is a relatively obscure issue with few known sources; however, it can be very enlightening. See Marandi (2012) for an example of information offered by Wikipedia which was contradicted by other sources I was able to find on the same topic. And in any case, *even the most reliable of tertiary sources[4]* , such as good encyclopedias, introductory textbooks, and the like, while perhaps good enough, if used judicially, for very elementary articles such as this, should not be used as references in original research and scholarly articles. For example, while I consider Brown (2007) a wonderful introductory textbook for BA Language Teaching Methodology classes, I would never accept it as a reference in an MA thesis or PhD dissertation. This is despite the fact that I would consider it to be a fairly *reliable* source of information. The point to be taken from all this is that in addition to all the tips mentioned above about ascertaining the reliability of a website, we should also bear in mind that even reliable online information should only be used in its rightful place, and may therefore be considered an (in)appropriate reference, depending on whether it is a primary, secondary, or tertiary source, and depending on the context.

Notes

1. Search engines are web sites similar to Google, which collect and organize information on the Internet and are therefore used to "search" the Internet for content on a particular subject. And incidentally, while Google (http://www.google.com) is the most-widely used search engine, it is worthwhile trying out other search engines, as well. For example, Dogpile (http://www.dogpile.com) is a metasearch engine which combines the results of several popular search engines.

2. To give you a better idea of how a Google bomb works, I would like to remind you of the Google bomb successfully created by an Iranian blogger as part of a campaign against National *Geographic's* attempt to replace the name "Persian Gulf" with an illegitimate alternative in 2004. A Google search for the illegal name would lead you to the following page: http://arabian-gulf.info/ which begins with the following sentence: "The Gulf You Are Looking For Does Not Exist. Try *Persian Gulf*." See the following page for more information: http://mahimoto.com/google/

3. A domain name indicates the destination location for the URL. For example, in the address or URL for Alzahra University's web portal, i.e., http://www.alzahra.ac.ir/persian/index.asp , the domain name is alzahra.ac.ir .

4. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources, see the following link: http://www.stthomas.edu/libraries/research/tutorials/basic/sourcetype.html

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Task 2: Consider the various bits of advice presented above. Which ones do you consider to be more important? Can you think of any vital points not mentioned here?

Is Wikipedia reliable?

A very relevant question and one often posed by students is "How reliable is Wikipedia?" The general consensus on this seems to be that while Wikipedia is good as a starting point for research, it should not be taken as gospel, and information taken from it should be checked against multiple sources ("What's wrong with Wikipedia?," n.d.; Woods and Thoeny, 2007). Also, it is advisable to refer to the sources cited in the reference list of a Wikipedia article (Woods and Thoeny, 2007), rather than merely reading the Wikipedia entry itself, and also to check the history and discussion pages of each article to get a better feel of the credibility of each individual Wikipedia article. Still, many teachers do not accept Wikipedia as a reference for their students' homework ("Wikipedia: Citing Wikipedia," n.d.), although sometimes this seems to be less related to a distrust of Wikipedia information, and more part of a general education policy which discourages the use of tertiary sources such as encyclopedias as more than just a starting point. A similar position can be seen in Wikipedia itself ("Wikipedia: Citing Wikipedia," n.d.), where it advises against the use of Wikipedia and other encyclopedias as a research source, "Normal academic usage of Wikipedia and *other* encyclopedias is for getting the general facts of a problem and to gather keywords, references and bibliographical pointers, but not as a source in itself."

Nevertheless, there are differences of opinion as to the credibility of Wikipedia. An often-cited study carried out in 2005 claims that Wikipedia is not far behind the internationally acclaimed *Encyclopedia Britannica* as far as reliability is concerned (Giles, 2005). Woods and Thoeny (2007), on the other hand, believe that Wikipedia has some weaknesses that other encyclopedias do not. For example: Important subjects may be ignored or may receive insufficient attention in Wikipedia, entries may be incomplete or changed at any given moment, and original sources are often not cited, making it difficult to check the credibility of the information.

