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On Evaluation of Sources - getting TOP sources

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Abstract

In this paper some guidelines to evaluating sources is presented. The TOP criteria are introduced. TOP stands for Trustworthiness, Objectiveness and Precision. Trustworthiness is about the general reliability of the source (author, publisher and type of source. Objectiveness addresses the quality of the information found in the source. Finally, precision is about the relevance and the focus of the source.

1 Introduction

Whenever an investigation is conducted, sources of information are to be found and handled. The purpose of the investigation may be academic, practical or both, but sources are essential.

The scope of this paper is to give a brief introduction to how to evaluate the quality of sources. Today, when everyone easily can publish anything on the internet, careful evaluation of the quality of sources is essential. Focus will be on written sources.

Sources may be *primary* or *secondary*:

- Primary sources will contain new and not previously published information. Examples are research papers (journal articles and conference papers), dissertations and research reports.
- Secondary sources build on primary sources and compile and disseminate information from primary sources. Examples are textbooks, surveys, manuals, tutorials and dictionaries, but also articles in magazines and newspaper are in this category.

One very important factor in source evaluation, is *peer-review*. In academia or industry, peer-review means that the work (the paper) has been reviewed by other researchers or professionals in the same area (peers) and have been found suited for publication.

One can find many guidelines to source evaluation. In [1] it is suggested that sources should be evaluated according to 5 criteria (the "CRAAP" test):

- **Currency** (how new is the information of the publication)
- **Relevancy** (how important is the information to your investigation)
- **Authority** (who are the authors (and their affiliation) and the publisher)

- **Accuracy** ((how reliable is the information)
- **Purpose** (the intend of the author and publisher)

Especially, the CRAAP test [1] includes good advice on evaluating sources found on the Web.

In the following, we present a checklist and questions to ask when a source is assessed. The evaluation is based on three criteria:

- **Trustworthiness**
- **Objectiveness**
- **Precision**

So, your sources must be TOP sources.

2 The TOP criteria

The TOP criteria are primarily based on [2], [3] and [1]. In the following sections we are going to examine each criterion more closely. Some the criteria may overlap, so the following should be regarded as a list of inspiration.

2.1 Trustworthiness

This is about how much we should trust a source, how reliable is the information provided by the source.

When establishing the trustworthiness of a source the following factors should be considered:

- *The author:* Education and position, affiliation (recognised academic institution, well-known company...), etc. Is the subject within the author's field of research/expertise? Is there contact information to the author?
- *The publisher:* Is it a recognized publisher, journal or conference? What is the publisher's ranking (check for instance official authorisation lists (in Denmark [4])).
- *The type of source:* Is it a primary or secondary source. Is it peer-reviewed? For instance, is it a scientific paper or an article in a news media? Who are the intended audience for the source? If the source is a website, who is behind the website?

For instance, information from a peer-reviewed journal publish by IEEE¹ is more trustworthy than information found on a blog run by a one-man freelance consultant company.

2.2 Objectiveness

Here we consider, if the source is unbiased and comprehensive. Points to be looked into:

- What is the intention of the publication of the source?
- What is the authors affiliation?
- Who have funded the research?
- Does the source try to inform or to convince?
- Is the information biased?
- Is it comprehensive and are all aspects covered?
- Are there any possible conflicts of interests?
- Does the information conflict with other (recognised) sources?
- Is the information backed by references or data?

¹ www.ieee.org

- May the information be strengthened by reproduceable experiments, e.g. proof-of-concept prototypes?
- Is the information verifiable?
- Is the source peer-review?

For instance, information in a source maybe correct and valid, but if the source is biased, information that question a specific point of view may be omitted, e.g. evaluation of a software tool written by an employee at the manufacturer.

2.3 Precision

This is about how relevant, and precis is the source for your investigation. Questions to ask:

- What is the subject of the source, is it relevant for your investigation?
- When is it published?
- When is it updated/revised? (especially important with websites)?
- Does the information seem comprehensive, detailed and precis?
- Are the arguments consistent, detailed and precis?
- Can the information be confirmed by other sources?
- Does the source include references indicating that the author has done a solid investigation into the subject?

For instance, if the source is an article about something else and the information is supplementary to the main contents of the article, it may not have the same precision as if the main focus of the article is the a subject closely related to your investigation

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