How to assess web site credibility

Copyright 2016 by Richard Schenkar

Recent disclosures concerning the credibility of information on climate change raise an issue of how one might reasonably assess scientific credibility of Internet data. The uncomfortable reality is that we, the users, must now assess Internet data credibility on our own without the aid of editors or other screeners as a result of the speed of change and the volume of data we can access online.

A posting (dated December 10, 2009) on the widely-read weblog Slashdot suggested that. . .

> This [climate change data controversy] has harsh implications for the credibility of science generally. Hard science, alongside medicine, was one of the few things left accorded automatic stature and respect by most untrained lay persons. But the average person reading accounts of the East Anglia emails will conclude that hard science has become just another faction, as politicized and messy as, say, gender studies. While nothing interesting was found by most scientific journals . . . the attacks against scientists in these leaked e-mails for proposing opposite views will recall the reader to the persecution of Galileo.

One web site does offer a series of eight criteria useful in assessing Internet information credibility. It is from the Health On the Net Foundation, online at http://www.hon.ch. The Foundation uses these criteria to assess Internet data:

Authoritative information: The site provides general information about the organization or individual responsible for its operation and content, and a person is named as editor or principal author. Where the site provides medical or health information or advice it is by medical or health professionals whose training or credentials are listed. Where information or advice is offered by non-medical professionals or organizations, the web site makes a clear statement or a disclaimer.

Complementary Information: The site states that information provided there is meant to complement and not replace any advice or information from a health professional. The site also indicates the indicated mission and audience of the site.

Privacy and Confidentiality: The privacy and confidentiality policies regarding e-mail, personal, and medical information are displayed on the web site. The site and its mirrors respect the legal requirements, including those concerning medical and personal information privacy, that apply in the country and state of their location.

Documented, Referenced and Dated Information: The last modification date is provided for the site. Where the site contain information from external sources, there are references, hypertext links (valid and regularly checked), or bibliographic citations to the source data.

Claim Justification: If claims are made relating to the benefit or performance of a specific medical treatment, commercial product or service, they are supported by clear references to scientific research results, published articles or other valid data.

Website Contact Details: A valid e-mail address for the webmaster or a hypertext link to a valid contact form is easily accessible throughout the site.

Funding Source Disclosure: Sources of the funding of the site are clearly described.

Advertising Policy: Where advertising supports the site, a page provides a description of the banner and advertising policy, along with a description of economic benefit derived from the exchanges. If there is advertising, there is a clear separation between editorial content and advertising.