

Chapter XV

Teaching Credibility of Sources in an Age of CMC

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ABSTRACT

*In 1989, the American Library Association issued its **Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report**, which was essentially a call-to-arms outlining the necessity of teaching our young people to be information savvy in an information-rich society. This chapter, written from the perspective of two librarians, will argue that a quicker pedagogical revision is needed for teaching undergraduates the concepts of credibility of information created in an era of computer mediated communication. Reviewing some of the major developments that have altered the understanding of credible information, this chapter encourages educators to adopt new approaches to teaching students about the credibility of CMC-generated sources.*

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has radically altered the ways in which students and faculty understand the ability, or inability, of discrete pieces of information to be judged as credible. From the controversies over Wikipedia, to the influence of blogs in American politics, to debates surrounding open access journals, CMC has redefined the notion of credible information. While instructors in higher education have made pedagogical changes around teaching credibility since the development of the Web, a larger revision

is still necessary for engaging undergraduates in the concept of credibility, particularly around sources generated from CMC technologies. Such a revision must be based on an understanding and acceptance that CMC technologies have significantly changed the creation, dissemination and use of information.

In 1989, the American Library Association (ALA) issued its Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report, which was a call-to-arms outlining the necessity of teaching our young people to be information savvy in an information-rich society. Today's college students

were born the year this report was released. Are they equipped, as the report calls for, to be competent consumers of information in the higher education arena, let alone in an economy that demands such skills? Are university faculty prepared to engage with students in the complexities of the information available to them via CMC? Can students and faculty achieve an understanding that credibility has not been destroyed by CMC, but rather altered by it?

This chapter will address these questions by beginning with a review of some of the major developments that have altered our understanding of credible information, as well as changes in information and technology instruction. The main focus of the chapter will encourage educators to adopt new approaches to teaching students about the credibility of sources generated from CMC technologies.

BACKGROUND

Credibility can be viewed as believability, an assessment reached through judgment of trustworthiness and expertise (Fogg et al., 2001; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). An assessment of trustworthiness requires of the source good intentions, perceived goodness, truthfulness, and lack of bias; an assessment of expertise requires of the source competence, experience, and skill (Fogg et al., 2001).

This definition serves as a starting point as we begin to look at a number of recent developments in information spheres that have changed how people judge the credibility of their information sources. The dramatic rise in participatory culture is one such development. Participatory culture can be characterized as including low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, support for creating and sharing one's intellectual property with others, a belief that one's contributions matter, and a sense of social connection to others in the culture (Jenkins, 2006). Participatory culture

means that all people, not just those with the financial means to control access to publishing, can be creators of information. Today's teens are creating content at remarkable levels; 50 percent of all teens, or about 12 million youth (ages 12-17), create content for the internet (Lenhart & Madden, 2005). In other words, "the internet and digital publishing have given them [teens] tools to create, remix, and share content on a scale that had previously only been accessible to the professional gatekeepers of broadcast, print and recorded media outlets," thus helping advance participatory culture (Lenhart & Madden, 2005, p. 1). In the weakening of the traditional gatekeepers of information, we find the space for alternative notions of credibility to exist.

Participatory culture meets its technological match in what has been coined as Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is a term that captures a host of applications that can be categorized primarily as interactive, collaborative, open and social, or the opposite of the so-called "static Web" (Alexander, 2006). Examples include: blogs, wikis, photosharing applications, social bookmarking, and rss feeds. Web 2.0 applications are known for their low technological barriers, allowing for participation by anyone with internet access. Some currently popular examples of Web 2.0 applications that have made a significant impact include Flickr, Wikipedia, MySpace, Facebook, and del.icio.us. Frequently, the information generated from these CMC applications comes under close scrutiny for credibility; a scrutiny that appears to be primarily based on the medium of creation, rather than the content itself.

The rise of CMC-based information into credible and, therefore, valid sources should not be discussed without acknowledging the documented fall of mainstream media from the public's favor over the past 20 years (Gillmor, 2004; Hatchen, 2005; Kawamoto, 2003). Most accounts of this collapse sketch out the same story line: the convergence of many different media (print, digital, visual, audio), the blurring of the line between

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