As the Harvard Guide to Using Sources points out, however:

The fact that Wikipedia is not a reliable source for academic research doesn't mean that it's wrong to use basic reference materials when you're trying to familiarize yourself with a topic. In fact, the library is stocked with introductory materials, and the … librarians can point you to specialized encyclopedias in different fields. These sources can be particularly useful when you need background information or context for a topic you're writing about." ("What's wrong with Wikipedia?," n.d.)

My personal position on the use of Wikipedia also is that it can be used as a starting point, but should not be the sole source of information; any information taken from Wikipedia should be checked and cross-validated with other sources. This is often more easily said than done, especially if the topic under question

("How to know if a website is reliable," n.d.). However, it can be vital if you are searching for rapidly changing information, such as prices or the latest technological advances, etc ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.).

✓ Similarly, check to see when the website was first created ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.). A website which has been around for, say, a decade is more likely to be reliable than one which has just recently been created (Rogers, n.d.).

✓ Examine the website to see how professionally it has been designed ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.; "How to find out if a certain website is reliable," n.d.). Obviously, the fact that a website has been professionally designed is not by and of itself sufficient evidence in support of the reliability of the website, but the opposite could at least make its reliability questionable (Rogers, n.d.). For example, a website which is inundated with advertisements should be treated with caution ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.), especially if the advertisements are lewd or vulgar.

✓ Check to see if the author of the website provides reliable sources to support the information given in her/his website. Just as we are used to demanding references from published materials, we should similarly look for evidence substantiating the claims in a website, such as a reference list with dependable sources ("How

can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.; "How to know if a website is reliable," n.d.).

✓ Most of the points mentioned above are not conclusive, so it is best not to limit yourself to just one of them. Depending on how important the information you are looking for is and how vital it is for you to get your facts right, you might decide to exercise more or less caution. For example, if you have come across the term LMS and are curious to know what it means, a simple Google search would probably suffice to give you a general idea. If, on the other hand, you want to know whether using an LMS for language teaching is advisable or not, you would need to use only the most reliable websites related to this topic. Similarly, if you are doing a search on information relevant to your thesis or dissertation or for an article you hope to publish in an academic journal, you should make sparing use of websites, unless their reliability and credibility is established beyond doubt.

✓ Check the information provided by the website under question against other sources ("How to know if a website is reliable," n.d.). Obviously using multiple sources can be expected to increase the reliability of our research results, unless, of course, all the sources we are using are equally biased and misinformed.

out if a certain website is reliable," n.d.).

✓ Go to a search engine, such as Google, Yahoo!, etc., and type in the following: link:yourwebsiteaddress; for example: link:http://www. alzahra.ac.ir/persian/index.asp. (Remember not to include a space between the colon and the URL.) The results will be websites who have created links to the site you are searching. If other reputable, well-known websites are linking themselves to the website you are researching, it is much more likely to be a reliable source (Rogers, n.d.; "How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.). Similarly, check to see what kinds of websites are cited in the source you are researching: Does this website link you to other websites of good standing, or does it take you to doubtful websites ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.)?

✓ Look for an "About" link or tab, providing information about the website author, and do a search on the author. Who is the website author and what are her/ his credentials?

While such information might not actually prove anything, the absence of any information about the creator of the website can be an indication that you shouldn't trust it ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.; Rogers, n.d.). The same might be true if there is no way to contact the website authors, so look for email and postal addresses, phone numbers, etc. ("How to find out if a certain website is reliable," n.d.; "How to know if a website is reliable," n.d.).

✓ Check to see when the website was last updated. Websites which are regularly maintained are more likely to be reliable, although this is by no means a hard-and-fast rule. Also, even if the website you are using is generally a reliable one, if it hasn't been recently updated, the information it contains might be outdated ("How to find out if a certain website is reliable," n.d.). This might not be important if you are looking for information on a topic which doesn't change over time, such as historical information

problem that is likely to continue in the foreseeable future[2] (Karch, n.d).

