



Media Literacy and the Web: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

When the question: "What's new?" is pursued at the expense of all other questions, what follows in its wake is often an endless flood of trivia and fashion. I wish to be concerned with the question: "What is best?" for this question cuts deeply, rather than broadly sweeping over everything. – Robert Pirsing, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

I was teaching in the clinic with one of our residents a few months ago; between appointments, we were researching topics on the Internet. The resident was looking at sites dealing with fluoride. "Hey, Dr. Adair," he said, "here's an anti-fluoride Web site with some derogatory statements about fluoridation." I smiled knowingly until he finished: "And they reference one of your publications."

We have all likely had the experience of Googling dental terms – fluoride, amalgam, behavior management – and being directed to some authoritative-looking sites with wacky information. Search for "fluoride," for instance, and you will probably see the URL for the Fluoride Action Network. To an uninformed person, lay or professional, this sounds like a group devoted to spreading the word about the dental benefits of fluoride. Instead, the site links readers to articles with headlines such as "Water Fluoridation 'Obsolete' According to Nobel Prize Scientist." Back on the Google search page, you have to read down past the link to the "Fluoride Issues Home Page" (on which the major link is titled "Mind Control Prevention") before you come to the American Dental Association's Web link.

Or try searching for "amalgam." The first 2 links present information from Dental Amalgam Mercury Syndrome, Inc, and from a holistic medicine site. It's not until you read down to the eighth link that you find a reputable health organization – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The ADA's site is 12th on the list.

This hierarchy of sites results from Google's algorithm of basing its search listings by popularity – those sites that are referenced most frequently by other popular sites receive the highest listings. Google claims that this results in high-quality sites receiving higher rankings. This is misleading because the quality of the information on the site is not being ranked, only its popularity.

Here is where media literacy comes in. The term is variously defined, but it essentially refers to one's ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create a variety of forms of media. I am not so concerned with access and creation for the moment. What worries me is how today's teens are

not savvy about the media, which can readily be accessed via the Web and other sources. The Internet is a huge repository of information – some good, some bad, and a lot ugly. Learning how to use it is part of media literacy. It is hard to imagine how we used to do many of the things that we do today online. Just as my young adult children don't remember TVs without remotes, today's adolescents don't remember a world without an Internet. Many of them may be as likely to accept someone's blog as a legitimate source of news as they are to accept information from a reputable media site. The Web is not alone in this dumbing-down of information either. You have only to tune in to some of the characters who pass as journalists on evening cable TV "news" shows or radio broadcasts to find further reasons for concern. And let's not even talk about "podcasts."

Some of the parents in our practices are in a similar need of a media literacy upgrade when it comes to sources of scientifically-sound information for their children. There are plenty of sites from respected organizations that they can use to learn about pediatric oral health, and we should show them where to look. Start with your own AAPD Web site – www.aapd.org. From there, a nonmember can find links to a wealth of respected and helpful sites, among them dental and medical organizations, publications, and parenting resources. They can search for and read abstracts about studies published in the AAPD journals, and they can learn more about our association's mission and vision. The AAPD Web site is a great launching pad for exploration into the science and news about children's oral health. Those who wish to improve the media literacy of the parents in your practices have only to publicize this resource – with a link on your own practice's Web site!

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