CITATION CHALLENGES: BUILDING CREDIBILITY FOR THREATENING IDEAS*

ANDREW S. HIKEN
University of California, Davis

This paper describes an exercise in citation verification that took place in a lower-level social problems course at the University of California at Davis in fall 1989. The exercise was not planned in the course preparation, but was initiated in mid-quarter in response to a challenge to a particular text by an individual student. The results were most gratifying.

As designed, the course examined several broad social problems (e.g., political and economic inequality, crime, environmental threats, chauvinism) from a power-conflict perspective, with three primary objectives: first, to show students the nature and importance of values and value conflicts in defining social problems; second, to help students to understand social problems as manifestations of competition between identifiable vested and nonvested interests; and third, to develop in students a critical attitude towards information and its sources. The course met three times weekly: meetings consisted of two full-class lectures containing 100-plus students and one much smaller discussion section led by one of three teaching assistants.

The text subject to challenge was *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media* by Michael Parenti. It was used in conjunction with *America's Problems: Social Issues and Public Policy* by Elliot Currie and Jerome Skolnick. Numerous current selections from the mass media were examined and criticized throughout the course as well.

Inventing Reality provides a compelling analysis of pro-business and pro-government selectivity and bias on the part of what the author defines as the "mainstream media": a list of influential print and electronic outlets which includes the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the major weekly news magazines, the three national television networks, and other media.

A frank Marxist, Parenti employs more than 600 footnotes in 13 chapters to document concentration of ownership, undue influence by advertisers and government, and connection to other business and financial interests in the media, and to identify falsifications, omissions, emotional loading, ideological interpretation, and other tools of propaganda in the "reporting" of such subjects as the Soviet Union, the Third World, the U.S. economy, and organized labor.

The book created a high level of dissonance in many members of the class, which was typical of the basically conservative student body to be found on the U.C. Davis campus. The class contained a large proportion of freshman, as well as many students at all levels who had never before been exposed to a fully coherent and thoroughly documented left-style analysis. Desire to reject the book and to deny its analysis was widespread; it found expression in one student's determination to do some independent checking.

The student selected two adjacent footnotes from a chapter on labor struggles, each citing a quotation from a different newsweekly. She chose these items because she felt them to be particularly extreme examples of efforts to influence the reader emotionally. When she sought to verify the accuracy of both quotations in the main library at U.C. Davis, she could not find them, although both publications contained articles about the coal strike in question. At that time, we first learned of her effort; she complained immediately to her teaching assistant, who recognized that the situation could not be ignored and advised me quickly.

After verifying the absence of the quotations (not a fully satisfactory process: the articles located by the student did not contain the sought-after statements, but both magazines in the Davis library were missing multiple pages), we decided to maximize our critical position. Rather than seeking complete copies of the magazines to search further for these two quotations, we determined to enlist the cooperation of the entire class in a fast, informal check of all the book's citations.

* Presented at the annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Spokane, 1990.

We had two reasons for pursuing this approach. The first was our agreement that our response to this challenge must exemplify fully and publicly our own commitment to the spirit of honest and complete inquiry that we taught in class. The second reason was that the doubt, once cast, was real; though none of us doubted Parenti's honesty or competence, at that point no one was prepared to insist on the validity of the book's entire body of footnotes without some verification.

THE LECTURE

The first step was the preparation of a lecture to introduce the new class project. I opened this lecture with the announcement that the class was about to take a "detour" dictated by immediate events. Then I introduced the student who had issued the original challenge; she explained to the entire class what she had done, why, and with what result.

Then I spoke at some length about possible sources of citation error and about inferences that might be drawn from them, in an effort to create reasonable expectations for the project at hand. After pointing out that dishonesty of any kind was highly unlikely in view of Parenti's long career and distinguished reputation, I described anecdotally several potential sources of honest error, such as unnoticed relaxation of rigor due to last-minute deadline pressure, typographical error by the publisher or printer, use without verification of a reference cited incorrectly in an earlier source, and mistakes by a tired (or lazy) research assistant (Roth 1966).

Next I offered students several reasons to cooperate enthusiastically with the extra work that the project entailed: demonstration of a commitment to intellectual honesty and fairness; experience in a practical critical pursuit in which the result was truly unknown; nonthreatening practice in what was, for many, their first attempt at library research; a look at how much work can be accomplished by a group of organized volunteers, and how quickly it can be completed; the satisfaction to each student of fulfilling a responsibility to the group; and, last but not least, participation in a learning process motivated entirely by desire for the knowledge produced, with no impact whatever on a grade.

THE PROCESS

Finally I gave instructions on how the project was to be carried out. First, I cautioned students to be honest, diligent, and systematic, in the true spirit of subjecting Parenti's work to the same scrutiny he applied to the work of others.

Then I parceled out the book's 13 chapters among the course's six discussion sections and asked each student to select six footnotes for search. Students were told to select consecutive footnotes from a place in the numerical order that corresponded roughly to the position of their own names in the alphabet.

Next I explained why this loose, fast assignment of duties could be expected to be satisfactory. Although this method certainly would miss some footnotes, we were sure we could count on a final figure between 80 percent and 90 percent. We could treat this as a huge sample, certainly representative of those few footnotes which went unchecked. Further, this method would guarantee some duplication of work, thereby providing students with a means to check each other's accuracy randomly.

