5.2: Research on the Internet

We’ve all had the experience of typing a search term into Google and coming up with 5,000,000 "hits." What can you do with 5,000,000 webpages? Of course, not all of them are relevant or reliable. The first ones, at least on Google, will be businesses trying to sell their products. This is how Google makes money and does it so well. The second one will probably be Amazon or Wikipedia, and the next few will be the websites that get the most traffic.

If you type in “attention deficit disorder” (with the quotation marks) on any given day (it will of course change from day to day), you might find something like the image shown in Figure 5.1. No surprises; you have seen this many times, or something very similar. In this case, some of the top links look like they could be useful for reliable information, but we know this is not always the case.
Figure 5.1

If you “Google” the term “Advanced Search,” you will be taken to Google’s Advanced Search page. The same is true in Yahoo!; if you type “Yahoo! Advanced Search USA” into the YAHOO! basic search engine, you will find a more sophisticated search engine. These advanced search engines are easy to use and more useful to someone looking for focused, reliable information for a speech. They are also intuitive and adaptive.

Figure 5.2
Before we continue, let’s clarify some common terms used in Internet searches. First, a couple of definitions and some background. All Internet sites have a top-level domain. You know these as .edu, .gov., .org., .com., or .net; Merriam-Webster (2016) formally defines it as a “section of the Internet that is made up of computers or sites that are related in some way (such as by use or source).” A website ends in the domain term; a webpage (the individual pages of a website) will have letters, punctuation, and numbers after the domain term and backward slash mark. This is part of a page’s overall web address, known as the URL, or uniform resource locator.

Domains, of course, indicate the type of organizations using that “after the dot” set of letters. .ORGs are nonprofit organizations. They can have good information, but are not totally free from bias; the Republican and Democratic parties’ websites are .ORGs. .GOVs are websites for state, local, and federal governments. They also have a great deal of good information, but will not have information showing the negative sides of government policies. .EDUs are tied to colleges and universities (elementary and high schools are considered part of local governments and have .GOV in their URLs). Some of them have good research, but most are full of information geared for students at that institution. Of course, .COMs are for businesses. They are not totally unreliable, but one would not expect unbiased information on most of them. Ford.com is not going to post negative reviews of their vehicles’ safety ratings. Monster.com is a good place for information on job searches, but it also wants to sell viewers a service.

### Evaluating Websites

First, when you access a website, you should determine what you are looking at. Is it a blog? an online academic journal? an online newspaper? a website for an organization? Obviously, these are not all created equal. Let’s use blogs for an example. There are literally millions of blogs—MediaKix states that in 2017 there were over 440 million of them (these include Tumblr.) Some blogs are maintained by true experts who have credentials in their fields. They are presenting the information either as a public service or they have found a way to “monetize” the site. Other bloggers use their blogs for propaganda, self-expression, or sharing ideas and photos with friends. You should be able to discern what kind it is; a reputable blog will let you know the author’s credentials. Otherwise, stay away from blogs in general.

Finding a webpage with information on it is just the first step. How should they be evaluated so you know the information or analyses there is reliable? CAPOW is an acronym that can be used as a guide for determining how well suited a website or webpage may be for research purposes. According to Price (2008), who produced a video about CAPOW for YouTube, CAPOW stands for:
CURRENCY. Is the information posted on the site up-to-date? If studies are cited, are the dates of the information given? This standard will be more important with scientific, health, and current event topics. If information about the earthquakes in Haiti is from 2012, it is not reliable to explain what is happening there now.

AUTHORITY. Is the person or organization behind the site an authority, that is, has credentials, expertise, and the respect of others in the field? Having an education or doctorate is important, but it must be in that particular subject. Can you even determine or what person or organization is behind the website?

PURPOSE. Is the person or organization behind the website trying to persuade you to a viewpoint or trying to further a cause? Can you recognize it? The fact that the organization is trying to advocate for something, such as disaster relief or ending animal abuse, does not mean the information is unreliable. In fact, it may be from very good sources. It just means you should be aware that it is presenting good evidence on one side of an issue, and there could be good evidence on the other side.

OBJECTIVITY. This one is closely tied to purpose; it also has to do with the sources from which the website uses quotes and evidence. For example, one of the “hot” topics in recent years has been whether infants and toddlers should be vaccinated. As you probably know, anti-vaccination advocates cite studies from the past that seem to connect the chemicals in vaccines to autism and other conditions, even fatalities, in children. One must read carefully to determine who and what is being cited and look into more than a couple of sources on the Internet to get the full picture of this controversy. There are many websites that will provide information on both sides of the debate. Some will have .ORG in the domain. These organizations and sources can be very passionate in their writing, but passion, assertions, and name-calling do not signal reliable information.

WRITING STYLE. Have you ever received one of those emails telling you that you are inheriting money but you have to take some funds out of your bank account and wire it to someone, usually overseas? Many people fall for those, unfortunately, but they should not because the writing style usually has a number of mistakes in it and other signs that the person is not familiar with English (along with the fact that the claims are kind of ridiculous). There are websites like this, too. Additionally, note the tone of the writing. Using the example above, a website called www.humanosphere.org is pro-vaccine, and contains a report on how the media became more pro-vaccine after the measles scare at Disneyworld. It refers to Disneyworld as “one of our nation’s holiest sites,” which shows a sarcastic tone. In fact, a good indicator of bias is how the writer refers to those who disagree with him or her.

Furthermore, in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7, the topic of using sources correctly is discussed. In both cases, you would
want to be sure not to take information out of context. For example, on the website vaccines.procon.org, this statement appears in the "con" side: "According to the CDC, all vaccines carry a risk of a life-threatening allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) in about one per million children." It is followed by a link to a formal citation. An unethical speaker could just leave out that last part and use the statement "According to the CDC, all vaccines carry a risk of a life-threatening allergic reaction (anaphylaxis)" to give the wrong impression of what the Centers for Disease Control published.

If all this makes you think that you should be skeptical of information on the Internet, at least in terms of using it for your speeches, then that is good—you should!

Of course, one source that many students have questions about using is Wikipedia. Most of us use Wikipedia or similar sites to look up the answers to pressing questions such as “Was Val Kilmer in the film Willow?” or “When is the next solar eclipse?” However, it is unlikely that your instructor will be satisfied with your using evidence from Wikipedia (or other Wiki-type sites).

There are a couple of reasons for this. One is that Wikipedia is, like a dictionary, a basic reference source. Like a printed encyclopedia, it is used for basic or general information about a topic, but this means that it is not suitable for serious college-level research.

Additionally, because anyone on Wikipedia (or any Wiki site) can update information, there is no guarantee that what you read will be up-to-date or correct. While Wikipedia and its editors make every effort to maintain the accuracy of entries, with millions of pages on the site, that isn’t always possible. Also, sometimes the information in Wikipedia is just plain wrong. The previously cited CAPOW video gives the example of a posting from a few years back that claimed the comedian Sinbad had died, even though he is still alive. Another example, given in Thomas Friedman’s The World is Flat (2005), is of a well-known CEO who spent years trying to clear his name when incorrect information about him was posted on Wikipedia and then reposted on several other sites.

Wikipedia is a good place to go to obtain basic information or general knowledge about your subject, and you can use the references at the bottom of the page (if there are any) to look for information elsewhere. But saying to an audience, “my source for the information in this speech is Wikipedia” will probably do little to convince your audience that you are knowledgeable and have done adequate research for the speech.