Virtual Reality: Evaluating Online Information

by

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It all started with Sean Ellickson. He had shoulder-length, red dreadlocks and a triple-pierced eyebrow. His baggy jeans and T-shirt were generally so filled with holes that they only seemed to remain on his body by some amazing combination of faith, safety pins, and duct tape. He owned five Volkswagen Bugs, and his hobby was fixing and restoring these cars to mint condition. He also played guitar in several local coffee shops. In a class filled with business majors, he stood out.

For their first persuasive paper, I asked my students to pick a topic that they really cared about, an issue that they could research and take a stand on. He chose legalizing marijuana. Generally this is a topic that I try to discourage. I’ve read too many first-person accounts of the benefits of getting high to really want to have to plow through still more of that. But Sean convinced me that this really was a topic that mattered to him, so I shrugged and let him loose. However, I must admit that I cringed a little when I read the opening sentence of his rough draft. “What do Bill Clinton, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, and Pavarotti all have in common? They all use pot on a regular basis.” Well, at least he’d followed my suggestion to open with something to catch the reader’s attention. When I talked with him about his paper, I asked about the source for this opening quote. He told me that he’d found it on a really cool Web site: “www.weed, or something like that.” For over a year or so, I’d been noticing the gradual addition of Web sites into my students’ research projects, but www.weed served as a wake-up call.

It was becoming pretty clear that my students were woefully unprepared for the complexities of online research. Considering the difficulty that many of them have with standard, less complex print sources, this didn’t come as much of a surprise.

Those of us who teach students to research know that one of the challenges of our job is to get students to question their sources, to realize that every writer has some bias, that every story has another side or two or three and that many sources may have hidden — and sometimes not so hidden — agendas. I remind my students of the now-famous phrase from the sixties, “Question Authority,” and I point out that if they do a search for the origins of that phrase, they will find that it has been attributed to several different people over the years. The originator may in fact be impossible to ever reliably determine. I also ask students to compare articles on the same subject from two ideologically different periodicals — say, Mother Jones and the Wall Street Journal — and they begin to see how the biases of each journal play themselves out in print as they note what information gets included and what doesn’t, who gets quoted and who does not. We also look at whose facts and statistics are given and what rhetoric is used to frame the issue. This helps students to begin to see that the sources they once thought were neutral are in fact heavily biased.

I also talk with my students about the editorial process, a system of careful cutting and selection. I point out that every quote or sound bite that makes its way into an article or newscast is probably the end product
of an interview that may have lasted for over an hour. I ask them to read excerpts from several revealing books on how the news gets 'produced' as well as Debra Seagal's article, "On the Cutting Room Floor" that described the biased selection process that goes into creating "true life" and "real crime" police docudramas. I also describe my own experience as a production intern at a public radio station where part of my job involved lifting quotes from interviews and "cleaning up" interviewee's grammar problems, including being told to make one African American student sound more "intelligent" by editing out his use of nonstandard English.

We talk about the difference between opinion and fact, and I try to get them to question the authority of the experts they use and to remember that three other experts might very well have three other opinions. Recently, during one such discussion, my students took particular interest. Melissa, nodding her head, drew a parallel, "It's like those movie reviews. Every time Siskel and Ebert say something is fantastic, I end up hating it." Then Emily added, "Yeah, and those ads in the paper are the worst. They list about twenty critics raving about a movie that's a piece of trash."

So we decided to look a little more closely at the movies, or at least at the ads and reviews that get quoted in them. We talked about the dangers of decontextualized quotes, and I sent them off to find some of the actual reviews that were quoted in several movie ads. Natalie brought in an example from the film Boogie Nights. The ad for the movie quoted Richard Corliss's review from Time magazine, "Boogie Nights is Goodfellas meets Pulp Fiction." However, the actual review was less enthusiastic. Corliss originally said, "Boogie Nights has panoramic ambition: a tapestry-style narrative, labyrinthine tracking shots, explosions of random, firecracker violence. Nashville meets Goodfellas meets Pulp Fiction. The film doesn't quite get there." A long way from the ad's implications. Matt found that "Smashing!" in one ad was actually lifted from this quote, "Besides smashing heads and jiggling bikinis, this film has little to offer."

