

# Domain Names Can Leave Net Users in Tangled Web, Study Finds

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In a world of e-mail spam and Internet scams, it's often difficult to discern fact from fiction in cyberspace. Some Internet users can't distinguish a real Web site from a fake one based on its domain name, and some users also said they would be more trusting of information found on sites they thought were real, but were really fictitious.

Those are some of the findings of a new study from North Carolina State University researchers that examined people's ability to distinguish between actual and artificial Web sites, as well as their beliefs about the credibility of information that may be found on them.

Drs. Michael Wogalter and Chris Mayhorn, professors in NC State's Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, conducted the research. The study was published in the July edition of the Proceedings of the International Ergonomics Association and presented at the 16th World Congress on Ergonomics in Maastricht, the Netherlands.

"This study shows that people are having difficulty discriminating between Web sites that have a familiar or credible sounding name," Wogalter says. "In some cases, people said they were more familiar with the sites that were simply made up by the researchers."

Study participants were asked to rate their familiarity and trust levels of 16 different organizations and their corresponding Web sites from a list provided by the researchers. On each list, half of the 16 organizations

and Web sites listed were real, and the other half were fake.

Although participants rated eight (50 percent) of the real Web sites as more trustworthy than their fictitious counterparts, they rated three fictitious sites significantly higher than actual Web sites. For the remaining five sites, participants could not discriminate between the actual and fictitious sites. An analysis of the data revealed that participants on average reported trusting about 50 percent of the information that might be accessible on any of the 16 Web site domain names given, suggesting there is some level of appropriate skepticism. Older participants also reported being less trusting of Internet information than younger participants.

With regard to familiarity, some well-known organizations, such as the American Automobile Association and WebMD, were given significantly higher ratings of familiarity and trust than their fictitious counterparts, National Automobile Counsel and Web Doctor. In other instances, people reported being significantly more familiar with a fictitious organization, such as the Women's Health Association and Crash-Safety.org, than the Society for Women's Health Research and Crash-Worthiness.com, which are real.

Wogalter and Mayhorn's findings show that the trustworthiness of a Web site is related to the level of familiarity one has with an organization, but low levels of familiarity don't seem to negatively impact one's degree of trust. Trust levels in Web sites often depend on whether they have credible-sounding names, like the made-up organizations and domain names in the study.

Still a familiar-sounding organization or a credible-sounding domain name doesn't mean a site is legit.

“Just because it shows up in Google doesn't mean it's trustworthy,”

Wogalter says. “It’s a great resource, but you have to remember that anyone can put anything on the Web.”

Source: North Carolina State University

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