

Evaluating Internet Information

"dot com" "dot gov" – suffixes and country codes explained

Any information that you use to support ideas and arguments in a research paper should be given some scrutiny. Printed materials that are collected in a library go through an evaluative process as librarians select them to include in their collections. There is also an evaluation of Web sites that are included in search directories, such as Yahoo!, at least to the extent of classifying and placing sites into a categorization scheme. However, sites harvested by "spiders" or "robots" for search engines don't go through any evaluative process.

There are no real restrictions or editorial processes for publishing information on the Web, beyond some basic knowledge of Web page creation and access to a hosting computer. Anyone can publish opinion, satire, a hoax, or plainly false information. To insure that the Web sites you use as information sources are acceptable for research purposes, you should ask questions about those sites. The following are some elements you should look at before deciding to use a Web site as a research resource:

Domain suffix

The term "dot.com" has become a ubiquitous phrase in the English language. The "dot.com" really refers to the domain of a Web site. Sites on the Web are grouped by their URLs according to the type of organization providing the information on the site. For example, any commercial enterprise or corporation that has a Web site will have a domain suffix of .com, which means it is a commercial entity.

The domain suffix provides you with a clue about the purpose or audience of a Web site. The domain suffix might also give you a clue about the geographic origin of a Web site. Many sites from the United Kingdom will have a domain suffix of .uk.

Here follows a list of the most common domain suffixes and the types of organizations that would use them.

.com

Commercial site. The information provided by commercial interests is generally going to shed a positive light on the product it promotes. While this information might not necessarily be false, you might be getting only part of the picture.

Remember, there's a monetary incentive behind every commercial site in providing you with information, whether it is for good public relations or to sell you a product outright.

.edu

Educational institution. Sites using this domain name are schools ranging from kindergarten to higher education. If you take a look at your school's URL you'll notice that it ends with the domain .edu. Information from sites within this domain must be examined very carefully. If it is from a department or research center at a educational institution, it can generally be taken as credible. However, students' personal Web sites are not usually monitored by the school even though they are on the school's server and use the .edu domain.

.gov

Government. If you come across a site with this domain, then you're viewing a federal government site. All branches of the United States federal government use this domain. Information such as Census statistics, Congressional hearings, and Supreme Court rulings would be included in sites with this domain. The information is considered to be from a credible source.

.org

Traditionally a non-profit organization. Organizations such as the American Red Cross or PBS (Public Broadcasting System) use this domain suffix. Generally, the information in these types of sites is credible and unbiased, but there are examples of organizations that strongly advocate specific points of view over others, such as the National Right to Life Committee and Planned Parenthood. You probably want to give this domain a closer scrutiny these days. Some commercial interests might be the ultimate sponsors of a site with this suffix.

.mil

Military. This domain suffix is used by the various branches of the Armed Forces of the United States.

.net

Network. You might find any kind of site under this domain suffix. It acts as a catch-all for sites that don't fit into any of the preceding domain suffixes. Information from these sites should be given careful scrutiny.