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## **Evaluating Internet Content: the Good, the Biased & the Inaccurate**

by Jenny Wu

Three years ago, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, in *Whirlpool v. GN Holdings, Inc.*, 67 F.3d 605 (1995) first implied that an attorney has an obligation to use the Internet on behalf of clients. That year, MIDS (Matrix Information and Directory Services) estimated that 7.8 million individuals and organizations "provided" internet content. In 1998, MIDS estimated the number at 68 million. As the Internet has grown and become more accepted, so has the expectation that attorneys will routinely search the Internet.

But searching the Internet is like panning for gold. Where among the millions of web pages is the nugget of information you need? How do you find what you're looking for? How will you know that it's the real thing and not fool's gold? Who can you trust?

In the old days, using books at a law library made you felt safe. A librarian chose those books because they could be trusted. Producing a book was expensive, so publishers employed editors and fact-checkers to ensure their accuracy. And you learned, over the years, how to tell whether a book was up-to-date and whether the publisher was reputable.

But anyone can put anything on the web. It is so cheap that people post now and worry about accuracy later. Web sites are notoriously unstable and, unlike a printed page, they can be changed without leaving a trace.

Here are some tips on judging whether a web site can be trusted:

**Use your law librarian.** Librarians were among the first pioneers on the Internet and they excel at separating the wheat from the chaff of information overload. Ask your librarian to recommend sources or to evaluate sources that you discover. Some librarians put the best of the web at their attorneys' fingertips by designing Intranet pages listing sources for commonly needed information.

Learn to critically analyze the information you find on the web. Ask these questions:

**Who** is responsible for the page? Is it a well-known, well-respected organization? Your first hint is the address: any web address ending with ".com" is trying, on some level, to sell you something. A web site sponsored by a governmental agency (.gov) or a school (.edu) can usually be trusted. Look for a description of the sponsoring organization. What is the their bias? Including an address and phone number usually indicates a more legitimate, stable organization.

**Who** is paying to give you the information? Is the site dependent on advertising or more subtle ways to convince you to buy a certain product?

**Who** is responsible for the specific information? Is an author listed? Is it a well-known name? Are the author's credentials provided?

**Why** does the web page exist? To sell you a product or an opinion? Be careful.

**When** was the page last updated? When was the specific material posted and written? The most helpful web pages provide such information.

**How** much information is included? What is the site's scope? For instance, does it include the entire CFR or just certain sections?

**How** accurate is it? You may not know for sure until you double-check but, on a good site, sources of facts are identified and easily verified.

**How** well is the information documented? Do they provide cites for cases on point? Do they provide links to appropriate regulatory or legislative sites? Are those links active? Dead links are a sign of poor maintenance. Also, don't forget that when you link away from a page you trust, you are entering new territory. Stay alert.

**How** easy is the page to use? Is it attractive? Is the information well-organized? Is the text well-written and easy to read?

Thus armed and ready, leap confidently into the incredible wealth of information on the Internet.

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