Students were given one week to complete the research. They were asked to submit their results on index cards (one footnote to a card) identifying the chapter, the footnote number, the title of the reference, whether the quotation or information had been found, and whether it was accurate. Students also identified themselves on each card. The cards were given to teaching assistants, who found student volunteers to tabulate the results in each section over a second week. In the third week, a single student volunteer tabulated the full course results and reported them to the entire class.

THE RESULTS

On the simplest level—the verification of citation accuracy—the project showed *Inventing Reality* to have a degree of accuracy perfectly acceptable in the social sciences: 88 percent of the book's footnotes were fully verified, 3 percent were found to be definitely erroneous, and the remaining 9 percent were not checked. If the 9 percent that were not checked are accurate in the same proportion as the 91 percent that were checked, the book's overall accuracy is nearly 97 percent.

Surely, according to any professional standard, this is excellent performance by the author, the research staff, the printer, and the publisher.[1]

Although our own faith in the text was not in question, research once begun must be allowed to go where it goes; academic hoaxes are just common enough to be recalled. Because we all share Parenti's basic analysis, confirming his accuracy was a matter of more than purely academic interest; we would have been very disappointed to find his work anything but excellent.

When the project was evaluated in the more important dimension of effectiveness as a teaching tool, it was successful in several ways.

The first dimension of success was students' enthusiasm. Our students immediately became involved on the level of their own concerns. Parenti had threatened to overturn some of their most basic childhood socialization, had shaken their confidence in their world views, and had scored at least a near miss on many students' self-images. To the extent that our verification plan seemed initially like an attack on the book, many students were eager to participate.

Inventing Reality is a book in which the evidence *is* the analysis. Once the accumulated evidence is shown to be accurate, the conclusion cannot be denied because Parenti's documentation of systematic media bias is also his conclusion. Not all social analysis is so self-demonstrating, of course; "The evidence is accurate" does *not* translate automatically into "The interpretation is correct."

Paradoxically, however, acceptance of the book marked the end of students' resistance to the course material in general. After the report of results, my question, "Then we have to believe Parenti, don't we?" produced nearly unanimous satisfied nods. Thereafter, I noticed a diminishing of general reluctance to grapple with *all* unfamiliar and threatening ideas, which lasted for the balance of the quarter. Verification of Parenti's citations seems to have been a symbolic first step, which made subsequent steps much easier.

In addition, the end of resistance brought the teaching staff a deeper level of respect from students for having pursued the truth aggressively. Students could see clearly that we did not know at the beginning of the project what the outcome would be and that we were prepared to accept the discrediting of our chosen text.[2] We contributed consciously to this view by carefully suppressing any hint of defensiveness and by approaching the problem entirely as an unexpected opportunity to increase our own knowledge.

Last, and in my view most important of all, the project was a confirmation of the truth that there are no problems, only opportunities. Our initial response might have led us to be defensive or protective, or to trivialize the question, but we determined instead to take the student's interest as seriously as she took ours and to show that good can come of anything.

A final note: since the time of the class in which these events took place, I have used *Inventing Reality* in five subsequent classes at two universities without a hint of the skepticism shown by the student who began the "great footnote search." I have remained alert to any opportunity to repeat the exercise; none has occurred. Mere reporting of the project and its results to subsequent classes has not had nearly the same compelling effect.

I am now convinced that a repeat would not—could not—have the same value if introduced as an assignment. Just as students saw during the exercise that we did *not* know what the results would be, they would see equally clearly that we *do* know *now*. It would be drill rather than adventure, motivated by the requirement to complete an assignment rather than by a true desire for knowledge. I believe that the key elements in the success of the project were the spontaneity of the challenge and the willingness—*the eagerness*—of the staff to accept it. Like all serendipitous tools, this project came into being because of our ability to welcome real challenge from our students and to seize the moment when it occurred.

Though the citation challenge as a teaching tool has enormous power, its power de-

[1] By way of comparison, Janell Rudolph and Deborah Brackstone (1990) cite studies in the accuracy of references which found errors respectively in 24 percent, 31 percent, and 44.9 percent of citations.

[2] We had not fully formed our plans for how to proceed if the search revealed a high proportion of errors. Though now moot, our speculations were moving toward involving the author himself in our process.

pends on its being student-generated. I will certainly use the exercise again in the event of a spontaneous challenge to the credibility of this or any other text I use in the future; if our students take citation accuracy for granted, however, so must we.

REFERENCES

Currie, Elliot and Jerome Skolnick. 1988. *America's Problems: Social Issues and Public Policy.* 2nd ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

Parenti, Michael. 1986. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media.* New York: St. Martin's.

Roth, Julius. 1966. "Hired Hand Research." *The American Sociologist* 1:190-96.

Rudolph, Janelle and Deborah Brackstone. 1990. "Too Many Scholars Ignore the Basic Rules of Documentation." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 36:A56.

Andrew S. Hiken is a graduate student at the University of California-Davis. He is a part-time instructor in sociology at UCD, and also at California State University-Sacramento. Address correspondence to Andrew S. Hiken, Department of Sociology, University of California-Davis, Davis, CA 95616.