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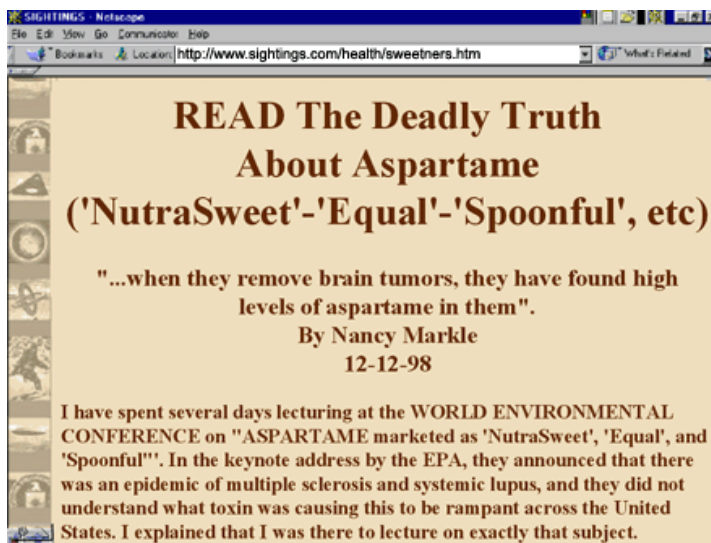
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Deconstructing Web Pages

This exercise takes you step by step through the process of deconstructing a Web page in order to determine its credibility as a source of information.

Imagine that you're a secondary student using the Internet to research a science project on the artificial sweetener, Aspartame. If the first response to your Web search is [the page shown here](#), you might want to run to your kitchen and toss out that can of diet Coke.



This article is identified as a presentation made by a woman named Nancy Markle at the "World Environmental Conference and the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation F.D.A Issuing for Collusion with Monsanto on Aspartame." Ms. Markle quotes a number of experts who have discovered that:

- Aspartame is responsible for systemic lupus and methanol toxicity.
- Side effects include blindness, spasms, shooting pains, seizures, headaches, depression, anxiety, memory loss, birth defects.
- Many have died from Aspartame poisoning.
- A conspiracy between drug and chemical companies prevents this from being known.
- Government leaders and medical associations are oblivious to this danger.

Though these statements are passionate, further Web research is needed before accepting them as fact. Let's apply the *Five W's of Cyberspace*.



Who is Nancy Markle and WHO sponsored or attended the "World Environmental Conference on Aspartame"? Is information about the author and conference clearly stated or easy to access?

No contact or background information about the author or the conference she attended appears on this Web page. However, a Meta-Web information search can be

used to dig a little deeper.



Using the search engine Google, a search for the name "Nancy Markle" brings up over 900 Web pages that refer to her.

From these results it becomes apparent that Nancy Markle is at the heart of an online Aspartame debate. The Web sites that turn up under a search for "Nancy Markle" either cite this article as proof that Aspartame is a health risk, or disagree with and refute Ms. Markle's claims.

The most surprising result of the search is that there is no Nancy Markle. It turns out that the original source of this "presentation" was actually a message posted to Usenet newsgroups by a woman named Betty Martini.

Betty Martini, who is not a medical professional, believes that there is a conspiracy between the industry creating Aspartame, and the American Food and Drug Administration. She has founded an organization called "Mission Possible International," whose Web site houses an archive of anti-Aspartame literature.

Information on the "World Environmental Conference on Aspartame" is also sketchy. If you search the Keynote Address archives of the American Environmental Protection Agency site - the organization that was supposed to have presented the keynote address at this conference - there is no reference to a conference by that name.



What are you getting? Is the information biased? Does the site use loaded language or make broad, unsubstantiated claims? Can the information be verified through other sources?

Let's check the statements made by Ms. Martini for bias.

...people were jumping up during the lecture saying "I've got this [aspartame disease], is it reversible"

*...there are a lot of people out there who must be warned, *please* let them know this information.*

Betty Martini uses emotional language to persuade her audience and to create a sense of urgency about spreading this message to a largely unsuspecting public. She makes strong assertions, but does so using vague language and anonymous sources. She implies that:

Aspartame causes multiple sclerosis

...During a visit to a hospice, a nurse said that six of her friends, who were heavy Diet Coke addicts, had all been diagnosed with MS. This is beyond coincidence.

and that Aspartame causes diabetics to go into comas.

