Intel project seeks to mark disputed Web information

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Do Eskimos have more words for "snow" than we do? You're probably not alone if you thought the answer was yes.

Truth is, this is one of those pesky urban myths -- like the untrue predictions of a moon-sized Mars in August -- that just won't fade from the popular mindset.

Such legends can spread quickly on the Internet, so [computer scientists](#) at [Intel](#) Research in Berkeley, Calif., are developing new technologies to filter and measure disputed information online.

The software is called Dispute Finder and is the project of Rob Ennals, a research scientist at the Intel lab.

Think of it this way: Every time you visit a Web site, any statement on that page will be highlighted if someone else has marked it as disputed. If you click the highlight, you can see what evidence people have used to dispute the statement.

"Disputed does not mean wrong, it just means that there's some credible people that disagree with it," Ennals said. Objectivity, then, is not paramount -- just contention.

The software makes use of a small number of highly motivated users to mark statements on Web pages as disputed while they're reading. These demarcations are then syndicated out to the broader array of more

passive [Web users](#).

The traditional way of dealing with questionable information would be to rely on experts like Conrad Jung, an astronomer at the Chabot Observatory in Oakland, Calif. He reports receiving calls about a persistent chain letter claiming that Mars will reach its closest point to Earth in August.

The chain letter -- it's not dated but has been traced back to 2003 -- is not outright false. It's just been misread as a prediction that Mars will be the same size as the moon in the August night sky.

That's not true, Jung said.

And in politics -- where statements often become contentious -- the Pulitzer Prize-winning Web site PolitiFact.com has journalists rating statements against a "truth-o-meter."

President Barack Obama's recent statement, "Californians consume 40 percent less energy per person than the national average," was rated "Mostly True" on the site, based on an analysis of California's electricity and energy usage as compared to national averages. (It turns out they use 40 percent less electricity, but only 30 percent less energy overall.)

Now imagine if, while you surfed the Web, you had a thousand little Conrad Jungs in your computer, whispering, "Hey, watch out, that might not be true." That's what Dispute Finder promises.

In the future, Ennals said, he'd like to develop Dispute Finder to also work with TV closed captions and, ultimately, with those persistent chain e-mails.

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