

Title:

Questioning Online Credibility

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Summary:

Human nature invariably prompts a level of trust;if it is written, it must be true. We live in a generation where we expect authors, editors and publishers that are qualified to write on various topics. What qualifications are required to post a blog, write an online article, or edit a wiki? Some web surfers may find the answer startling: None.

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Article Body:

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Credibility online is becoming more and more of an issue. Anyone can have a blog or post to a forum and anyone can edit wiki entries. Web surfers are beginning to comprehend that just because it is in print does not necessarily mean that it is true. In fact, in today's online world, the collective truth might be the closest thing we can get to the real truth. Peer policing and social bookmarking have become common in the online world.

Human nature invariably prompts a level of trust;if it is written, it must be true. We live in a generation where we expect authors, editors and publishers that are qualified to write on various topics. What qualifications are required to post a blog, write an online article, or edit a wiki? Some web surfers may find the answer startling: None. Expertise is no longer a prerequisite. Wikipedia is a popular online reference, that frequently obtains top ranking in search engines as a reference source. How many Wikipedia readers realize that Wikipedia can be edited by anyone at anytime, regardless of their qualifications.

The concept of using peers to review posts is not without problems, while obvious vandalism is often quickly addressed, minor inaccuracies can remain for a fairly long time. Perhaps, persistence is the key. How many of us have the

time to constantly make corrections to a reference source? Perhaps the differences are mere nuances, or perhaps a difference of opinion. In the case of a wiki preservation of the reference is subjected to a democratic process or even worse, mere persistence. Will historical perspectives on hot political issues on Wikipedia be reflected by the most persistent group in the future?

The Internet is an evolving medium and unlike encyclopedia or a reference book it is not static. While it is easy to determine the age of an encyclopedia, tracking a web page's origin is far more complex. Syndication further complicates content credibility. While the original webmaster might be diligent in keeping information accurate and up to date. The accuracy of archives and syndicated content becomes a quagmire. There is no guarantee that each syndicated copy will remain accurate, or up to date. As the original publisher has no control over the content. Should webmasters and publishers avoid phrases that are not date specific "This year there were" moving to a more formal "In 2006 there were "?

Suggested steps that will lead to improved online credibility:

1. Education

It is critical that we educate both adults and youngsters about the nature of content on the Internet. Students should be taught to not only cite their sources, but also to establish the expertise of their source. This might seem excessive, but students should second source all items and assign a level of credibility to their sources.

2. Full Disclosure

Like traditional journalists, bloggers, publishers, and webmasters should fully disclose relationships and expertise when writing about a specific field or providing advice on a topic where they have a personal interest. Publications and publishers should always maintain transparency between advertisements and editorial content.

3. Establish Sources

As in life we build confidence through relationships, so too, we need to build relationships in the online communities. Sources which have provided accurate information over time, should be assessed as more reliable than new sources. While search engines are working to develop algorithms to assess the quality of a website's content , nothing can be a replacement for personal experiences over an extended period of time. If a source has provided misleading or incorrect

information, treat the source as unreliable.

4. Date Content

Quality publishers should make an effort to date content. Perhaps the statistical information was accurate at one point in time but due to the passage of time, is no longer an accurate reflection of current trends. Any statistical information should be framed with dates in which the data was collected. Additionally all factual information should be framed with dates.

The vast majority of research conducted today uses the Internet as a primary source. It is critical that the data being collected online is an accurate reflection of facts and is not merely conjecture, opinion, or old information.