How to Separate Good Data From Bad

By TINA KELLEY

THE first rule when it comes to information found on the Web (and many other places as well): be skeptical. You would not buy a stock, write a check or believe a contentious statement from an unknown source off line -- so bring the same challenging attitude to information found on line. And don't be shy about going off line to check something: go to a library or pick up a phone to check.

Here are a handful of suggestions to help surfers assess information they find on line.

* Know the source. If you recognize the source and are sure that particular source is running the site, you are likely to be on solid ground. Don't forget, though, that some of the people who are running sites are trying to confuse you: www.amnesty-tunisia.org and www.amnesty.org/tunisia, for instance, carry opposing messages. Don't forget that hackers can sometimes commandeer legitimate sites.

* If you see a tilde (as in "jdoe") in a Web site's address, that's usually a sign of a personal home page. The tilde might occur in an.edu address, suggesting that the page's owner is a professor or student at a college or university. "Chances are they're not a major, major entity," said Reva Basch, author of "Researching on Line for Dummies" (Dummies Technology Press, 1998), of tilde-site owners. Often a clue that a site is a personal page is an address that includes "geocities," "tripod" or "members.aol.com."

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to hyperlinks, the small Web addresses appearing at the bottom of the screen when you move the mouse across a Web page. "A good page, one using the Internet well, not only has internal links, but also points outward to other parts of information," Mr. Gilster said. "If I have a good idea, it's to my advantage for you to look at other ideas, to prove to you that mine is the best. Web pages that are completely inward turning, where all the information only points to the same server, should raise an alarm flag."

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.

* Pay attention to whether a site's address, or U.R.L., ends with .com (for commercial), .org (technically for nonprofit organizations), .gov (for government), .net (for network) or .edu (for educational). While many .edu sites describe bona fide research, others are individual home pages of people affiliated with the institution, with information that is harder to verify. It is also true that anybody with a little bit of money can get a .com, .org or .net site, so the suffix is in no way definitive -- a strip miner could register lovetheenvironment.org. Foreign Web sites have different suffixes: .ca for Canada, .ru for Russia and so on.