Information Literacy
Internet Research Skills:
I. Classification

A central function of publishers and libraries is to exclude, screening out a number of materials in the process of selecting resources for publication or purchase. This work of exclusion shielded researchers and students from a huge proportion of the information circulating in the world. Now that we have access to a much wider range of sources, we have to develop new skills to evaluate them. The new information environment necessitates a much more actively critical approach to the sources we use.

Because it can be so much more difficult to evaluate the reliability of online sources and because they are so much less controlled than the resources available in a library, many in academia express extreme scepticism of the value of any online source. There is a tendency to seek to resolve the issues around evaluation and quality by excluding Internet sources. Much of this scepticism is well founded, but the response to these challenges is not to turn away from online sources. Instead, it is important to develop information literacy, a new set of skills to help us to develop a better understanding of the materials we are looking at, to allow us to evaluate authority and credibility and to understand the context in which materials have been produced.

Classification

A useful starting point for evaluating online sources is to begin with a classification of the materials you are dealing with. Classifying involves putting a document in a category in order to be able to assess it according to the standards appropriate to that category. When you've decided a document is a news document, you won't be disappointed that it's not footnoted. You won't expect an advocacy document to be neutral. Conversely, when an academic document clearly falls short of the standards of proof that you expect of such materials, you have a right to be particularly sceptical of its conclusions. The guidelines below are not intended as a set of rigid instructions to be followed mechanically, but as a series of questions that can usefully be asked about any online materials. Doing this is valuable in itself, allowing you to develop a better understanding of the nature of the source.

▪ Advocacy

Advocacy groups such as political parties, non-governmental organizations or pressure groups advocate a particular cause or viewpoint. They weigh up competing arguments as they develop these positions but that process of weighing up is not their prime concern. The advancement of a particular point of view is their core purpose.

Some advocacy groups systematically and deliberately distort and exaggerate facts in pursuit of their aims. On the other hand, many advocacy groups produce work of extremely high quality. The work of groups such as *Amnesty International* draws on academic standards while also seeking to have a direct political impact. They are valuable academic resources and we need to be careful not to approach all advocacy documents with unduly high levels of scepticism.

Generally, you will recognize an advocacy document because it will be clearly marked with the name of the group that produced it. If not, the name of the group should be there on the site home page. Although many advocacy groups use the *.org domain*, not all such groups use the domain. Therefore, the URL does not provide a reliable guide, although many try to avoid the *.com domain*. Be aware that some advocacy groups try to give their arguments more credibility by making themselves sound like academic organizations with titles like the 'Centre for Research on …' or the 'Institute for the Study of …'.

▪ Academia

Academic documents undergo some sort of quality control, be it the examination process a thesis or dissertation goes through, the peer review which journal articles are subject to, or the editorial process academic books go through.

Academic documents are accorded a certain degree of authority because of the experience of authors, reflected in their academic qualifications and their other publications. Academic work goes through a set of procedures that provide at least some sort of quality control.

Academia attracts a certain amount of respect, as a source of unbiased research. As a result, certain advocacy groups, businesses and news sources try to make their documents look like academic documents. Several countries have domains which are reserved for academic institutions, *edu* in the USA, *ac.uk* in Britain, *ac.jp* in Japan, *edu.au* in Australia, for example.

There are now large numbers of academic draft papers and works in progress on the web. Although these are clearly academic documents, you cannot treat them like published articles. In many cases authors stipulate that you should not quote from or cite these articles without direct permission from the author. You can read them and print them, but you can only cite them after contacting the author, assuming your own supervisor is happy for you to use materials which haven't taken final form.

▪ Official Documents

Official documents are those produced by public institutions, and by government and international agencies. They include documents from the smallest local council or fire department up to national bodies such as government departments and agencies. They include documents from international organizations, from the UN and OPEC to NATO, etc. Many governments have their own domain (*gov* in the USA, *gov.uk* in Britain, *gov.jp* in Japan) or their government affiliation is often clear from their URL. Many US states have their own domains. Thus *ca.gov* is the domain for the California state government. Some US states have domains that do not come under the overall *gov* domain, such as New York State, whose domain is *state.ny.us.* Government domains in most cases only cover central government. Local and regional bodies often make their own arrangements and it is not as straightforward to identify them by their URLs. Political considerations do of course influence official documents, and in certain cases they shade over into clear advocacy of particular positions.

The boundary between official and news sources can be unclear. Many countries have official news agencies connected to government. Despite being government agencies, their prime function is to provide news. Apart from this, many governments issue press releases and print publications to promote the government currently in power. These are not news services but they sometimes look like they are, particularly on the web where it's easy to put together a collection of government statements and call them a news bulletin or news update.

▪ News

Traditional news sources such as wire services, newspapers, TV and radio news programmes, and magazines are being joined by new media sources such as news blogs and alternative online news sources. The line between government and advocacy groups and news sources can be quite unclear at times.

Most online newspapers still follow the basic layout of the print version -a front page with short summaries of stories that appear inside- so that you recognize them as news sources immediately from their familiar layout. Likewise, the websites of TV news services are clearly identified. The wire services provide news stories to huge numbers of other Web services but they always clearly stamp their name on the individual news stories. These are news documents no matter what kind of site they appear on.

As with academia, the news media has a reasonably high level of credibility. Some advocacy groups imitate the style, layout and terminology of news documents in an attempt to increase their credibility. News sources, like academia, aspire to the pursuit of truth and the ideal of objectivity. Unlike academia, news sources set lower formal standards of proof and referencing of sources. They are not footnoted. They can and do give the opinions of individuals as though they represent the opinions of an entire group. Standards vary from one news organization to another. Many news sources have only the barest consideration for the ideals of objectivity and put considerably more weight on another core purpose of news-gathering: the selling of news as a product.

▪ Personal Pages

The recent expansion of services such as Myspace has made it a simple matter for anyone with Internet access to set up their own web page and blog. Millions of people have web pages that are primarily concerned with their private lives. Many people use their web pages to express their personal opinions on matters of public debate, but few of them expect that others will rely on these private pages as authoritative sources of information. The informal tone and presentation mark these contributions to public debate as essentially private expressions of opinion.

There are a number of measures for assessing the value and reliability of a personal page. As the product of a single individual, its reliability will depend on this individual alone. You can look for indicators of how much trust to place in them. Consider what their qualifications to write on the subject are. These qualifications can range from academic degrees to direct personal experience to previous publications on the topic. Finally, evaluate them for accuracy and objectivity.

▪ Business/Marketing Pages

These are pages set up by commercial companies with the purpose of selling a product and promoting the company. While they may provide useful information about the company, this information is there to promote the company and its products. When using such pages you have to be constantly aware of this fact and of the very important consequences it has for the reliability of the information provided. Be aware that businesses do sometimes try to present their materials as 'news' or 'research' to give it more credibility.

The *.com domain* was created for businesses and is used by businesses worldwide. In addition, many countries have their own commercial domains, such as *.co.uk* in the UK. Just because a site has a *.com* address doesn't automatically make it a business/marketing site, however. Many news organizations, advocacy groups and private individuals use the *.com domain.*