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Essay 3 Draft 4

Credibility by Literacy Online

When a person sits down to write a forum post online, what dictates the way his or her voice will be perceived or interpreted? How does a writing method or voice translate to being read by an end user on the other side? Does the appearance and mode of transportation play a role? It is apparent that the internet has arrived with what may be described as a colossal degrade in rudimentary communication skills, but have people really become less capable of scholastically acceptable writing, or is the extent of internet language simply a shortcut to save time. Discerning the differences between conventional and electronic mediums of communication plays a large role in a delicate balance of literacy and self identification.

There is a clear distinction between the methods employed in verbal etiquette used in conversation and that of the Internet. The largest of these is a shift between having body language and inflection available to verbal contact but not electronic. In a conversation, even small changes in stance or actions can control the course or tone of the encounter. For example, crossed arms can relay either animosity or leisure depending on even subtler context. Online, these options generally are not available. There are stand-in systems such as the emoticon, which is commonly printed as a colon and punctuation to represent a facial expression. Emoticons strive to provide more reference feedback in typed text. Unfortunately this system is too clunky for effective use, providing only a handful of very basic facial expressions and the variations in how an emoticon is interpreted swings widely among users. Without the extra dimension of expression, the potential and utility of corresponding over the Internet is diminished and the ability of users to convey the full bandwidth of a conversation is lost.

As explored in "Making Sense of Credibility on the Web: Models for Evaluating Online Information and Recommendations for Future Research," the way in which websites operate without professional or peer review creates a "leveling effect [...] that puts all information on the same level of accessibility, and thus all authors on the same level of credibility in the minds of Internet users." (Metzger, 1). This is a similar situation to the aforementioned dissimilarities in conversation in that the Internet's ability to convey information quickly has not encompassed the functionality and trustworthiness of more traditional systems. Because of this "level playing field" and loss of detail, an end user online is left to either assume all material is unaccredited, or rely on less relevant guides.

One guide that has taken a more prominent role in determining the value of text online is spelling and grammar. Even one spelling error, well below the expected value, can turn a reader away from text online, regarding it as unprofessional. In an article by Adam Stevens, the effect of proper spelling and grammar on perceived credibility is tested in a social experiment. The study finds a correlation between the use of proper writing mechanics and the association of credibility with an author (Stevens). A similar study titled "Reviewer Bias and credibility in Online Reviews" finds that the usage of non standard conveyance tools such as emoticons detrimentally impacts the perceived credibility of reviews online (Mackiewicz, 7). By learning of the connection between mechanics and credibility, a quintessential issue with internet communication arises: credibility may be purchased at the price of careful revision and proofreading. Now, the above statement stands in physical writing such as news reporting, but the internet allows such an exchange to work on a larger scale and take more ground in granting unearned credibility. This can be a beneficial factor in online text, promoting more aware writers and better vigilance in quality control, but again the content is not ensured.

Another influence on a reader's impression of an article is the medium or site by which it is conveyed. Information on social networking sites is generally perceived to be less creditable than if it is found on a personal blog. A survey by Alicia David and Peyton Glore delves into the topic of visual website interface and credibility. The article, rather humorously presented in a banal, outdated webpage, finds that there is a strong connection between the 'current-ness' of a site and the credibility given to it by users (David). The paper goes on to suggest that the topic of layout and credibility is strong enough to influence universities which offer online courses to pay special attention to the presentation of course material. Again, we see a mutually exclusive situation, where most credible sources online have a functional, well maintained appearance, but not all visually appealing sites have credible information.

Our Internet is still developing, and if it is to succeed as a useful, informative device it will eventually come to terms with the literacy and credibility of content and correct for them. In the current state credibility is placed in a fuzzy zone of appearances. Finding a reliable source online literally leaves consumers to judge the 'book' by its cover. Previous years have shown that the Internet has been accepted by our world, and holds great potential for those seeking refined and relevant information; we can only hope that the future will see that potential realized.

Works Cited

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