...People were telling us...that they had relatives that switched from saccharin to an aspartame product and how that relative had eventually gone into a coma.

It's important to note the information gaps in statements like these. This article contains an abundance of unsubstantiated, anecdotal information, but very little factual evidence to substantiate claims. Ms. Martini blames Aspartame for almost every illness known to mankind, including brain tumors, blindness and Alzheimer's disease. Yet she offers no links to medical studies that might support her claims.

A critical reader might wonder why, if Aspartame is responsible for so many serious health problems, the Canadian and American medical associations have not raised the alarm. Because she specifically mentions connections between Aspartame and multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease and diabetes, it might be a good idea to see what these organizations have to say about this controversy.



CANADIAN
DIABETES
ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION
CANADIENNE
DU DIABÈTE

The [Canadian Diabetes Association](#) says that "People with diabetes can use sweeteners available in Canada - including Aspartame." They also make reference to Internet claims that "Aspartame is deadly for diabetics" and offer some "browser beware" tips for diabetics who are looking for information online.



Multiple Sclerosis
Society of Canada

The [Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada](#) posts an alert on its site regarding this article, and asks visitors to note that:

- There has been no published, peer-reviewed research on Aspartame and multiple sclerosis which would support these claims, and
- There is no evidence of an MS "epidemic," as claimed in the document.

Like the Canadian Diabetes Association, the Multiple Sclerosis Society also offers some pointers for judging if an Internet document or published article is credible. (The American Multiple Sclerosis Foundation goes one step further, and has posted a step-by-step rebuttal of Ms. Martini's allegations, written by their senior medical advisor.)



The [Alzheimer Society of Canada](#) makes no reference to Aspartame as a possible cause of Alzheimer's disease. When an e-mail was sent to the Alzheimer site asking if they knew of any links between Aspartame and Alzheimer's a reply arrived the next day, saying that there were no known links between them.



When was this article posted? Is it current? Has it been updated?

Although the "What's" are certainly enough to make you question the information on this Web page, let's follow through on the other W's, to see what we come up with.

Questions surrounding the currency of this information also bring up some interesting points. The original Web page where this information was found was at, which dated the article December 12, 1998.

The Web page that attributes this document to Betty Martini, states that this document is "...a copy of an e-mail Mrs. Martini had sent to a group of doctors following the 1995 World Environmental Conference," and that the original email had since been modified, and combined with other information.

This is confirmed by David Emery, from the [Urban Legends and Folklore](#) site, who includes a link to Betty Martini's original posting, on December 3, 1995.

This original e-mail also solves part of the mystery surrounding the nature of the conference she attended. From this e-mail, it appears that Ms. Markle was a presenter at a "World Environmental Conference," not a "World Environmental Conference on Aspartame and Multiple Sclerosis."



Where is this Web page located? What's the nature of the site? Is it a personal home page? Is it part of a medical site? The article talks about the link between Aspartame and Multiple Sclerosis, so is it part of the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation's Web site?

Where is this Web page located? The original page where we found this information about Aspartame was at www.rense.com/health/sweetners.htm. By paring this URL down to it's domain name, www.rense.com/, we are able to learn more about the nature of the Web site hosting this information.



We discover that "rense.com" is the supporting Web page for the Jeff Rense radio show. Both the radio show and the Web site are dedicated to issues that don't make the mainstream news.

"From UFOs, ETs, abductions, alien implants, crop formations and the paranormal, to... the poisons in packaged food.... no interview program has a more consistently amazing content," says the Web site's introduction.

Interesting listening and reading to be sure, but not necessarily factual information.



Why would I use this site as a credible source of information? Can I verify the information I've found?

The question that remains to be asked, is WHY would we think this site is a credible source of information? In researching this topic, we've learned a number of things:

- First, there are individuals and organizations that believe Aspartame poses a health risk.
- Second, this belief is not shared by the medical profession at large and claims

about the risks associated with Aspartame have not been clinically proven.

It's safe to assume that the individuals who believe that Aspartame is dangerous are sincere. It would also be accurate to use this Web site as an example of one side of the Aspartame debate. However, with no verifiable facts available to support the statements made by Ms. Martini, and a fair bit of confusion regarding the authorship and credibility of this article, it would be smart to pass on this Web page as an authoritative source of information.

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