EVALUATING INFORMATION SOURCES

We constantly evaluate information to guide our decision-making process in both our personal and professional lives. Information is available at our fingertips around the clock; we can easily search the Internet, browse library holdings, or even access experts in Google chat sessions. Not only is it easier to find information, but there is a lot more of it. It can be challenging to evaluate the integrity of information sources when developing Extension programming. Not all the information available is valid, useful or accurate. Evaluating information sources is an important skill that involves deciding where to look for information, sifting through it, and deciding what to accept. This fact sheet provides guidelines to evaluating information sources. It starts with identifying characteristics to check: authority, timeliness, quality, relevancy, and bias (Bell & Frantz, 2014). Next, it looks more closely at special considerations for evaluating online sources of information and red flags to keep in mind.

CHARACTERISTICS TO CONSIDER WHEN EVALUATING INFORMATION SOURCES

AUTHORITY

- Take a close look at the author's credentials, such as his or her educational history and relevant employment. Authors with advanced degrees or other published books and articles tend to be more credible. You can look for this information on the author's webpage or in other biographical sources (Bell & Frantz, 2014).

- Determine if the author is currently associated with a reputable organization by considering the organization's membership, mission, and vision (if applicable).

- Use citation databases or indexes to track how often a source has been cited by others in the field (Bell & Frantz, 2014).

- Investigate the publisher or trade organization by examining their website to get a better idea of their basic values and goals (Bell & Frantz, 2014). Sources published by a university press, professional society, scientific publisher, or a peer-reviewed scholarly journal will have gone through a strict editing process (Mills, n.d.).

TIMELINESS

- Look for the date of publication and consider if the topic you are investigating requires the most updated information (Bell & Frantz, 2014). In some cases, older sources of information can still be sound 50 to 100 years later.

- Sources published recently tend to be more credible than older sources as new research is conducted.

- Check if a book has a more recent edition.

QUALITY

- Check for accurate grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

- See if the information is organized in terms of clarity, flow, and structure (Bell & Frantz, 2014).

RELEVANCY

- Consider if the content is appropriate for your purposes. When developing Extension programming, you will probably want to consider scholarly sources rather than popular sources — but that might not always be the case.

BIAS

- Determine if the author has a particular bias or if their goal is to sell a service or persuade you to their viewpoint (Bell & Frantz, 2014).

- Look for sources with authors who appear to have considered various perspectives as opposed to biased sources that present evidence only supporting one side.

- Read the source's introduction and conclusion. Ask yourself if opposing viewpoints are acknowledged or addressed (Bell & Frantz, 2014). If the source represents only one view, you will want to read additional sources that represent and provide evidence for other perspectives.

- Check that the author's arguments and conclusions are supported by credible and cited sources (Bell & Frantz, 2014).

SPECIAL CONCERNS FOR ONLINE SOURCES

It is much easier to publish material online than in a book or reputable magazine. As a result, print sources tend to be more credible than online sources. Keep the following additional considerations in mind when evaluating online sources of information.

AUTHORITY	Anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can publish a website without having any particular qualifications (Driscoll & Brizee, 2013). There are no existing standards for publication to the Internet nor is it regulated or monitored. Sometimes it is not even clear who is the author of a webpage, whereas print publications clearly indicate the author and his or her affiliations.
TIMELINESS	Dates of publication and timeliness of information can be questionable on Internet sources. Dates listed on websites can be the date posted, date updated, or a date may not exist at all (Driscoll & Brizee, 2013). The date may tell you whether the page author is still maintaining the page or has abandoned it (Barker & Hennesy, 2012).
QUALITY	Internet sources do not go through the same publication process as print sources, which includes editors and reviewers (Driscoll & Brizee, 2013). Internet sources typically do not refer to sources the author used to develop their content so the reader is unable to trace reference materials. The url domain name can provide insights. The extension indicates the type of group hosting the site which may be an indicator of quality: commercial (.com), educational (.edu), nonprofit (.org), government (.gov), military (.mil) or network (.net) (Barker & Hennesy, 2012).
RELEVANCY	Consider if Internet sources are appropriate to guide the development of Extension programming. This may depend on the audience or content.
BIAS	A website may appear to be factual but actually be persuasive and/or deceptive (Driscoll & Brizee, 2013). While bias can exist in print publications, most publishers will clearly indicate when they are catering to special interest groups.

RED FLAGS

If a source has any of the following, you will want to look elsewhere:

- Spelling and typographical errors
- Poor grammar
- Inflammatory or emotional language or images
- Graphic styles aimed at persuading you to accept the author's point of view

- Vague or sweeping generalizations that are not back by evidence
- Broad generalizations that overstate or oversimplify the matter
- Political, ideological, or financial goals
- An ironic tone, this could indicate that the source is actually satire or parody (Barker & Hennesy, 2012)

REFERENCES

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