Overview

Imagine you have a research paper due next week. You need to right an essay on the following topic: “To what extent has the US's defensive stance against Al Qaeda since the 9-11 attack has had any effect on its influence or ability to launch another successful attack?” You have spent the morning collecting sources and you find a list of websites you might use in your paper.

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qaeda>
2. <http://www.mafhoum.com/press5/151S23.pdf>
3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2693927>
4. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.92.7426&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054248>
6. <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/a/al_qaeda/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=al%20qaeda&st=cse>
7. <http://counterterrorismblog.org/>
8. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/59989/lawrence-d-freedman/against-all-enemies-inside-americas-war-on-terror>

<http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst;jsessionid=LhmZGc8nr818hXR3sdQztv7NlmY1FB7YGLFp8vsTTpWM0VmdMg2G!-929691828!-929797399?docId=5002526170>

But which ones should you use? In this module, we will give you some tools to answer that question by discussing how to evaluate information sources.

Instructions

There are three major aspects to be considered when evaluating an information source.

* Time Appropriateness

The first thing to consider is the timeliness. When was the source published? If it is a website, you can usually find out when it is last updated on the homepage. If it is a scholarly article, you can refer to the conference proceedings or the academic journal where the article is published. If it is a book, we can find out in the forward when it is first published and whether it is reissued. There will also be explanations on the change of the content in reissued books. We can use this information to figure out the currency of the information.

Exercise 1:

* + - 1. 1. Can you find out when were these articles published? <http://www.mafhoum.com/press5/151S23.pdf>
      2. Published in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
         1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2693927>
         2. Publishted in \_\_\_\_\_\_

In addition, the type of the sources and subject areas also impacts the time appropriateness. For example, among academic publications in computer science, conference or workshop proceedings often contain most up-to-date research findings. These proceedings consist of short research papers that report recent research studies and results that are to some extent preliminary. Academic journals contain longer research articles that are usually written based on several conference research papers. These articles take a longer time to prepare and to get reviewed and published, but they present more comprehensive description of research studies. Books contain even more information than journals and thus take an even longer time to get published. Therefore, even if a conference paper, a journal article, and a book have the same publication data, the information they contain has different timeliness.

Exercise 2:

1. Which of the following sources will you use if you want to find the most recent studies on Al Qaeda?
2. Conference Proceedings
3. Scholarly Journals
4. Books

However, it is not always the case that we can only use the most up to date information. If you search in an area of rapid development, such as IT technologies, you would demand more current information. On the other hand, if you work in fundamental sciences or humanities, materials that are written a long time ago may still be useful to you.

Exercise 3:

1. Which of the following sources will you use if you want to find the direct impact of 9-11 attack?
2. A newspaper article from Sept, 2001
3. A research article published in 2005

* Informativity

Informativity assesses how much information a source offers (Scope) and how relevant the information is (Relevance). It can be viewed as the major criterion to answer the question of how useful an information source is. A source that offers direct information on a topic of interest is considered more informative, so is a source that offers more information. Informativity is also a subjective measure. Different people may rate the same source with different level of informativity based on their purposes of use. The context dependent informativity can be judged using two more detailed criteria.

* Representativeness

Representativeness assesses how informative a source is giving a certain topic of interest. More specifically, we decompose the information into basic facts, which can be represented as who, what, where, why, how, and when. Then, we think about whether these facts tell the information we are looking for in our topic of interest. A very important thing to keep in mind is to avoid bunny trails when searching on the Internet. It is very easy for someone to keep clicking on the links on one website and get directed to another website, and to yet another website. Although the links between websites usually indicate that the information on the websites are somehow related, one still needs to be careful when following these links since many links are created due to advertising purposes instead of related contents. In addition, each separate website needs to be evaluated as a separate information source. For example, one can be directed from an authoritative website to a commercial website without explicit warning. Therefore, we should be aware of where we are and what content we are reviewing at all times.

* Perspective/Bias

Perspective/Bias takes into account how the information contributes to our knowledge, whether as an objective fact or as a subjective opinion, and in the latter, how many different opinions are presented. When using content that presents different perspectives, we need to think about what views need to be accounted for given our topic of interest. In addition, in the case where there is a controversy of opinions, we need to understand the underlying reason of the existence of the controversy so that we can synthesize the controversy or develop our own opinions.

