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Technology in Practice. Information Literacy 2.0

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Information Literacy 2.0

Critical inquiry in the age of social media

by Meredith Farkas

Ideas about information literacy have always adapted to changes in the information environment. The birth of the web made it necessary for librarians to shift more towards teaching search strategies and evaluation of sources. Tool-focused "bibliographic instruction" was replaced by skill-focused "information literacy." Now, with the growth of Web 2.0 technologies, we need to start shifting towards providing instruction that will enable our patrons to be successful information seekers in the Web 2.0 environment, where the process of evaluation is quite a bit more nuanced.

Inquiring minds

Critical inquiry skills are among the most important in a world in which the half-life of information is rapidly shrinking. These days, what you know is almost less important than what you can find out—which now requires a set of skills that are very different from what most libraries focus on. In addition to academic sources, a huge wealth of content is being produced by people every day in knowledgebases like Wikipedia, review sites like Trip Advisor, and in blogs. Some of this content is legitimate and valuable—but some of it isn't.

Keeping up and being able to find the latest information requires not only good search skills, but also good networking skills. Even librarians find it impossible to be well-informed about every aspect of librarianship. I focus my own professional development on areas most relevant to my current position, but there are times when I need expertise I simply don't possess. This is where the axiom "I store my knowledge in my friends" comes into play. Because I have successfully built a professional network, I have a large group of friends with diverse knowledge whom I can rely on when I find my own knowledge is insufficient for a particular task. Yet, networking is rarely part of information literacy instruction.

Years ago, it was often difficult to find enough information on a research topic, a product you wanted to buy, or a hotel at which you might stay. Today, information is in such abundance that we have difficulty determining which information is worth relying upon. An August 19 *New York Times* article, "In a Race to Out-Rave, 5-Star Web Reviews Go for $5," discussed the growth of commercial services that are paid to create glowing reviews. After discovering that most people couldn't tell which reviews are fake, researchers at Cornell started to work on a computer algorithm that could. We need to learn the clues that help make that determination.

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Academia is not immune to problems with quality and accuracy, challenging the assumption that articles that make it through the peer-review process can be trusted. The pressure to publish from the tenure system and the proliferation of peer-reviewed journals have led to the publication of studies whose conclusions cannot be relied upon or are downright fraudulent. A September 15 *Guardian* (UK) article, "Publish or Perish: Peer Review and the Corruption of Science," railed against a system that leads to the publication of worthless studies with poor research design that come to dubious conclusions. Given this, we all need to look beyond the headlines and evaluate research design before trusting conclusions.

Information literacy instruction should focus on helping people develop skills that will benefit them in answering questions and informing decision-making throughout their lives, not just for their next paper. It's critical that we develop instruction that supports critical inquiry in this extremely complex information environment. ∎

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