Evaluating Sources

The following discussion is referred to in various places in *Acting on Words*, including pages 280, 281, and 292.

The research process involves a number of steps, which require attention to policies and procedures. Learning the steps takes practice and patience. Amidst all the tips on how to find, collect, refine, and catalogue (organize) information, you might find your head beginning to swim. By way of offering a beacon to help you through the twists and turns, we would like to quote author George Monbiot from the introduction to his book *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning.* To appreciate how meaningful his words are for the light they cast on research, let's keep in mind that his book tries to come to grips with the idea of global warming, with the extent to which human activity contributes to that process, and with recommended measures and timelines people should respect if disaster (some say farfetched, some say possible, others say probable, others say inevitable) is to be averted. This is hardly an assignment you need fear in first-year English! But it is an excellent illustration of the essential issues of research.

Global warming is fraught with enormous contention and complexity. Monbiot, a regular columnist with the well-respected news analysis magazine *The Manchester Guardian*, holds a BSc degree but is not a scientist. His task was formidable: to sort through the political sandstorms surrounding the topic as well as the technical problem of too much and conflicting data, even from the same body. Here are some things he says about that task (and by extension, about all serious research).

> The research for this book has involved me in a long series of surprises…. What I have sought to do… is to start from first principles, to believe nothing until it is demonstrated…. One rule I have devised for myself is to trust no one

> who has something to sell. By tracing the statements different people have made to their roots, I have developed a kind of hierarchy of credibility." (xxiii)

That last phrase is especially important: evaluating sources *is* about devising a fair and necessary "hierarchy of credibility." He speaks highly of the neutral and accurate value of information from *government and university data banks*. Here, more specifically, is what Monbiot says about a "hierarchy" of credibility."

> [T]he most credible sources are peer reviewed academic journals, and particularly the most illustrious ones…. But … in some important respects [distinguished bodies and journals] have abandoned us. It has been left to amateurs to… try to perform certain important experiments, to work out important methods…. So I have been forced either to rely on august sources or to try to work out answers for myself. (xxiv)

Concerning the problem of too much and conflicting data, in his book Monbiot acknowledges the discrepancies, produces ranges of estimates, and ensures that none of his conclusions disregards possibilities of certain extremes. Perhaps even more important, as signalled in his words immediately above, his hierarchy of credibility does not end in an idea of absolute infallibility: not even the most "august" and "illustrious" bodies tell us everything we need to know. He acknowledges that prestigious bodies, including universities and their publications, can be remiss, short-sighted, timid, complacent, even outright resistant to research implications that could affect the stakes of those benefiting personally from the status quo. Let us remember that all sources provided by humans depend upon human integrity. If you know history and some of the finest satirists throughout the ages and cultures, you may well have a healthy scepticism of humans regardless of how august and illustrious their positions. Nevertheless, Monbiot places peer reviewed academic journals at or near the top of his hierarchy of credibility for a very good reason. Their contents must pass the scrutiny of other experts in the field. This doesn't guarantee either accuracy or proper attention to the related issues, but it offers more hope of reliability and proper coverage than do reader-generated sources.

Where Does this Leave Wikipedia and Other Online Sources?

To begin with, Wikipedia is a special form of encyclopaedia, a source summarizing other sources. Encyclopaedias are removed texts, regardless of how high their professional standards may be. If, as Monbiot says, the most reliable research is that which traces information to its roots, then any encyclopaedia needs to be treated as a starting point toward verifying, clarifying, and expanding on its information, not as a citable source itself. So Wikipedia raises the same concerns as any encyclopaedia. As we know, being a special sort of online site, Wikipedia raises other concerns as well.

A wiki is a web site or similar online resource that allows users to add and edit content collectively. This relatively new capability has many social values and, no doubt, other benefits. Some academics—a minority, at this point, most likely-- see tremendous learning potential in Wikipedia-type initiatives. Some argue that with open access, a democratized plurality of interested editors, powered by an infusion of new ideas and vantage points, can exceed the quality of conventional "august" restricted sources. We should also consider that studies comparing Wikipedia and other established encyclopaedias have suggested, to the surprise of some, that for accuracy Wikipedia measures up well. Those who refer to Wikipedia frequently (including at least one author of *Acting on Words*), generally praise its strong points of user friendliness, clarity, currency, and so on. Nevertheless, you have probably guessed that we are heading toward a recommendation that you not use Wikipedia in your essay citations.

Consider again the point that Monbiot raises on the matter of ethos (credibility, authority on the topic). A source that can be altered by anyone may be democratic and noble in many respects, but it simply cannot be relied upon to have the same consistent currency and accuracy as a source that is maintained and vetted by experts in the field. Jimmy Wales, the head of Wikipedia, confirms that he never intended it to provide a definitive research source. He intended it as a quick, friendly way to acquaint readers with amateur knowledge of a topic, and he intended it as a collective exercise relying on trust. In a *Time Magazine* interview (5), Wales acknowledges that one of his editors lied about credentials and had to be fired. Trust goes further than some of us might imagine, but not

all the way. Matters of research can, in some cases, come down to issues of life and death: you would probably not "trust" someone who assures you she knows brain surgery, despite lacking a medical school degree, to perform an operation. She might be fine, but… Wales says that he agrees with teachers who advise their students not to cite Wikipedia: "There's always a chance that there's something wrong" (5).