Exercise 4: which of the following sources is most relevant to your assignment?

1. a. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/59989/lawrence-d-freedman/against-all-enemies-inside-americas-war-on-terror>
2. b. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2693927>
3. c. <http://counterterrorismblog.org/>

* Authority

This criterion indicates how authoritative an information source is. A scholarly publication is one that is published by and for experts. Such publication is usually reviewed by a group of widely acknowledged experts for its soundness and academic value. Therefore, content from such publication can be considered as authoritative. On the other hand, a large amount of information is available from popular magazines and websites. Such information is gathered by individuals who are not professionals and is targeted at a general population of audience. While such information provides a broad view from more people rather then a specialized group of experts, it may contain false information. When using information from the popular sources, one would need to be aware of the questionable validity of the information and carefully separate facts from opinions.

Exercise:

1. Choose the most authoritative source from the following options:
2. a. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qaeda>
3. b. <http://www.mafhoum.com/press5/151S23.pdf>
4. c. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2693927>

Besides these main criteria, there is other information in a source that we can use to assess the quality of the information.

* Citations

Citations are an important part of a publication. It tells how a publication relates to its peer publications in an indirect way. It can also be used to assess the quality of a publication. Usually, a more influential publication is usually cited in more places and is cited by more prestigious publications.

* Peer review

Reviews are a special type of scholarly articles that can be used as a good starting guide when entering a new research field. While most general articles focus on specific topics and report individual studies, reviews offer overviews of a research area by comparing different studies and illustrating connections and controversies among research findings. Reviews can help one to understand the foundations, major contributions, as well as challenges of a research field.

Although we introduce and practice the criteria to evaluate information resources separately, in a real assignment, we need to balance these criteria in order to decide how to use the information we gather. Here, let us look at the 9 resources we find and evaluate them using all criteria we have learned so far.

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qaeda>

The first link is the Wikipedia page on Al Qaeda. According to the natural of the Wikipedia website, we the website is constantly maintained by a lot of users on the Internet. Although the information on Wikipedia is not guaranteed to be authentic, it is believe to fairly reliable and usually up-to-date. On this Wikipedia page, there is a lot of detailed information on Al Qaeda and there is a special section on US’s defensive stance on starting the war on terror. Therefore, the information from the article is directly related to the topic of interest. However, in general we prefer not to cite Wikipedia pages in academic papers since the source is not authoritative. Instead, we can use the information we find from Wikipedia as a starting point to search for more information from the Internet. In sum, it is appropriate to use this source for this assignment.

2. http://www.mafhoum.com/press5/151S23.pdf

The second link is a PDF file from an online forum which publishes articles on economy, finance, and politics issues in the Arab world. The website was last updated in 2007. Thus, the information on the website is slightly out of date. However, since the question in Sally’s assignment is on the influence of US’s defensive stance on Al Qaeda’s ability to launch another successful attack, the influence can be assessed during a long period of time. Thus the information from 2007 can still be used to answer this question. In the 2nd page of the PDF document, there is an explanation of the nature of the article, i.e., a research document published by a nonprofit institution without strict review process. As a result, the authoritativeness of this article is not at the expert level. However, since the article is a research publication and news and other media reports are used to support the author’s point of view, the article can still be considered as fairly reliable. By reading this article, we can find that most content is about Al Qaeda and the trend of Terrorism. The influence of US’s defensive stance is indirectly mentioned. This paper provides the author’s opinion on Al Qaeda’s current ability. Thus, this article is partially related to the topic of interest. Also, we notice that this paper provides more subjective opinions than objective facts. One thing we can do is to read the supporting materials the author cited by ourselves and try to make our own judgments based on these materials. Overall, this source is appropriate to be used for this assignment.

3. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2693927

The third link is a scholarly article published in a referred academic journal. As a result, the authoritativeness of its information is high. The article was published in 2002. Therefore, the information is a bit out of date. From the conclusion section shown on the webpage, this article mainly talks about the justice and legal issue of US’s war on terror against Al Qaeda. It is closely related to the topic of interest. Therefore, this article is appropriate to be used for this assignment.

4. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.92.7426&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Similar to the last article, this article is also published in a referred academic journal. We also see that the author of this article is a researcher from MIT. Therefore, we can believe that the information in this article is authoritative. This article was published in 2003. So again it is a bit out of date. This article talks about using a mathematical analysis to assess the current influence of Al Qaeda. However, it does not directly answer the question of what the current influence is, which is the topic of interest. Therefore, this article is only indirectly related to the original assignment. In sum, this article can only be used as supplemental material in this assignment.

5. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054248

The article is published in a referred academic journal and thus is authoritative. It was published in 2003, again a bit out of date. By reading the abstract of this article, we can see that this article touches the two major points of interests in the original question, i.e., the impact of US’s defensive stance on Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda’s current ability to launch successful attack. Therefore, this article is very relevant and is appropriate to be used for this assignment. Nevertheless, since this paper expresses a lot of the author’s opinions besides citing facts, we need to be careful when separating the objective and subjective information.

6.http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/a/al\_qaeda/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=al%20qaeda&st=cse

The article is published in the New York Times and thus its information source is more reliable than many other websites and public media. I was published in 2009, so the information is up to date. This article provides information on US’s military actions on Al Qaeda after 9-11 attack and the results of these actions can be used to reason the current ability of Al Qaeda to launch new attack. Therefore, this article is relevant to this assignment and is appropriate to use.

7. http://counterterrorismblog.org/

This blog provides up-to-date information on counterterrorism community. Although the blog claims itself to be a gateway of expert opinions on counterterrorism community, its authoritativeness is still questionable. Moreover, this blog does not provide direct information on this assignment and is thus not appropriate to be used.

8.http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/59989/lawrence-d-freedman/against-all-enemies-inside-americas-war-on-terror

This links points to a brief review on a book on America’s war on terror. The book and the review were both published in 2004, so the information is slightly out of date. The book review is published in a famous foreign affairs website, so the information on both the view and the book can be considered as quite authoritative. However, the book content is only indirectly related to this assignment so it should only be used as supplemental material.

9. http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst;jsessionid=LhmZGc8nr818hXR3sdQztv7NlmY1FB7YGLFp8vsTTpWM0VmdMg2G!-929691828!-929797399?docId=5002526170

The link points to a journal article excerpt. However, there is no clear information on the journal or the author. Therefore, the authoritativeness of this article is questionable. It is also unclear when the article was published. This article talks about the impact of US’s war on terror, but does not offer explicit information on the impact on Al Qaeda’s current ability of launching new attack. Therefore, this article is not well related to this assignment and is not appropriate to use.

Assessment Item: Please practice the above evaluation criteria in the following Scenario.

Scenario 2: Now assume that you are taking an interdisciplinary elective course on sustainable living, and you have been assigned the following term paper topic: “Is there enough evidence to conclude that eating beef is necessarily bad for the environment?”. You did a web search and came up with the following 10 links. Please follow each link to read the searched content, and comment on its time appropriateness, informativity and authority. Then, rate the overall appropriateness of using the content for your assignment on a scale of 5 (1 – not appropriate at all, 5—most appropriate).

1. <http://www.earthsave.org/environment/foodchoices.htm>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

2. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1953692,00.html>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

3. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E03.pdf>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

4. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

5. <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads/08_Agriculture.pdf>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

6. <http://www.fcrn.org.uk/fcrnPublications/publications/PDFs/FCRN_int_vs_ext_livestock.pdf>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

7. <http://www.carbonfarmersofamerica.com/aboutus.htm>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

8. <http://solveclimate.com/blog/20090604/new-report-complicates-ags-assault-biofuel-rules>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

9. <http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/abstract/89/5/1704S>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

10. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/t6x0ku38555668v4/>

Time appropriateness: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Informativity: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Authority: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Overall appropriateness: (radio button)

Assessment Item: Now that you have found a number of relevant documents for your paper, how do you know whether you should stop looking? Based on the appropriate materials in Scenario 2, do you feel you have enough for a coherent paper? Is it too broad? Is it too narrow? Too disconnected? Does it cover an appropriate scope in terms of time? Please list here the links from Scenario 2 that you would want to use for your assignment and explain whether you think these links provide you enough information. (Text box)