Evaluating Online Resources

Elaine Studnicki
Duquesne University, USA

INTRODUCTION

In a matter of seconds, a person using the Web will make a decision. Do I stay on this Web site or click to another? There are many reasons for this reaction. For many the decisions are unconscious behavior and for others it is a matter of speed. Still others focus on content. Regardless, the ability to get users to a Web site and keep them there has become big business for both business and educational institutions. According to Internet Usage Statistics (2007), the Internet World Stats Web site, over 1 billion people use the Internet worldwide. The MIT home page is accessed about 2000 time a day from around the world. And use is on the rise. In 2009 the completion of an 18,000 km oceanic cable drop linking South Korea, China, and Taiwan with the United States Internet sends a clear signal that usage and dependency will only increase in the future and spread around the world. This creates an imperative that users are keenly aware of where they surf, what information they share, and, most importantly, if they can believe what they read and see.

Internet search skills go beyond personal preference. Clearly initial reaction will play an important role in surfing the Web. It may be this reaction that the user engages when they click on a Web site for the first time. But understanding the primary reason and purpose for surfing will help the user navigate successfully. In December 2005, a survey from the PEW Internet & American Life Project reports that nearly a third of Internet users go online on a typical day for no particular reason but just for fun or to pass the time. Some 40 million people said they were surfing for fun on a typical day during the month. What is alarming is that this number is up from 25 million people who were browsing for no particular reason in November 2004, the most recent time when this question was asked. However the Web is a complicated place and sometimes it isn't a lot of fun. To understand its plethora of options, the user needs to be aware and understand how it works and how individuals, companies, governments, and educational institutions use it.

Educators surf for fun, too, but they also use the Internet for serious professional and personal reasons. They use it to offer online classes, to provide students with instructional resources, to connect with colleagues around the world using data and video, and to plan family vacations and pay bills. It certainly is changing how we teach, learn, communicate, and live our daily lives. The idea that millions of people browse for no particular reason lends credence to our changing lifestyles.

Because of these changes, knowing what is a good Web site and why you are there becomes even more critical. The ability to evaluate online resources requires the convergence of several skill sets. Assessment can be so quick that a user will simultaneously fuse personal choice, experience, technical access, and the awareness of authoritative content to evaluate a Web site and moments later move on to another location. In fact, according to an article in PC Magazine in 2001 the average length of stay on a Web site is 4 seconds; 50% less then earlier believed (Metz, 2001).

We all have a pretty good idea of what we like and don't like. Our instincts and senses react quickly to what is in front of us. We make these choices based on years of decisions and character development and we have it down. We are organic, crafters, researchers, and lovers of movies, clothes, music, or cars. We shop on the Web, learn on the Web, and chat on the Web and do this all within pockets of the Web that give us comfort and what we need to be happy to return and do it again. The Internet really wants to service our needs and give us that product that we'll purchase or share with others. Of course this is called sales and consumerism. We all know that it is not the Internet but people on the Internet who offer these opportunities. The Internet is one vehicle that we use to take care of our needs. Using the Web, we are given more choices today than at any other time in history. And even though we know what we like, choosing can get pretty confusing! So to understand why we like certain pages on the Web it is important to go beyond our personal first impressions of color, text, and appearance and consider how the Internet manages and promotes itself.

Why this is important is because we don't only "take" from the Web, we "give" to the Web. We become part of an international family sharing personal information. It can be as confidential as bank account and credit card numbers and as important as your hobbies, interests, clothes preferences, and travel plans. Once we enter personal information, we are a part of the system. Some feel it is like being managed by the Oz behind the curtain: the all knowing being who guides us to choose their product so discreetly at times that we think it is our own idea. The saving grace is that we do have choices! Understanding our needs and how consumerism works on the Internet helps us to make good choices that are personal and meaningful to our needs. We need to be careful and think first before we give out personal information of any kind.

There are reasons we travel to certain Web pages. An empirical study performed in 2001 by Zhang and von Dran (2002) of Syracuse University helps us understand Web site similarities and differences. They identified six different Web site domains: financial, e-commerce, entertainment, education, government, and medical. Obviously each of the domains serves a different function on the Web and clearly each domain has specific priorities for Web site development. For example, the financial domain data indicated that addressing security was at the top of the list for design and function. The study indicates that there were six characteristics that the user found valuable regardless of the domain. They were navigation, completeness/comprehensiveness of Info, site technical features, currency/timeliness/update, accuracy, and readability/comprehension/clarity. Keeping these elements in mind and fused with our personal preferences will help us understand why and where we surf. Our tolerance threshold for speed or our ability to triangulate data and not assume all information on the Web is correct are examples of how we deal with these features. How important our searches become will also change our reaction to certain Web pages. Surfing for fun does not have the same meaning as surfing for research and specific knowledge sets.

These characteristics are especially meaningful for students using the Internet for research. Because the younger generations are growing up with technology, there is a tendency to assume that they know what they are doing and reading on the Internet. This is not necessarily true. A 2001 study conducted by Deborah Grimes and Carl Boening indicated that students are using unevaluated resources for research. Additionally they don't always follow teacher directions for using the Web or library resources. In fact most students bypassed library resources completely and went straight to the Web for their research. The researchers used 10 criteria for Web site evaluation. They are (1) authorship, (2) currency, (3) recommendations, (4) perspective, (5) audience, (6) style and tone, (7) quality of content, (8) organization of information, (9) publisher, source, host, and (10) stability of information. The conclusion is that students are superficially evaluating Web sites, if at all (Grimes & Boening, p. 9). The idea that because students grow up with technology infers that they know how to use it does not represent a realistic assessment of student learning. Teachers need to be much more involved with student research and teach students how to use the Internet for research.

Another research study conducted in 2003 measured patterns of information seeking based on domain and Web expertise (Jenkins, Corritore, & Wiedenbeck, 2003). Specifically, the authors measured the ability of nurses with varying degrees of Web experience and osteoporosis (domain) knowledge. They found that nurses with little Web experience (novice) and domain knowledge (novice) search breadth-first and did little or no evaluation of the results. On the other end of the assessment is the domain expert/Web expert who carried out depth-first searches, following deep trails of information and evaluated information based on the most varied and sophisticated criteria (Jenkins et al., 2003, p.1). The study provided additional findings that lead to a better understanding of ability level characteristics and how the Internet can provide help to surfers. One of the most important things that a user wants to know is the accuracy of information on the Web. Because the Web constitutes the work of the most experienced to least experienced people and a wide array of ethical behavior, it is up to the surfer to determine if the information is accurate and current. The results of this study led the authors to believe that the Web novice not only became lost and disoriented while searching but was also misled by graphics. They reported that the graphics were distracting but did not extend their perceptions to information credibility and they often read them wrong. In fact, the perception of graphics and advertisements led the participants, especially the expert Web/domain user, to the conclusion that less credible information was found on the site with graphics. It was also interesting to note that the Web novice groups experience an increased cogni-