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.

* Check to see if the site is objective, or at least takes account of opposing points of view.

* Pay close attention to when a site was most recently updated. The last revision dates of some sites can be determined by using a feature of the Netscape Navigator browser. Click the View option and go to Page Info to see information on when the site was last revised. (Internet Explorer has no similar function.) Other Web pages display "last updated" lines -- which in themselves are, of course, hard to verify.

* Gauge a site's credibility by seeing who runs it. To check, go to rs.internic.net and use the "whois" search of the database of registered domain names run by Internic, an organization that is the registry for the most recognized categories of Internet domains. While Internic can give a name and contact information, be aware that this information is not conclusive. But if you can get an idea of who runs the site, you can better judge its information. Some people use Web navigation software called Alexa, which can be downloaded free from www.alexa.com and includes source and other information. (Its performance can be quirky.)

* 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.

* Ask yourself if banner advertisements change your impression of a page, either compromising the content of the page or lending it credibility by representing an advertiser's implicit vote of confidence in the site.

* 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."

* If you come across unfamiliar topics or Web site authors, run their names through a search engine or Dejanews.com -- a search engine of newsgroups -- to see what others have said about them. Dejanews is a huge and often fractious collection of personal opinions, some of them highly misleading or incomprehensible and some well informed.

* Consider contacting a Web site owner directly, perhaps using an E-mail address or phone number from the site, or perhaps using the fruits of your Internic search. "If you have doubts about a person's credentials, send him an E-mail," said Paul Gilster, author of "Digital Literacy" (Wiley Computer Publishing, 1997), and beware sites that offer no address or do not respond. "You should be able to use the technology to solve the problem the technology creates."

* A long and complicated Web address is another warning sign, but someone trying to find out more about a site with an ungainly address can delete parts of it from right to left. "If I'm presented with information like that, I always like to back up level by level, slash by slash and see where I am and what other information is there like that," Ms. Basch said. Barbara Quint, editor of Searcher magazine, also sees the value of exploring a site from top to bottom. "I'm coming through the front door," she said. "I want to look around at the building before I find myself at somebody's broom closet."

* 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."

* Esther Grassian at the U.C.L.A. College Library urges surfers to look for sites that refer to print and other off-line resources.

* Look for sites like Cnet.com that include a page of corrections, which are rare but appreciated (provided the corrections aren't too plentiful)

* Beware of sites with lots of spelling and grammatical errors. "It's hard to believe anyone doing serious work would put up a Web page loaded with that sort of problem," Mr. Gilster said. Lack of attention to such detail could indicate less-than-rigorous content. (Some sites run by non-English speakers can be an exception.)