The COBWEB Method for Evaluating Websites

C is for Credibility: Do the creators of the site have appropriate expertise and knowledge? When you look at a site, always look for the credentials of the person or persons presenting the information. Does the person have the appropriate education and experience in the discipline?

O is for Objective: What is the reason for creating and maintaining the site? Many sites claim they exist “to provide information.” Sometimes that is true: government agencies are charged with disseminating information, and some nonprofits consider that to be part of their mission. However, often sites are created in order to convince you of a particular point of view, or to entice you to their site so they can profit from the ads, or to sell you something. When a drug company presents drug information on a website, their primary motive is usually to sell the drug, not to provide free information to consumers.

B is for Bias: What particular viewpoint of the creators may influence their presentation? We all have biases. When the American Medical Association makes statements, you should recognize that they are speaking first for the well-being of physicians (whose membership dues support the organization) and only second for the well-being of their patients. The American Chemical Society represents the chemical industry and chemists, as well as accredits chemistry programs at colleges and universities.

W is for Website: What does the website tell you about itself? Look around the website. Does it identify its mission or the mission of its parent organization? Observe the use of ads. Notice people connected with the website (the board of directors, the advisory board, contributors, etc.). Is there an online store, and what is it selling?

E is for Evidence: What is the level of evidence presented? Beware of opinions presented as facts, and statements such as “Studies show….” What studies done by whom at what institution/organization? Dependable websites indicate where the information came from, and the best will cite their sources.

B is for Beyond: What does the world beyond the website say? Don’t take any website or its information at face value. Use a search engine to check on credentials and facts. Verify that awards, positions, and references are correct. Look up nonprofit organizations at an evaluation site such as Charity Navigator (charitynavigator.org), Charity Watch (charitywatch.org) or BBB Wise Giving Alliance (give.org). Check links at reputable websites on the same topic to see if they link to the website being evaluated.