Go to Wikipedia, if you wish, for a preliminary idea of what threads to trace, but then trace those threads to more credible, reliable, authoritative places. Remember Monbiot's principle of "tracing the statements different people have made to their roots" (xxiii). How do we know who has provided the information in Wikipedia? If we know who said something, we can explore that person's sources and judgement. How do we determine the ethos of anonymous online contributors who might be anyone? Wayne Gretzky was the star hockey player of his era, but that did not make him an expert on aspirin, though certain ads tried to suggest otherwise. Would NHL records or Academy Awards qualify someone to update an encyclopaedia entry on Chinese history? Anonymous information restricts our opportunity to assess the authority of the contributor and limits our ability to "trace" the information to its roots. An important feature to demand of an online source is that it provide a *legitimate contact person*.

Anonymity and consequential questions of ethos surround many other online sources. Many online statements lack author attribution, sometimes even lack titles or any declared connection to a host organization or institution. The information in anonymous sources may be of some interest but it should not be relied upon. At best, online sources that lack ethos should simply help you to search further for other sources on the same topic that do provide ethos (clearly qualified authors, complete titles and evidence of review by other professionals in the field). In short, unless you are doing a sociological or cultural studies inquiry into online attitudes and behaviour, do not cite Wikipedia in your university papers. For the same reasons as discussed above, do not cite online sources that lack reputable authors or clear connection to a proven organization. If your source does not have demonstrable ethos, it may well do more harm than good to the

credibility of your analysis and argument. You will present yourself as indifferent to the reliability of the information and ideas you are using. Avoid citing such sources if for no other reason than the simple reality that many of your instructors and academic readers will not respect Wikipedia and other unattributed online sources, and thus you will lose an appearance of reliability.

Yet another related concern about online sources is that they so frequently "disappear." Studies find that readers generally go to the first few entries that come up in a search engine like Google and ignore the other entries past numbers five or ten. Consider that the list of entries changes order and shape on a regular basis. Relying on the first entries in an engine that could significantly differ from one day to the next is a haphazard approach, not suitable to scholarly inquiry. The problem of transient online sources is true even of some that otherwise have strong ethos. For example, a student lists a number of sources for her essay on legalized gambling, including facts sheets posted by a government authority. These sheets are intended to cover the past year. The sheets for that year will likely be removed and replaced by those for the following year. This compromises the *recoverability* of the source. Before long, information cited in the student's essay may no longer be retrievable online. In some cases, online information that disappears could be extremely hard if not impossible to trace to an archive or to another source offering confirmation. Because of this desert sands nature of online information, very little—perhaps even nothing-- that appears solely on internet should be relied upon in your writing as a central or crucial source. Remember that the western idea of scholarly sources includes *recoverability* of cited material as a core element of *reliability.*

Last Words of Introduction on Evaluating Sources

The important word is "evaluating." *You* are doing the evaluating. To be sure, you reach decisions about one source based on consideration of other sources-- but still, it is you making the judgement. Research methods are entirely bound up in the process of critical analysis described in Chapter 14 of *Acting on Words* and in other sources on the nature of analysis and evaluation. As George Monbiot points out, sometimes you reach the end of

your research only to discover that the venerated authorities have not provided what seems to be needed. That is when you turn—with justification-- to less orthodox or amateur sources and, more importantly, design and solve the next explorations yourself. As a part of writing, research ultimately serves final decisions that are up to you, as writer, to make.

Avoiding the Appearance of Plagiarism

Any loose or hasty attitude toward full and accurate citation of your sources may lead to charges of plagiarism. (Chapter 12 *Acting on Words* goes into more specific detail on ways to ensure that your summaries, paraphrases, and quotations are properly attributed). When you plagiarize someone else's work, you are presenting his or her ideas or words in your own writing as though they were your own. Academic institutions consider plagiarism a serious offence, one that can result in academic failure or even expulsion. Many students plagiarize without intending to because they haven't learned when and how to document their sources, or because they have developed bad note-taking and composition habits that lead to plagiarism. In fact, some students claim to have gone through high school blissfully unaware that they were plagiarizing virtually in every essay and research assignment they ever wrote.

It is very important to learn the rules and expectations for documenting sources before you find yourself in the unpleasant situation of dealing with an accusation of plagiarism. Make yourself aware of your institution's definition of plagiarism. Treat that definition like a law.

Common Research Errors in First-Year Papers

1. A final list of sources appears but the paper lacks in-text attributions of any sort. The reader has no idea at all where or how the listed material has been integrated. Although such papers do not necessarily reflect deliberate cheating, they can be classified as plagiarism.

2. The paper makes reference to Wikipedia and other online sources that lack reliable ethos (no cited author, unreliable author[s], or have no identified host organization or contact person, an unreliable host organization, or uncritical uses of sources that "have something to sell.)"

3. The paper presents an idea from another source as its own (plagiarism).

4. Facts have been stated as common knowledge, when they are not, and therefore require citation.

5. When integrating material, the paper fails to make the most appropriate choice among summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting.

6. Names of the authors or works referred to are misspelled (which reflects lack of focus, intention, or interest).

7. Quotation marks are omitted around short quotations or they are incorrectly inserted around longer quotations (four lines or 40 words) that are set off from the text as block quotations.

8. The paper uses the now outdated footnote system to cite references.

9. The paper fails to acknowledge that words quoted from one source were in fact quoted by that source from yet another source.

10. The paper fails to represent sources offering a balance of different points of view on the topic.

11. The paper uses too many sources (perhaps including some of dubious value).

12. The paper does not reflect the latest current information on the topic.

13. The writer has misunderstood the ideas in the sources.

14. The writer has handed control to the research sources while the actual writer remains on autopilot.

15. In-text citations appear, but there is no final list of sources.

Works Cited

Monbiot, George. *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2006.

Time Magazine, Can ed. "Ten Questions." 2 April 2007. 5.