sentencing Project Web site, Marc Mauer page <http://sentencingproject.org/About.aspx?BiosID=12> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

¹¹ University of California--Santa Barbara Web site, Events page http://www.ihc.ucsb.edu/events/event_files/past/winter03/mauer/index.html [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

work with good credentials, but a researcher needs to remember the slant of the materials found there when digesting the information it contains.

Pew Forum Article

For the last hypothetical research need, more information on the recent Supreme Court hearings into whether lethal injections can constitute “cruel and unusual punishment,” a search for “lethal injection” and “Baze v. Rees” retrieves another site to evaluate. The first non-governmental link in the results is to the Pew Forum. Again, the process begins at the “About” page, which includes information on the research code of ethics for the Pew Research Center. As part of the Pew Research Center, the Forum is to “conduct research ... that is impartial, open-minded and meets the highest standards of methodological integrity.”¹² A double-check on Networksolutions.com verifies the ownership of the Forum by the Research Center.

Taking a look at the specific article, “Lethal Injection on Trial: an Analysis of the Arguments before the Supreme Court in Baze v. Rees” by David Masci.¹³ Mr. Masci is a Senior Research Fellow. Prior to joining Pew, he served as a journalist for *Congressional Quarterly* (CQ) for fourteen years. He has a J.D. from George Washington University and teaches as a part-time faculty member in the Sociology Department at GWU.¹⁴ The article contains appropriate references to related cases that support some of his assertions, but even in this piece there are unattributed quotations. Overall, though, this article performs well through the audit.

¹² Pew Forum Web site, About page, <http://pewforum.org/about/> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

¹³ David Masci, “Lethal Injection on Trial : an Analysis of the Arguments before the Supreme Court in Baze v. Rees,” <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=271> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

¹⁴ George Washington University Dept. of Sociology Web site, Faculty page, <http://www.gwu.edu/~soc/contact/hours.cfm> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2008].

We have moved quickly through our information, and I want to pause and stress the importance of being careful while clicking along on the internet. Take another look at our Google search for David Masci. His name sounds uncommon, but below all the CQ hits is a link to the LinkedIn network. This “David Masci,” although he is a lawyer, is not the Pew fellow. Also always try to verify information independently in at least two locations. With Professor Linder, we searched his home institution’s site to verify his educational affiliation, even though he displays it prominently on the site. In our Pew example, we found the organizational affiliation on the Web site and also on Networksolutions.com. “Trust but verify” is a good mantra.

Conclusion

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 database or pathfinder. 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.