While this obviously does not indicate that we should stop using search engines, it does mean that we always need to ascertain the authenticity and reliability of the websites we use, even if they are one of the first websites to appear in a Google search. Remember that anyone can put things online; in fact, there are more unreliable than reliable websites. Therefore, do NOT quote just any website. Spend some time gathering information on the website first.

A Google bomb uses a large number of links (or similar techniques) to exploit search engine algorithms, thus causing a web page "to have a high ranking for searches on unrelated or off topic keyword phrases, often for comical or satirical purposes"

How can we do this? There are several things you can do when trying to establish how reliable online information is. Some are as follow:

- ✓ Check the website's URL (i.e., the Uniform Resource Locator, which is just a fancy way of saying "the website address"). Is the website hosted by or associated with an established, trustworthy institution? In particular, checking the domain name[3] of the site will give you an idea who is hosting it ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.).
- ✓ Perform a search on the domain name in a "whois" (i.e., a kind of domain research/directory site), such as http://www.whois.sc. Doing so provides you with information about the registered owner of a domain ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.).
- ✓ Check the extension of the website address ("How can I tell if a website is reliable?," n.d.). (The extension refers to the few letters that appear at the end of a domain name. For example, some widely known extensions are .org, .net, .com, .gov, .edu.) Extensions such as .net and .com are mainly commercial and can be purchased by anyone, so they are in some ways the least reliable. The extension .org is usually used by organizations; websites with this extension gain their dependability from the reputation of the organization using them. However, this extension is also open to the public for purchase, so it is not in itself an indication of reliability and authenticity. The extensions .gov and .mil are used by the US government and the US military, respectively. (Worse and worse!) And the .edu extension is used for educational institutions, such as universities, etc. Many people consider an .edu extension as one indication of reliability ("How to know if a website is reliable," n.d.), although we should bear in mind that many individuals with some kind of affiliation to an educational institution are granted websites using the .edu extension, and obviously not all of them are reliable sources of information ("How to find

our knowledge—about everything from politics, to current affairs, to literature, to science—is being shaped by nothing but the aggregation of responses. The search engine is a quantitative historical record of previous requests. So all the search engine offers is a ranking system that feeds back to us the wisdom of the crowd. In terms of links clicked on and sites visited, Google is an electronic mirror of ourselves. (pp. 92-3)

This circularity is reminiscent of an anecdote I recently came across in an email. The story goes something like this: A young inexperienced Indian whom has recently been made chief is asked by his tribe whether the upcoming winter is likely to be a hard one. He tells them he will let them know, but advises them to gather extra firewood in the meantime. While the other Indians are gathering firewood, he makes a call to the local weather station, and asks them the same question. They tell him it will most likely be a cold winter, so he urges his fellow Indians to step up their efforts in gathering wood. To be on the safe side, after some time he calls back the weather station, and repeats his question. This time, they tell him it will most definitely be a very hard winter. Again, he insists that the tribe members gather as much firewood as they possibly can. However, after some time there is still no evidence of cold weather, so he calls the weather station yet a third time, only to be told that it will be the hardest winter in living human memory. Finally, it occurs to him to ask, "How do you know?" The response he receives is, "Because the local Indians are gathering firewood like crazy!"

Task 1: Type "how to increase your Google ranking" into a search engine, such as Google or Dogpile. Which factors can increase/decrease your website's ranking? Are all of these factors justifiable? Which are not?

