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Curating and Evaluating Open Web Sites and Sources

There's nothing new about finding and using open access resources; in fact, the movement to publish, aggregate, and deploy open access books, journals and other scholarly resources continues to grow at a rapid pace. And with the coinciding interest in open pedagogy, an increasing number of faculty and librarians are adding open access to their collection of available research sources.

However, open access in the academic context almost always implies peer-reviewed or other scholarly and academic- focused resources. But there is also an explosion in **non-scholarly** free (still credible and substantive) business-focused sites, sources, and even searchable databases that are available on the open Web, and accessible via a Google search.

They are not always that easy to identify from all the lesser quality sites. And then if you do find one, how do you know if it is credible and valuable enough to add to a LibGuide, faculty reading request, or to refer a student to utilize for his or her project or paper?

This article looks at these questions.

First, why would you want to even think about finding and adding non-scholarly, free Internet resources? There are several potential reasons:

- Non-scholarly free resources can complement areas not covered by your current subscribed resources. This may be particularly true when you need practical, popular, news related and/or timely information not covered in archival scholarly databases.
- They can be used to deepen and improve alumni portals, which may not be permitted to offer contractually limited fee-based databases.
- Your institution may be able to cut its collection funds spending by substituting one or more free high-quality free resources for a fee-based one.

- Adding these can complement an institutional program or priority to collect and teach about trends in the free and open access movement.
- Integrating these non-scholarly free resources can be used to teach information literacy. Tom Ottaviano, Business Librarian at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY), uses open Web research to teach different origin and usage of various sources. In an email interview, he told me:

I expose [students] to different types of resources, and ask them to rank the resources from the most valuable to the least valuable for a research assignment, and then ask them to be able to defend their rankings. While students claim to know the difference between scholarly and popular materials, they'll often cite things like Forbes or Business Insider as scholarly...students should understand that most information (if not all) does have value. What then is the value of a magazine article? A blog post? Or a newswire?...When and how should they be used?...

Where do these quality free business sites come from? Who publishes and disseminates them? Although free credible sites and sources can come from nearly anywhere, they typically are offered by:

- Government: federal, state, local, international
- Universities, think tanks, non-profit organizations
- Associations
- Conferences
- Private Publishers
- Consulting Companies
- Crowd Sourced Wikis
- Private for-profit businesses

The *type* of data and resources you may find varies widely, but examples may include: international financial data; industry trend and forecast reports; global standard of living indices; white papers and trade journal articles on technology trends; company directories, product reviews, economic news from around the world, and much more.

How can you more easily locate these sites? As editor of an e-newsletter ([Best of the Business Web](#)), which describes and evaluates five substantive and credible business research sites each month, I need to do this regularly. My own technique is really quite simple; whenever I come upon a business site that looks intriguing, whether from casual searching, responding to a research request, researching to add to my own collections and guides, or being mentioned at a conference by a colleague, I simply note down the name of the site. That's step one. Then, when it's time to make selections, I go through all of these and view and try them out to identify which are the best. That's step two.

Step three is to deploy good criteria to determine what makes the final cut. Here is what I look for:

1. High quality content — what is the source of the data? If derived from 3rd parties, who are those providers? Is the provider a known entity? If not, time to do a little research!
2. The site or database does what it says it will do—it works and does so consistently.
3. Are there methods to filter/limit searches to make them more precise?
4. The interface is clear and intuitive.
5. The publisher/provider is clearly identified along with contact information.
6. The source will add some special or new value to a business researcher's toolkit.

Of course, this is all a judgment call ultimately—and there is also a gut feeling factor too. [Note—I also recommend adapting from this more formal method deployed for evaluating all types of open access resources, itself adapted for use in the higher education context, by ISKME, 2017, from Achieve.org's [Rubrics for Evaluating Open Education Resource \(OER\) Objects](#).]

There are some cautions when venturing out onto the open Web to utilize non-scholarly free resources. Some questions that are good to think about ahead of time include:

- How much of your LibGuide or other collections do you want populated with non-scholarly free resources? What kind of balance is appropriate?
- How do you keep up with changes, updates, or even abandoned sites?
- How will you advise students if there are technical problems or questions, as there will not be any customer support?
- Are there ads on the site? If so, what will be your institution's policy on accepting or rejecting sites with ads?

Robert Berkman is Outreach Business Librarian at the University of Rochester (NY) and editor of [Best of the Business Web](#), a monthly digital newsletter that identifies five high quality free on the Web business resources and the 2019 [Best of the Best of the Business Web](#), a directory of the last three years of selections.