How to Evaluate Internet Information

In theory, anyone can publish whatever they want on the internet; therefore, it is critical that those searching it develop a critical eye and evaluate the credibility of the information found. The massive amount of information, both good and bad, is time consuming to search through, and many search engines rank material according to their idea of what is relevant to your search terms. However, this doesn’t mean the material is relevant to want you want or that it is from a reliable site or source. Unlike similar information found in print or news broadcasts, information available on the internet is not regulated for quality or accuracy; therefore, it is particularly important for the you, the information consumer, to evaluate what you find there.

According to Driscoll and Brizee (2017), “Traditional print sources go through an extensive publication process that includes editing and review. This process has fact-checkers, multiple reviewers, and editors to ensure quality of publication” (para 3). However, much of what is found on the internet doesn’t have a print equivalent, so it has low or no quality standards for publication. Anyone with a computer and access to the internet can publish a website or electronic document, and most internet documents do not have any type of reviewer.

When writing a paper or speech, your opinions and ideas need to be backed up with research; incorporating information from experts and authorities gives you more credibility. When you look at a variety of sources from different perspectives, it helps you develop and refine your argument. You need multiple perspectives, taken as a whole, in order to get the complete picture. Using credible, believable, and trustworthy sources makes what you say credible, believable, and trustworthy, and using quality research contributes to the effectiveness of your argument or position.

To determine the validity and credibility of information you find on the internet or in any other source, including books and journal articles, one evaluation tool you can use is the CRAAP Test. This tool requires you to look at the information you’ve found and evaluate it’s currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose.

Determining the currency or timeliness of the information is especially important when looking at nursing and medical information, so it’s critical that these sources have a date. According to Driscoll and Brizee (2017), internet sources’ dates of publication and timeliness are questionable; a creation or revision date tells you when the information was written or revised, but a posted date or date updated doesn’t necessarily do so. Print sources clearly include the date of publication, publisher, author, and editor (Driscoll & Brizee, 2017). Authorship and affiliations are difficult to determine on the Internet however. Some sites may have an author or sponsorship listed, but many do not. Websites usually have a copyright date, but this doesn’t tell you when the information was written; so, copyright dates should NOT be used in your references and in-text citations. Use “n.d.” instead when there is just a copyright date or there is no date at all.

Determining the relevance of the information to your topic is the second part of the CRAAP Test. You need to determine if the information relates to your topic, answers your question, or supports your claim. It’s also important that the information is at an appropriate level for your intended audience. If it’s not, you’ll need to look for a better source.

Determining the authority of the information is the third part of the CRAAP Test. Print sources clearly indicate who the author is, what organization he or she is affiliated with, and when his or her work was published (Driscoll & Brizee, 2017). Authorship and affiliations are difficult to determine on the Internet however. Some sites may have an author or sponsorship listed, but many do not. Even if the author is listed, he or she may not always represent him or herself honestly, or he or she may represent opinions as fact. The responsibility is on the user to evaluate resources effectively. As a thoughtful student and information consumer you need to ask: Who is the author of this information and what are the credentials or qualifications of the author to write on the topic? Is there any
Determining the accuracy of the information you’ve found is the fourth part of the CRAAP Test. As stated earlier, there are no standards for the information found on the internet; anyone can create a website to use as a sounding board for their thoughts and opinions. If you are going to cite information found on a website, it’s important to know whether you can trust the accuracy of the facts presented. Some things to consider include whether the information is supported by evidence or not, if it’s been peer reviewed, and whether it has a list of credible, authoritative sources cited at the end of it. If the information is not backed up with sources, what is the author’s relationship to the subject to be able to give an "expert" opinion? You should determine if the factual information on a website can be verified in other sources—through a reference to or citation of a clearly reliable source, for example. These are all important things to consider.

Determining the purpose of the information is the last piece of the CRAAP Test. Knowing the motive behind the page’s creation can help you judge its content. What is the author trying to do with the information - inform, teach, sell, persuade, or entertain? The author’s intention or purpose should be clear, objective, impartial and based on fact, not opinion or propaganda. The information should not be biased politically, ideologically, culturally, religiously, institutionally, or personally. If you see clues that the author is biased, selling or promoting a product, or taking a personal stand on a social/political issue be sure you are aware of this. Bias is not necessarily "bad," but the connections should be clear. Credible sources will be based on fact, not opinion, and they will be objective and unbiased.

A clue as to whether information may be credible and unbiased can be found in the beginning of the web address or URL of the link. The extension at the end of an internet address before the first forward slash (/) correlates to the server for that internet address. Based on this extension, you can make an educated guess as to the credibility of the information. Credible sources will have a .gov or .edu extension at the end of the web address indicating that this information is coming from a government or educational site. Organizational sites, indicated by a .org, can be good sources as well; if unfamiliar, you may need to evaluate the organization by going to their “About Us” page and seeing what types of information they provide about themselves and by looking at what others have to say about it. Commercial sites, indicated by a .com, take more evaluation, as these sites may promote only one viewpoint or endorse only one product. Information from a government, educational institution, or well-know organization should be used over information on a .com site.

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Most of the information on the internet is distributed via websites, but websites vary widely in quality of information and validity of sources. Some additional types of information sources on the internet include blogs, message boards, and multimedia sites. Blogs are a type of interactive journal where writers post and readers respond. They vary widely in quality of information and validity of sources. While many prestigious journalists and public figures have blogs which may be credible, a vast majority of bloggers have little authority on the topic they write on. Blogs tend to be based on opinion and not necessarily on fact.

Message boards, discussion lists, and chat rooms exist for all kinds of disciplines, and while some are credible, plenty exist that are unhelpful and poorly researched. You may be able to find out how others deal with a problem or issue, but you will not necessarily be getting quality information. Additionally, the internet has a multitude of multimedia resources including videos, online broadcasts, news, images, audio files, and interactive websites. These need to be evaluated as well.

Because there is so much information on the internet, you need to evaluate carefully whatever you find there. The burden is on you - the reader - to establish the validity, authorship, timeliness, and integrity of what you find. Documents can easily be copied and falsified or copied with omissions and errors -- intentional or accidental. In the general there are no editors on the internet (unlike most print publications) to proofread and "send it back" or "reject it" until it meets the standards of a publishing house's reputation. Most web pages found in general search engines are self-published or published by businesses small and large with motives to get you to buy something or believe a point of view. If you want to use the internet for serious research, you need to cultivate the habit of healthy skepticism, of questioning everything you find with critical thinking.

References:
