Worksheet with Criteria and Guidelines for Evaluating Law related Websites

Title of Page: ____________________________________________________________

Web page address: ________________________________________________________

Date accessed: ____________________________________________________________

The most important factor when evaluating Web sites is to determine what are you using the Web for? In this instance it is for your Academic work. You must train your eyes to employ a series of techniques that will help you determine the validity and reliability about the web pages you find. Think critically, even suspiciously, by asking questions that will help you determine if the web page has information that can be trusted. Guidelines for Evaluation a Legal Website and the Berkeley University Website Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply and Questions to Ask should be used as guides for this worksheet.

Authorship: What person or organization is the source of the information? When looking at a law-related Web site, first determine whether the site offers primary law or other legal information. Primary law is the actual text of the law. It includes judicial opinions in court cases, administrative agency regulations, federal, state, and local laws (statutes and ordinances), and federal and state constitutions. Secondary sources explain or discuss primary law and provide references to primary law, including cases, statutes, and regulations.

- What is the Domain name of the URL and what does it stand for (.gov, .com, .org, etc)? ____________________________________________________________
- Is it written by a person or provided by an organization? Does the person have credentials in the field (lawyer, administrator, other professional).________
- Is (are) the author(s) clearly identified? ____________
- Is it published by an organization that makes sense and is related to your topic or issue and is the organization reputable (check the ‘mission statement’, ‘about us’, or board of directors)? What evidence is provided?
  ____________________________________________________________________
- What is the intent or purpose of the web site (disclose, persuade, inform, facts, data, market etc.? Who is it written for?
  ____________________________________________________________________
Jurisdictional Relevance: Remember different laws apply in different places. To determine jurisdictional relevance, consider these questions?

- If it is primary source, (test of a case, law or regulation). Where is the court, legislative body or agency geographically located? What is the scope (Federal, state or local?)

- Is it a secondary source (discusses or explains primary law)? Is the site interpreting or restating the law (are they citing cases or explaining statutes)? Is the source of the law and where it applies made clear?

Content and Viewpoint Legal research is a highly specialized and unique. It is important that you familiarize yourselves with some basic knowledge of our legal system and know and understand the interplay of different sources of the law. Most online legal sites that are free do not provide annotations (explanatory notes, legislative history, and critical commentary) or secondary sources within the text.

Viewpoint or bias is probably the hardest thing to determine on a website. Look closely at the source, its organization affiliation, advertisers, board members and links to other websites.

- How the topic is covered (links, summary, in depth)? __________________________
- Who is the intended audience? __________________________
- Does the information on this web page fulfill its intended purpose? ________________
- Is a site map or table of contents provided? __________________________
- Is it easy to get to? __________________________
- Is an index available? __________________________
- Are laws, court rulings, or regulations from an official compilation? Are they directly quoted or paraphrased? __________________________
- Are references provided to sources cited properly? (Preferably in the Harvard blue books style for legal or proper APA or MLA style for non legal) do they cite to the official source if it is a legal source)? __________________________
- Does the site provide the ability to search by document number (e.g. code section or docket number), title or parties in a case, keyword, and subject?
• Are references to other relevant information, such as related statutes, constitutional provisions, court opinions, or regulations, provided? (Note: this tends to be a value-added feature, not available on many free sites. The absence of these references does not necessarily mean the site is unreliable, but the user may want to seek out this additional information in other ways.)

• Is there any bias towards the subject matter? 

• Does the author/publisher have a particular viewpoint, which influences the content or presentation of the information? 

• Are other viewpoints presented? 

• Do the viewpoints of the advertiser(s) influence the content of the information? 

Currency: For legal materials currency is very important. As new statutes are passed, court cases decided and regulations put into effect the law can change and new precedents set, so it is important to be up to date.

• Is the material current? 

• Is it recent enough for the subject matter of the site? 

• What is the latest update given for the site? 

• Is other information provided indicating the last time the page was updated, for example “current through the end of the 2007 legislative session”? 

How does the date the site was last updated compare to the frequency with which statutes are passed, cases decided, or regulations promulgated in that particular jurisdiction? 

• Does a site with legislative information include pending legislation? Does it provide effective dates (dates when the provisions of an enacted statute go into effect)?
Prepared by Professor Eloise M. Bellard, 06/10. Adapted from the American Association of Law Libraries, Access to Electronic Legal Information Committee: Guidelines for Evaluating a Legal Website