



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... THE WORLD WIDE WEB

P. T. Barnum said there's a sucker born every minute—and that was decades before the advent of the Internet. He would have rubbed his hands in glee over the gullibility of people in the electronic age. As we have seen in this chapter, freedom of speech is a powerful liberty, but one consequence is that it makes it very difficult to silence those making fraudulent or misleading claims.

Americans expect the government to regulate radio and television because, before the days of cable and satellites, these media were held to be scarce resources that belonged to the public. But lawmakers and judges have been hesitant to regulate free speech on the Internet.¹ That's because when a medium is quasipublic, like the Internet, and access to it is easy and cheap, it is impossible to restrict the views and ideas that are published without also doing some serious damage to the freedom of speech. Today we have access to more information than we could ever have imagined, but we are not trained to use it critically and competently. It is up to us as consumers to sort the grain from the chaff. Of the many sources of information that you can find online, here are a few worthy of special consideration:

- **"Official" Web Sites.** Just about any organization, corporation, or political figure of note is likely to have a web site, from which they present news and information about themselves, their services, or their product. It's good to get information from official sources, but always bear in mind that the information they provide may be tailored to meet the site owner's needs, not those of the readers.
- **Blogs.** A blog is an online "weblog," a forum in which you can keep a public journal of sorts on any subject you want to talk about, from cooking to travel to politics. Political blogs present a particular challenge to the reader because bloggers from the left and right battle daily, crossing the line between journalism and activism, with no requirement that they meet the ethical obligations of either. That doesn't necessarily make blogs unreliable sources of information. It does mean, however, that you should be wary of information you find on a blog, and you should always try to figure out where the blogger is coming from so that you can see what impact his or her ideological perspective has on the news he or she conveys.
- **Wikipedia.** On first glance Wikipedia looks like a researcher's dream come true—a free online encyclopedia that seems to cover every subject

under the sun. The only catch with Wikipedia is that it is a communal encyclopedia, written, edited, and fact-checked by the people who use it. See something that seems questionable in a Wikipedia entry? You can edit it yourself, or tag it as potentially offensive, untrue, or libelous, in hopes that someone else in the community will address it. The self-policing, collaborative power of Wikipedia creates an amazing resource, but one you need to use warily because the information there is only as good as the last person who edited it. Never rely on it without double-checking!

- **Search Engines.** When you want to verify information you received from any source, chances are the first thing you'll do is enter a few keywords into a search engine to find out the real story. Search engines like Google, Bing, and Yahoo scan the Internet for content related to specific terms. However, most search engines use specific tools and a battery of information—including your past searches and your browsing history—to determine what results are best for you. That means that when it comes to political news, your own political leanings, as gleaned from what you've clicked on in the past, can have an impact on your search results—and influence what you click on in the future. Further, web writers are careful to pepper their stories with key words that will increase traffic to their sites, so the "best" information might not be what comes in at the top of your search results.²

What to Watch Out For

Here are some tips to help you become a savvy surfer of the World Wide Web:

1. **Find out the source of the web site.** Examine the web address, or URL, for clues. Although these days there are many domains, web addresses that end with .com, .org, .gov, .net, or .edu indicate, respectively, commercial, nonprofit, government, network, or educational sites. Sites from other countries end with abbreviations of the nation (for example, .kr indicates the site is from Korea and .fr indicates France). Remember, however, that anyone can purchase rights to a web address, and an official-looking address does not necessarily confer legitimacy on a site.
2. **Follow the money.** Commercial interests can shape the content of what we find on the web in any number of ways: links to sponsors' pages