

Evaluating Electronic Resources

by Bobbie Studwell

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In the last few years, many trade and popular computer magazine articles would lead us to believe that the end user is king. Whether you believe this or not, most information professionals realize that the emperor has no clothes if s/he is an uninformed user of digital resources. The sheer amount of electronic information available has become staggering. In addition, the variety of electronic formats available—CD-ROM, DVD, the Internet, and others—is daunting. What, therefore, is the information professional's role in training the end user/king in the intricacies of using electronic information, be s/he lawyer, judge, faculty, student, or someone else?

I don't need to go into detail about the explosion of information everywhere, and in particular on the World Wide Web, with a sophisticated user group. The group of law librarians reading this article knows about it. You face it every day. You guide your user population through it as best you can.

At a recent electronic publishers and law librarians symposium sponsored by AALL, it was recommended that easy-to-use training tools be developed to make our end users more information savvy. This piece deals with steps in a uniform evaluation process that end users should take each time they make the decision to use electronic information; especially information found on the Web. As we all know, end users will take the path of least resistance. The path is easier if the route is well planned from the beginning. The following steps should be ingrained in end users' information-seeking habits long before they reach us.

What's the Point?

Know the purpose of your research. A well planned research strategy saves time, effort, and money in the long run. What exactly are you looking for? Do you want

critical research, facts, opinions, statistics, company background information or something else? Each type of information sought begs for a reliable source of that information. Well known legal publishers continue to put out reliable products, and spend lots of money doing so. What about little known or casual publishers? If you're looking at a source put out by someone unfamiliar to you, then your research purpose becomes even more important as you evaluate the unknown publisher's product.

The Proof is in the Pudding

Only if you've taken the time to determine the purpose of your research can you test your results against your goal. If you're looking for cases to cite in a court brief, you need reliable material. You're more likely to skip the Internet and go directly to a CD-ROM or print product. You need authority, and the only way to get accurate citations is by using products over which some quality control is exercised: CD-ROM and print. As some of us have learned the hard way, even CD-ROM products must be evaluated in terms of the quality control publishers exercise over their content. If you decide to use an Internet site because of convenience or time savings, you will want to be sure the information on which you rely comes from a proven site. Cornell's Legal Information Institute is a site which puts quality control measures in place, but even its case coverage may be insufficient, given your research goal.

Start with What You Know

Over the past hundred years or so, librarians have brought a standard set of criteria to bear in assessing the usefulness of print resources. Many of us may not even realize we have a set of criteria in mind because they are so ingrained and religiously followed. The end user,

however, may need to register the following check points as s/he proceeds down his or her path. These same criteria are as applicable to electronic resources as they are to print resources.

Check the Content

The first step to take in assessing the value of a resource is skimming the contents of the work itself and the indexes. Electronic resources often don't offer an index because so many are full-text searchable, but many offer an outline of their contents. The first evaluation the researcher makes is whether the work is a collection of someone else's material or original text. It's important for the end user to know whose material s/he is relying on.

The end user should then pose a series of questions about the content of the electronic resource. The database, record or Web page should offer several key pieces of information without much end user effort involved in ferreting it out. These questions should be easily answered or should raise red flags about the reliability of the information presented. Who is the author? With what agency or organization is the author affiliated? What is the author's title or position? Did the author provide a place to contact him/her? When was the information created and/or when was it last updated?

Authority

If the electronic source has supplied the information pieces suggested in the contents check above, the next step is relatively easy. These questions will determine the competence of the author and publisher. Who is this author and what makes him/her qualified to write on this subject? If the work is anonymous, who is the publisher, and is it reputable? Is the piece copyrighted?

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

Accuracy

This step takes more end user judgment than the preceding steps. A way to test for quality control measures put in place by the author or publisher of the electronic resource is to check for tell-tale signs of accuracy. Is the resource free of grammatical and spelling errors? Is the data organized in tables, charts or some other way that makes it easy to read? Is the information timely, error-free, detailed, and comprehensive enough for the purpose stated? Is the information retrieved supported by cited sources? Is the source of facts or statistics identified? The end user should also be sure that the information isn't vague and doesn't make erroneous generalizations.

Certain types of legal information change rapidly; others don't. Is the area of interest one that needs regular updating? Has this piece passed that test?

Finally, the end user must learn to question one-sided viewpoints and use them for the information they present, while seeking opposing view points in

other information resources. Otherwise, s/he must be prepared to discard the one-sided information.

Objectivity

Sometimes this step is easy because the author or publisher's lack of objectivity is widely known. The following questions will reveal whether unknown or little known authors or publishers have prejudices. Is the information reasonably and fairly presented with a minimum of bias? Does it acknowledge the other side and is it internally consistent? Is it intended to sway the audience?

Advertising on a page related to the content of the information presented should signal a large red waving flag. However, check the content of the ad against the content of the article first. If that advertising is clearly offset from the content and the topic is unrelated, a different message is sent.

Currency/Coverage

When currency is important, other questions should be asked and answered.

Are Web pages still under construction?
Are electronic sources cited or acknowledged in the document, but not checked by the author or publisher for currency?
Are links back to information in previous editions supplied?

Conclusion

We need to convince our end users that just because information is now readily available in an electronic format, that doesn't make it better. We need to be vigilant in convincing our end users to become good evaluators of the information they locate. I advocate that the checklist provided should become a part of the research process as early as grade school. If the end user is King, should we ask those end users to be more like librarians? Has our role changed? You be the judge.

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Checklist

The following checklist is one way to assure that end users follow at least the minimal steps outlined in the accompanying article. Be an advocate and create a handout for students, attorneys, clerks, and others. Post the steps by each workstation, especially those with Web access. Recommend these steps and others to anyone who will listen.

Purpose

- ✓ Know exactly what information is relevant to your research question: facts, opinions, statistics, background, etc.
- ✓ Test the resources located against your purpose.

Content Check

- ✓ Skim the resource for information about the author and the organization publishing or presenting the information.

- ✓ Locate information about the date the original work was first published, and when it was last updated.

Authority

- ✓ Who wrote this document?
- ✓ Is the publisher reputable?
- ✓ Who can be contacted for more information?
- ✓ Is the author qualified to write this?
- ✓ Is the material copyrighted?

Accuracy

- ✓ Is the information timely?
- ✓ Is the information error free (typos, grammar, spelling)?
- ✓ Is the information sufficiently detailed and comprehensive for the stated purpose of the research?
- ✓ Is the information vague?

- ✓ Is the information one-sided?
- ✓ Is the information supported by citations to other sources?
- ✓ Is the information organized for easy reading (charts, graphs, etc.)?

Objectivity

- ✓ Is the information biased?
- ✓ Does it acknowledge the other side's arguments?
- ✓ Is it intended to sway the audience?
- ✓ Is advertising on the page clearly related to the content presented?

Currency/Coverage

- ✓ When was the material last updated?
- ✓ Is it a work in progress?
- ✓ Are cited sources up to date?
- ✓ Are previous editions acknowledged and possibly made available for comparison?