Chapter 11
Teaching Political Science Students to Find and Evaluate Information in the Social Media Flow

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media necessitates new pedagogical approaches in the field of political science, specifically in relation to undergraduate students' critical thinking and information evaluation skills. Instead of seeking out traditional static pools of knowledge, researchers and researchers-in-training now interact with information in an amorphous stream of production and consumption. Socially created information is now firmly integrated in the basic subject matter of political science, as manifested in primary sources in the field, scholars' communication practices, and the emergence of collective and distributed expertise. Existing models of information evaluation competencies do not address these realities of participatory authorship and decentralized distribution of information. Thus, in order to educate "information-literate" students in political science, educators must foster an understanding of how information is produced and how to critically evaluate individual information sources in the context of academic tasks.

INTRODUCTION

On May 7, 2011, the *Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom printed an interview with a "heroine of the Syrian revolt": Amina Abdullah, purportedly a Syrian blogger. Praised as an outspoken, courageous activist who contributed to the protest movement through her blog, "A Gay Girl in Damascus," Amina developed a strong following around the world (Marsh, 2011) and demonstrated the power of Web 2.0 tools in furthering activism. Many were alarmed, then, when the *Guardian* reported one month later that Amina had been taken hostage, ostensibly by

Syrian security forces (Hassan, 2011). Clearly, it would seem, dictatorial governments recognize and fear the power of social media. The saga took a different twist a few days later, however, when it was revealed that Amina and her blog were a hoax propagated by a middle-aged American PhD student living in Britain (Addley, 2011). The widely reported story became emblematic of social software's power not only to share information but also to deceive. Skills in evaluating information now more than ever underlie the ability to make sense of the world.

The discipline of political science is uniquely implicated in the rise of social media. The data that constitute fodder for study in the field are now highly diffuse. Primary materials pour out from sources ranging from politicians' tweets and blogs to documents "leaked" by Internet activists. Political action—from e-government to political protest—frequently takes place via networked conduits. Secondary sources, too, are no longer simply traditional research articles and professional commentary, as pundits of all stripes and academics alike spread their messages through websites and interactive media. Indeed, anyone with access to the relevant technology can be a content creator and thus a political actor. Therefore, instead of being able to rely on familiar pools where information collects, researchers and researchers-in-training now function in a constantly moving flow of information production and consumption (Boyd, 2010). In the complexity of this environment, it follows that skills in evaluating information are fundamental to the practice of political science.

The word "expert" is generally applied to someone who is a master of a particular technical skill or domain of knowledge. Expertise is often tied to recognized credentials as well as the means to publicly share knowledge, either through published work, via vetted media channels, or in classrooms and lectures. With regard to published information, then, expertise is linked to oversight and editorial review. The notion of

credibility is closely tied to expertise, as experts by definition are understood to be trustworthy. In the past, information had to come from particular channels in order to have the label of expertise applied. In the Web 2.0 environment, however, anyone with a piece of information to share can contribute to a larger "hive mind" of knowledge that can be accessed online.

This chapter explores connections between Web 2.0 tools and political science, as manifested in primary sources in the field, scholars' communication practices, and the emergence of collective and distributed expertise. Techniques and conceptual models for teaching information evaluation skills are then explored in light of the ubiquity of the information produced and disseminated through social, networked conduits. Analysis focuses on ways in which educators in political science can facilitate students' skills for evaluating information, which, in the flow of social media, is now an iterative, constant process that has changed the meaning of expertise. Educators must therefore more broadly educate students both in understanding how information is produced and how to critically evaluate individual information sources in the context of their academic tasks. Educators are no longer the only experts on whom students can, or indeed should, rely. The discussion primarily refers to the education of undergraduate university students, but the principles can apply to many student-teacher scenarios.

BACKGROUND

Goals of Political Science Education

Political science has been broadly defined as "the study of human behavior relating primarily to the operations of government, the state, and in principle other outcomes deemed important by actors" (Polsby, 2001). The ideas of power and conflict—among and within states—are also foundational themes. The field is complex, spanning a history

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