Several students also pointed out that most movie ads quote reviews from TV or radio sources that really can't be checked out. Too often my students have been all too willing to believe anything if it's in print. Exercises like these help to get them to start questioning their sources to become more skeptical. One of my colleagues at the University of Minnesota, Don Ross, recently surveyed composition students about their research methods. He was particularly interested in how they determined the relevancy and accuracy of their sources. He found that most students looked only at the first few sources they found and that while they attached some importance to what their instructors and the library staff had to say about these sources, for the most part "students decide pretty much on their own what is important or true." He suggested that most instructors probably are not doing enough to help students reach this kind of determination.

Asking students to question the authority and veracity of their sources has become even more important in the era of cyberspace. The Internet is exploding with information available at the click of a button. But often our students have little skill at evaluating the effectiveness, validity, or reliability of their Internet sources. Their willingness to believe anything in print extends to the cyberpage as well. Sean is an intelligent young man, but he hadn't bothered to think much about the veracity of his source. When I asked him to reflect on the likelihood of Bill Clinton continuing to get high in the White House or of Sandra Day O'Connor smoking a joint in the Supreme Court, he agreed that it seemed pretty unlikely.

It is important to note that students are not the only ones duped into believing Internet hoaxes. In one of the most publicized scams of recent times, the well-respected correspondent Pierre Salinger made a fool of himself by giving credence to the conspiracy theory that TWA flight 800 had been shot down by a Navy missile. Salinger's claims created a national stir, caused unnecessary pain and distress to the victims' families, and were utterly groundless. His "excellent" source was an Internet site run by the now infamous Ian Goddered — an unreliable conspiracy monger whose Web site included information about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots, as well as the erroneous
with powerful and exciting possibilities as well as significant challenges. So my students and I have started looking at and evaluating Web sites.

Initially I ask students to apply the same criteria to evaluate Web sites as they do to their print sources. The traditional print evaluation criteria of authority, accuracy, currency, coverage, and objectivity are good places to start.

**Authority:** Who wrote the Web page? Is an author even listed? If so, can you find out any information about his or her credentials? Is the site affiliated with a reputable organization like a government agency or a university?

**Accuracy:** How accurate does the information seem to be? Can you check any of the facts, studies, statistics, or quotes given on the page? Does the information seem to mesh with what you already know about the subject and with what other sources are saying? Have other reliable sources referred to or linked you to this site?

**Coverage:** How thorough is the site? Does it provide you with helpful, detailed information? Are there a variety of carefully selected links to allow browsers to access further information?

**Currency:** When was the site created and when was it last updated? On the Web, where currency is both easy and expected, an infrequently updated site is automatically suspect. Also, are the links updated in addition to the site itself?

**Objectivity:** Does the site seem to provide balanced, thoughtful information or is it heavily biased or inflammatory?

After considering these traditional evaluation criteria, I ask students to also look at cyber-specific features. Is the site fast, usable, friendly, and cool? Does it provide helpful links to other sites, interesting graphics, and multimedia options? Is it original and creative? Does it provide its users with any real reasons to return to it?
I have my students read what other online sources have to say about evaluating Web sites (see a list in the bibliography at the end of the article) and together we come up with a list of important criteria to apply to our Web sources. I also try to make students aware of the other problems inherent in this new and quickly changing medium. Recently, many online services have begun to respond to the overwhelming amount of information on the Web by offering (usually for a fee) a service that provides an online review of Web sites. James Rettig’s online article “Beyond Cool” does an excellent job of pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of a plethora of these evaluators. Although touted as excellent time savers, most of these services provide no criteria for their evaluations and rarely look beyond the aesthetics of the site, usually ignoring the quality and reliability of a site’s information. Instead, if it looks “cool” and has some neat graphics, it’s rated highly.

One site that gets high marks for appearance is FORCES (www.forces.org). I ask my students to evaluate this award-winning, pro-tobacco site. Initially, they find it impressive. According to Ryan, “This site is up front about its intentions. You can actually access information here, judge its credibility yourself.” The site’s sheer size, apparent comprehensiveness, appealing design, and ease of navigation all clearly contribute to its favorable reviews.

