

Information On The Internet Often Bears A Double Check

The Internet is a handy tool for accessing quick, up-to-the-minute information. But how do you tell if the information you are reading is accurate?

Did you know that TWA Flight 800, the commercial airliner that tragically crashed in July 1996 off the Long Island coast, was accidentally shot down by a U.S. Navy missile? OK, this is just one example of a rumor that was widely circulated on the Internet. But some people believed it, including such respected authorities as Pierre Salinger, former ABC News correspondent and one-time press secretary to John F. Kennedy. Salinger embarrassed himself by announcing to the world that he had “indisputable” proof, only to have his proof quickly debunked.

In reality, the Internet is overflowing with rumors, gossip, hoaxes, exaggerations, falsehoods, ruses and scams. Though the Net can reveal useful, factual information that you would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere, it can also appear to be a gigantic electronic tabloid.

“Information on the Net has an aura of credibility that it may not warrant,” says Joyce Flory, Ph.D., a Chicago-based co-author of five books about the Internet.

Can you ever trust the Internet? Sure you can. You just need to apply critical thinking in evaluating the information and advice you come across. Here’s a six-step approach for doing this.

1 Just as you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, don’t judge a Web site by its appearance. Sure, if a Web site looks professional rather than slopped together, chances are greater that the information within it will be accurate and reliable.

But looks can and do deceive, frequently. A flashy site can merely be a marketing front for quack health remedies or an illegal pyramid scheme.

2 Try to find out who’s behind the information. If you’re looking at a Web site, check if the author or creator is identified. See if there are links to a page listing professional credentials or affiliations. Be very skeptical if no authorship information is provided.

If you’re looking at a message in a Usenet newsgroup or Internet mailing list, see if the author has included a signature—a short, often biographical, description that’s automatically appended to the end of messages. Many people include their credentials in their signature or point to their home page where they provide biographical information.

3 Try to determine the reason the information was posted. Among those who create Web sites are publishing companies, professional and trade organizations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies, educational

RELIABLE SOURCES

If you’d like to delve further into the issue of information credibility on the Internet, there are Web sites out there that let you do just that. Here are a couple good ones.

The Sheridan Libraries of The John Hopkins University (<http://www.library.jhu.edu/elp/useit/evaluate/>)

University of California, Los Angeles College Library (<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/>)

Health On The Net Foundation—especially good for evaluating health information found on the Web. (<http://www.hon.ch/Conduct.html>)

institutions, individual researchers, political and advocacy groups, and hobbyists.

Each has its own agenda, sometimes explicit, sometimes hidden. Unearth the agenda, and keep it in mind when evaluating the information presented.

Similarly, look behind and between the words posted in Usenet and mailing list discussions. Is the author trying to promote his own ends or be helpful? You can often do both, but not always. Someone posting inside information about a stock probably has his

message or otherwise date its content, check out some of its links. If more than a couple of the links are no longer working, the information at the site may no longer be up to date either.

5 Try to verify the same information elsewhere. This is particularly important if the information is at odds with your previous understanding, or if you intend to use it for critical purposes such as an important health, family or business decision.

own interests at heart, not yours.

4 Look for the date the information was created or modified. Unless you’re doing historical research, current information is usually more valid and useful than older material.

If the Web site doesn’t provide a “last updated”

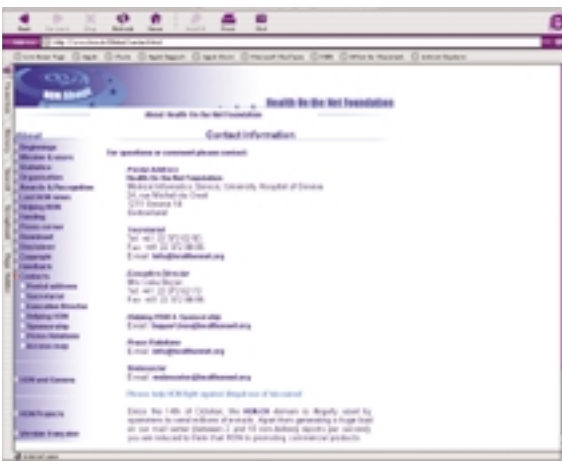
Ideally, you should confirm the information with at least two other sources. Librarians and information scientists call this the “principle of triangulation of data.” Spending a bit of time validating the material, through the Internet or at a local library, can be well worth the investment.

6 Try to find out how others feel about the reliability and professionalism of the Web site you’re looking at. There are a number of review guides that offer evaluations of other sites. Some of these guides review thousands of sites.

Bottom line: With any information you come across on the Net, the watchword is “Caveat lector”—Let the reader beware.



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