

Editorial Policy



Guidance Note

Internet Research

This guidance note should be read in conjunction with BBC Online Services Guidelines (www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/onguide/) which outlines the BBC's policy on using the Internet to find information and contributors.

In cases of doubt, further assistance can be sought from the duty Editorial Policy Adviser by telephoning 0870 333 4550 or BBC extension (02) 81819.

All Guidance Notes can be found at edpol.gateway.bbc.co.uk/guidance_notes.shtml (BBC internal link) or www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/.

Introduction

Great care should be taken when using online sources. Those conducting research should corroborate any information they find and check the identity of any contributor they wish to use.

Legal Issues

The web presents us with a huge array of sources, domestic and international, amateur and professional. It would be a mistake to assume that all web sites produce content in accordance with UK laws on defamation, contempt of court and intellectual property.

As disputes over web page content can occur, it is advisable to save copies of every website used in BBC output. These can be sent to legal advisers before transmission and referred back to if any issues arise.

Special editorial approval is needed if research involves obscene material. Go to <http://home.gateway.bbc.co.uk/IS/aomjr.htm> for more details.

Certain research tools such as peer-to-peer file sharing software present legal and technical problems. Make sure all software is approved and properly installed before use.

Hoaxes & Spoofs

Many entertainment websites contain bogus information such as spoof news reports. Some campaign and activist sites mimic the domain name and design of an official source for reasons of satire or misinformation. Researchers must take care to perform thorough provenance checks before using material from a Web site.

Many sites have an “about us” section revealing information about the site and contact details for its owners. Crosscheck these details with directory enquiries before making contact, as this lessens the chances of involving a hoax Web site.

A simple background check is advised for any source or contributor we wish to use. Searching the web for references to a site’s domain name may confirm its official status, but it might also reveal it to be a hoax.

Researchers can also conduct a “WHOIS” search to check the registration details of a domain name. This will often reveal the name, address and telephone number of a Web site’s owner.

Amateur Sites

Although a Web site may look professional, it may in fact be authored by an amateur enthusiast. Amateurs may be a great source of information and expertise, but may also lack the objectivity, accuracy, copyright ownership and legal awareness of many professional sources.

Biased sources

As with any medium, hidden commercial or political agendas can shape a Web site’s content. Researchers should check the links to and from a site as these can often reveal political or commercial affiliations. It is wise to question where the financing for a Web site comes from.

Out of date information

Even trustworthy sources can contain pages that have not been updated in years. Contextual information can provide an idea of the date it was authored, but always use recognised sources to corroborate any information found.

Best practice when emailing sources or posting in online communities

Transparency is essential when dealing with the public. Use a BBC email address and plainly state that research is being conducted on behalf of the BBC.

Consult the BBC policy on email use at:

<http://guidelines.gateway.bbc.co.uk/dq/email/policies.shtml>.

Online communities do not always appreciate media interference. It is often better to privately approach the owner of message board, than to directly post onto a message board.

If participation in online communities is essential, it is advisable to use a departmental email address rather than a personal one.

Best practice when conducting covert or specialist research

In certain limited circumstances special permission can be granted for covert research.

When going undercover online, special care should be taken with security. A simple visit to a website can betray BBC interest to its owner. Even emails sent via free Web based services can be traced back to the BBC.

Adequate training can ensure that any potential problems can be identified and overcome. Do not leave such things to chance.