Obviously, finding safe, reliable websites requires exercising good judgment and caution. We cannot always rely on a simple Internet search to find websites which are both safe and reliable. To quote Keen (2007) again, we should not take search engine results as "gospel" (p. 93). This is especially true since, as you saw above, it is actually possible to manipulate search results through various techniques. One such technique is increasing the number of links to a page, leading to an unexpectedly high rank of a particular website in searches, a practice that has become known as Google bombing ("Google bomb," n.d.; Karch, n.d.; Keen, 2007). A Google bomb uses a large number of links (or similar techniques) to exploit search engine algorithms, thus causing a web page "to have a high ranking for searches on unrelated or off topic keyword phrases, often for comical or satirical purposes" ("Google bomb," n.d.). For example, a Google search on "miserable failure" used to lead people to George Bush's White House website! Indeed, many search engine bombs are similarly related to political or social issues. And while search engines like Google are constantly trying to improve the algorithms they use to determine a website's visibility in their search results (this effort is called *search engine optimization*), Google bombing continues to influence search engine results, a

full URL in the bottom left corner of your browser. This is useful for those links which appear to take you to a safe website but will in fact link you to somewhere else (Phelps, 2012).

✓ Remember not to click on a suspicious link. There are many free online website checking services, link scanners which allow you to type in the address of a suspicious website to see whether it is safe or not (Buenaventura & Bunter, 2011; Phelps, 2012; Rosenblatt, 2011). (You can also right click on the link and copy/paste it into the link scanner.) For example, check out McAfee's SiteAdvisor at http://www.siteadvisor.com/ ; Norton's Safe Web at http://safeweb.norton.com/ ; URLVoid, which makes use of multiple sources, at http://www.urlvoid.com/ ; hpHosts at http://

www.hosts-file.net/ ; or Sucuri Site Check at http://sitecheck.sucuri.net/scanner/ if you are searching a shortened URL, such as those produced by TinyURL, bitly, goo.gl, tiny.cc, ow.ly, is.gd, etc. (Phelps, 2012). You may also use Google Safe Browsing by typing the following in the address bar of a browser *http://google.com/safebrowsing/diagnostic?site=* followed by the address of the site you want to check (Phelps, 2012). Finally, note that the above scanners work best on older websites (Chiron, 2012).

How can you be sure a website is reliable?

Nowadays on the Internet, you can find information on virtually any topic, by using one of the many search engines[1] which exist. In fact, conducting an online search is so easy that it has become second nature to many people looking for a quick answer to their questions. What these people might sometimes forget is that the websites they come across in their searches may not necessarily always be safe, and even if they are, their information is not always reliable. You may remember a quotation from Keen (2007) mentioned in the second article from the CALL series (Marandi, 2011), where Keen is attacking popular search engines like Google for providing unreliable information. Keen says (2007):

Search engines like Google, which run on algorithms that rank results according to the number of previous searches, answer our search queries not with what is most true or most reliable, but merely what is most popular. As a result,

Recognizing safe, reliable websites

Classroom Techniques

By Seyyedeh Susan Marandi, Assistant Professor
of TEFL, English Department, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran
Email: susanmarandi@alzahra.ac.ir

Abstract

The present article is the sixth of a series of CALL-related articles being published in *Roshd FLT* journal. In the preceding article, some useful tips were provided on how to ensure our online safety and privacy. A closely related issue is that of being able to tell apart safe/unsafe and reliable/unreliable websites. The reliability of a website can be doubly important, since an unreliable website might both be unsafe and also contain unreliable information. For this reason, learning how to recognize safe, reliable sites is dealt with in the current issue.

Key words: safe link, safe website, reliable website, Google bomb, domain name, extension, URL, Google ranking, tertiary source, search engine, Wikipedia

Make sure the link/website is safe

As I have repeatedly said, an important part of a CALL teacher's duties has to do not just with using technology for teaching, but with first teaching her/his students what is the correct way to use the Internet. For this reason, the two preceding articles largely discussed different aspects of safety on the Net. And of course, while teaching our students to establish the credibility and reliability of a website they are using (to be discussed below) is vital for encouraging a *critical* use of technology and CALL, it is also very closely related to their online safety, since credible sites are usually also safe sites. But before discussing how to ascertain the reliability of a website, a few brief points about distinguishing between safe and unsafe links/websites remain. These are as follow:

✓ Hover over a link before clicking on it; you will be able to see the