Learning to Trust Strangers: Information Literacy in the Age of Participatory Media

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“Oh, well, I’ll probably look at government sites first. ‘Cause I know I can trust those.”
– Anne, high school junior

Do you automatically consider U.S. government websites to be a trustworthy source of information about science? The high school student quoted above was required to search for information about environmental issues and reflected in an interview that she would first go to government sites, because she knows that the information she finds there will be trustworthy. It is tempting to dismiss this strategy as naïve, reflecting an unawareness of potential political positioning on environmental issues, or an unworldly belief that “if the government says it, it must be true.” Anne later explains that she could go to Google, but “anybody can write on Google, not anyone can write on government sites.” In fact, what Anne illustrates here is that her confidence in government information stems not from naïveté, but from a complex model of how information is produced—one that involves expert gatekeepers and authorial credential.

Trusting “the experts” is more than blind faith; it is the product of widespread familiarity with a particular system of information production. Novel participatory forms of publication and distribution are exactly that: novel, and heuristics for assessing their reliability are still weak. The arrival of “everybody” on the Internet has created an epistemological crisis: If just anybody can contribute to a news site, an encyclopedia, or even publish her own new resource, where does credibility come from?

Clay Shirky remarked that when people are looking for credible information sources, many “trust new classes of aggregators and filters, whether Google or Twitter or Wikipedia” (Shirky, 2009). He called this new form of authority “algorithmic.” That is, trusting a process instead of a person. In fact, assessing published information sources has always involved trusting the processes by which they are produced, it’s just that traditional processes of review and publication are so well established that the process itself is usually blackboxed. An article in BMJ (formerly British Medical Journal) by a Harvard graduate is considered trustworthy because those characteristics are markers of trustworthy processes. I don’t need to know about the system for soliciting submissions, gathering reviews, and shepherding or editing manuscripts and I don’t need to review the author's curriculum vitae because the institutions involved represent strong processes of publication and education.
How people judge the credibility of online sources has been examined by many scholars; some have identified the kinds of credibility cues that people look for on the Web in different contexts (Agosto, 2002; Fogg, et al., 2001; Kafai & Bates, 1997; Kuiper, Volman, & Terwel, 2005; Metzger & Flanagin, 2008; Sundar & Nass, 2001), factors that affect information consumers’ habits (Pirolli & Card, 1999), and how to support them in developing better habits (Kuiper, Volman, & Terwel, 2005; Stadtler & Bromme, 2007). The problem of credibility in the context of broad participation in information production has more recently yielded a new strain of research that examines how interfaces can be designed to support people in evaluating new publication processes (Adler, et al., 2008; Kittur, Chi, & Suh, 2008).

Much of my own research has addressed questions about how new participatory publication systems like Wikipedia function; however, it takes time for understanding of such systems to become widespread and intuitive. Not surprisingly (and often not undeservedly), wikis, blogs, tweets and other new media are regarded with suspicion. It takes experience, insight and intellectual effort for a student to justify using Wikipedia or a blog post as an information source compared to a more traditional source. If it takes effort to understand these new systems, what kind of epistemological exercises are people engaged in when they justify using such sources? Often, suspicion of new media persists where they challenge familiar economies of information production and where new forms of media production stand in contrast to the epistemological assumptions underlying traditional assessment of media quality. This is particularly noticeable where Wikipedia is concerned; some educators have gone so far as to ban students from using the site altogether and even block it from school computers (Olanoff, 2007; Cohen, 2007). Instead of teaching abstinence, how can our systems of education help create a generation of information literates in a read/write world?

The answer to the problem of understanding participatory media is, in part, participation itself.

In schools, when teachers teach students how information is produced, traditional economic models of publishing are often taken for granted. Information literacy has been primarily defined as a set of skills related to finding, assessing, and using information (ACRL, 2000; Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 1990); less attention has been played to the role of the public in creating information resources for others or the kinds of skills that might be involved in becoming adept contributors (Kafai & Bates, 1997). New economic models such as peer production (Benkler, 2006) create new targets for education. My work with high school students suggests that taking responsibility for information production activities in online environments is a valuable addition to standards for information literacy and can give young people a starting point for reflecting on where information comes from (Forte, 2009).

Without radical shifts in the ways that teachers, librarians and other educators view information literacy, students will be underprepared to understand and contribute in economic systems that are predicated on creative cooperation and participation. New
forms of production signal a need not only for new competencies, but also for student access to media and permission to reuse it. Intellectual property and licensing issues become salient for students as they seek out media to appropriate in their own work.

Many questions about how participation in information production affects consumption practices remain open. It is difficult to imagine that Wikipedians engage in the kind of work that they do without developing more sophisticated skills and knowledge about issues like intellectual property and heuristics for identifying credible sources; or that product reviewers on Amazon (Amazonians?) write reviews without becoming more adept at interpreting other consumers’ experiences and motivations for contributing. However, it is also possible that without the guidance of a formal classroom environment, opportunities for such reflection come too seldom to be considered part and parcel of the participatory Web experience. Further studies of information literacy practices and participatory media “in the wild” and in the classroom are in order. Some of the salient questions include:

• How might social dimensions of information be used to help consumers assess sources? For example, can reputation systems in wikis and other collaborative production environments play a role in supporting process transparency.
• How does participation impact notions of intellectual property and ethics? In particular, when young people become producers of information, how do their perceive their rights and obligations?
• If participation in information production yields more sophisticated information consumers, how do we encourage broader participation? What motivates and sustains participation in different cultural contexts?
• How does participation in public information production impact notions of privacy? How can education and design help inform participants about the traces they leave in online environments?
• How do people become conversant in production practices online? What affordances of social media support newcomers in learning from the examples of their peers?

Further efforts to train students in the art of information production are needed in formal education. Learning how to do traditional homework well can be an excellent learning experience for students; however, schoolwork can also shield students from important intellectual work. Participatory media signals the extraordinary possibility of engaging young people in real intellectual work that matters outside the classroom. Orchestrated carefully and with the right technological support, schoolwork can become rich with new opportunities for reflection and impact when learning goes public. Participatory media can be used not only as a staging ground for the edification of students, where teachers and authors produce and discuss educational media, but as a canvas on which students themselves engage in the intellectual work of publication and knowledge production.
References