But a closer look reveals highly suspicious information. This site, which claims to provide “Important news stories you’d most likely not see in your local papers,” presents page after page of “medical” reports that supposedly refute all conventional medical knowledge about the health dangers of smoking. However, as David noted, “Although the site gave sources from where its information came from, the information was often only presented as a small quote from an entire study. I am not very trusting of quotes unless I can see their entire source.” Jeff stated that “The evidence section just seemed pretty fruity to me, what are all these journals they keep quoting? I’ve never heard of any of them.” Tracy wanted to know, “Where are the links? Most sites have links to dozens of other good sites. Forces only gives propaganda links to get you to write to congress in support of pro-tobacco legislation.”

She’s right; the site provides nothing to help users determine the validity of any of the hundreds of

**Websites: Information and More**

Because I teach business writing, I want my students to be able to judge not only the authority, accuracy and objectivity of sites, but also their effectiveness in promoting the enterprises they represent. So in addition to institutional sites such as the American Cancer Society, we also looked at commercial sites such as Walmart and Target. Here are some student comments on these sites.

**www.wal-mart.com**

There are too many options which make the site seem overwhelming to search through. There seems to be lots of wasted, unnecessary information.

You need additional software to access their stocks and annual reports — a dead end for me.

I was bombarded by about 150 options as to where to go. It seemed like Wal-Mart was attempting to sell the entire store and everything in it on this single page.

**www.target.com**

Nice set of links to family-friendly activities and links. The table of contents makes navigation a breeze, but it should be on the front page.

I couldn’t view any of the merchandise, Target’s main reason for a site, isn’t it?

They add to their credibility by promoting their charity support online, as well as the education thing and their community support. Smart.

**www.cancer.org**

Even in the news section, I couldn’t find a date for when it was last updated. This hurts its credibility. Some of the information here is very date sensitive.

It offers a generous amount of information as well as helpful links for people looking for information about cancer and its treatment. It also gives an 800 number for those needing to talk to a real person.

I only found the Hope, Progress, and Answers links by accident. Maybe they could feature a few positive things more prominently.
studies it cites or the "health" information it provides. None of the journals and studies that it cites are linked, no health organization of any kind is linked, and there is no easy way to check the accuracy of any of the information provided by Forces.com.

Also, many students were turned off by the site's lack of objectivity. Although they realized that Forces.com is meant to be wholeheartedly pro-tobacco, most students were disturbed by what was to them the site's inability to consider the other side of the issue. Carrie wrote, "They don't even touch on why people want things to be smoke-free. They just keep saying that if you aren't allowed to smoke then you aren't really free. It just seems like Forces is yelling throughout the entire Website." Mark added, "What really annoyed me was the note for anti-smokers: 'Don't bother spilling your bile here. Go to a site that really cares.' After seeing this, I felt that I had enough of this site. That statement showed that they had no understanding of the other side of the argument, and people like that shouldn't be taken seriously." Tracy was also bothered by Forces' attitude: "The site rudely dismisses nonsmokers and is disrespectful in its tone — that makes me know I've seen enough."

Several students took a hard look at the site's impressive layout and fun graphics. Nadia said, "At first I liked their use of frames and all the color and moving words, but then all the flashing got to be distracting. I wanted to just turn off the little red flashing sentences." Mindy summed it up, noting, "I think that this site is not for serious people. I'd guess that they target younger kids or people who are not very well educated." However, despite the many problems my students describe, Forces.com has been praised by Lycos, Magellan, and LookSmart.

David Citron writes in his CyberCurmudgeon Column of another alarming new development that most people are unaware of in cyber research. He reports that some online search engines have now started selling their top spots — those sites that appear in the first ten or twenty hits in a supposedly random search — to the highest bidders. He points out that the ethics of this are equivalent to a newspaper selling its front-page stories to the highest paying corporations or political candidates. This become even more alarming when we remember Ross's survey that found that students generally only consider the first few sources that they find, often lacking the persistence to sort through dozens of print sources let alone the thousands of Web sites that may result from an online search.

It is clear that the Internet provides our students with a wealth of exciting opportunities. Online resources continue to grow exponentially. With the click of a button, our students can go from the New York Times online to the Drudge Review, from the American Cancer Society to Forces.com, and they can exchange email with experts, charlatans, friends, and pedophiles. We need to provide them with tools beyond a mouse, a modem, and a monitor to access and evaluate the barrage of information available to them. They need to understand that just because they found it on the Web doesn't mean they have a great source. They need to become better skeptics and learn to "question authority," whoever said it first.

Sources and Sites


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