The Good, the Bad and the Useless

Judith Edwards evaluates Internet resources.

The latest estimate of the number of Web sites worldwide is almost 2.25 million [1]. It is part of the job of many of us - librarians or information managers - to select what our users will find useful from this mass of information. How do we decide whether or not to add details of an Internet site to our resource guide or Web page? What criteria should we use when recommending Internet resources to an individual or class? How can we judge the quality or appropriateness of a resource for a particular query or user? Although many of the traditional principles of collection development of printed materials will still apply to online resources, other factors come into play when considering the electronic medium. This article is a compilation of the best advice and practice I've found "out there" on the Internet itself, and refers mainly to Web pages.

There are 3 main aspects of the process of evaluation - access, quality, and ease of use. I've put these in order of importance - before we can evaluate anything, we must be able to get access to the resource. Quality comes before ease of use - users may be prepared to struggle with a less-than-perfect interface if the content is really worthwhile.

Access

How reliable and stable is the site? Downtime should be infrequent, short in duration and announced in advance. COPAC [2] and EDINA [3], for example, are very good about announcing disruptions (anticipated or unexpected) on various e-mail lists. How long do pages take to download, at different times of day? Has the URL changed in the past? If so, was there a link to the new page? Is it likely to change again?

What hardware and software specification is your intended audience likely to be using? Memory, speed and support for colours will probably be at a low level on, for example, public PCs for student use, which are also unlikely to have the latest versions of Web browsers. Is the site usable by any browser? Does it use Java, proprietary extensions, frames or tables? Beware of sites which say "Best viewed with ...". (One shining exception here is the Carnegie Mellon Online Books Page [4], which says "Best viewed with any browser".) Are any special plugins or helper applications required? What does the site look like using Lynx, or if you use your browser with the images turned off?

This is important for users with a visual impairment, but also for those of us who speed up access by not downloading images. Are colour-blind users likely to be disadvantaged by an injudicious use of forced text and link colours? If you wish to recommend a site to which access is limited by a licence, such as an electronic journal, check that the licence includes all your intended users. If a password is required, consider how you will distribute it to users. If access is limited to your geographical site (by IP address), make sure that users are aware of this.

Quality

The question of quality of an Internet resource can be divided into the two main issues of authority (who is responsible for the site?) and content (the quality of the material itself).

Authority

The responsibility for an Internet resource is usually apparent from its main entry point, and often from page headers. If not, you can often establish where it comes from by analysing the URL. (The Netskills TONIC course [5] explains how to do this). What's the reputation of the organisation? What are the credentials of a personal author? You may need to consult colleagues with relevant subject knowledge, or perhaps find out what other materials the author has written. One recommendation may be that the site has been selected by and linked from other responsible sites - but beware of just copying other people's list of resources! Be careful of what you find via search engines - remember that they are mindless robots which cannot distinguish the good from the bad. Is the material available in other forms, such as CD-ROM or print? If so, does the Internet resource offer the same material, or more, or less? Is the material archived or indexed by other responsible sources? This will become increasingly important with, for example, new electronic-only journals. The site should have the confidence to offer a feedback facility such as a form, preferably with e-mail and postal addresses as well. If copyright is an issue for the particular resource, the site should include the name of the copyright holder.

Content

Your intended customers (such as readers of a Web page or students attending a class) may have certain expectations of the scholarly nature of the material which you are recommending. Is it peer-reviewed, or is there some other form of quality control? Users will expect that a scholarly journal article includes

citations, and perhaps a bibliography. Is the information accurate, and are sources for factual information listed? The site must be free from grammar and spelling errors, which are an indication of sloppiness which may be reflected elsewhere in the site. If tabular or graphical data is included, it should be clearly labelled and easy to read.

Is the content of the resource objective? The information may be provided as a public service, in which case it is less likely to be biased than that from a commercial site (but not necessarily!). If there is advertising (which may help to fund the resource), it should be clearly differentiated from the information itself. Is the information current? Does a Web site give the date that pages were created, and/or that of the last update? Online versions of books are often the out-of-copyright old editions, which may not matter as long as you are aware of this. Does the site compare well with other sites on the same subject, or is it something unique? The information must be relevant to your users, and at the appropriate level for them. Most Web sites will include links to other Internet resources - do these links work? It is helpful to users if the links are annotated or described in some way.

Ease of use

Being able to navigate a Web site easily is of prime importance. Is there a site map or table of contents, and an easy-to-use Search facility? Is it easy to navigate the entire site? Every page should have a link back to the beginning of its section and/or to the Home page. Do essential instructions appear before links and interactive portions? For interactive sites, such as databases and search engines, it is vital that 'Help' on how to use the system is readily available. If you don't find the site easy to use, it's unlikely that your users will! Is the resource intuitive to use, and does it have a 'friendly' feel? Users are likely to visit a site again only if they enjoy using it.

Good design of Web pages will assist their use, and may make the difference between recommending a resource and rejecting it. What you think of the design is to some extent down to personal preference, but there are some general features to bear in mind. Is the page concise, or do you have to scroll up and down a lot or, even worse, from side to side? Is the structure clear? It's rare to find a Web site without any images - do they add anything to the information or ease of use? If the site uses Java, frames or plugins, are they essential and do they make the site easier to use? Is the site usable with a text browser? Are the colours and background easy on the eye, or do they make the text harder to read? Is the "look and feel" that of an academic resource, or does it seem too commercial?

The list of evaluation criteria above may seem very long, but with experience of looking at Web pages, many decisions become almost instinctive. Subject knowledge is, as with the selection of any other type of material, a great help. More institutions are developing collection development policies for electronic materials, which further help the process of evaluating and selecting resources to offer your customers.

References

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Author details

Judith Edwards
Sub-Librarian, Reader Services
University College London
URL: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library/

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