

In Review: Digital media, youth, and credibility

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When contemplating how to understand and teach information literacy, librarians tend to focus on the research process as a whole, from when the assignment is first passed from teacher to student, to when the final citation in the Works Cited list is completed. This collection of essays from within and outside the profession of librarianship focuses on a very small yet crucial part of the research process: how credibility is assessed in different Web-based situations by various populations.

As many of the essays in this collection point out, navigating Web-based information and determining credibility is especially complex because it is often difficult to determine where the information on a Web page originates and its true author.

For librarians, perhaps the most eye-opening essay will be Matthew S. Eastin's "Toward a Cognitive Development Approach to Youth Perceptions of Credibility," which attempts to frame credibility decisions within a cognitive development framework, acknowledging the process will be different for students of different ages and cognitive development levels. Another fascinating essay is "College Students' Credibility Judgments in the Information-Seeking Process," by Soo Young Rieh and Brian Hilligoss, a preliminary report on a qualitative study of how three tiers of college students (large research, middle-sized state and community college) evaluate online credibility in various research situations, including non-academic ones. While the study is still very small, the data seems very promising in terms of illuminating our understanding how students conceptualize and execute the research process.

Gunther Eysenbach's "Credibility of Health Information and Digital Media: New Perspectives and Implications for Youth," while ostensibly about patrons seeking health information online, is interesting for its linking of research context to credibility assessment. Eysenbach points to a "deficit of context" which presents patrons with information without giving them a mechanism to determine where it was derived. While this is an especially important issue for health research, it is also an issue in other kinds of research, including academic. Most student research begins with some kind of Internet search that directs the student to a page containing the information, but lacking context: what kind of site produced the information and what kind of information is on the rest of the site? Context that is

apparent from flipping through the pages of a book is not always readily attainable online.

Even the parts of this work that attack the issue of constructing credibility from a more typical library science perspective bring new ideas to the table. R. David Lankes's "Trusting the Internet: New Approaches to Credibility Tools" does a wonderful job of juxtaposing credibility and reliability, bringing out the subtle differences between two ideas that are often used interchangeably.

Interestingly, one common thread across all of the essays is that patrons are not necessarily interested in finding the best information possible for every research query. In fact, a few of the essays make use of the economic term "satisfice" to indicate the willingness of patrons to take information that is sufficient for their research need, even if they are aware it is not the best possible information available. In many scenarios, it seems patrons use credibility as a metric merely to prevent themselves from getting harmful information. Insights like these help librarians better understand patron choices and allow them to develop services in a way that addresses the way patrons use resources, not the way librarians wish patrons used them.

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