

Student Evaluation of Website Credibility

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The study of source credibility has a scholarly pedigree that goes back to post-WWII interest in persuasion, early 20th Century attention to elements of rhetoric, and, fundamentally, classical considerations of *ethos*. Contemporary concern with the credibility of Websites as a source of information is not new and may be old wine in a new bottle. But if so, it is wine badly filtered in a bottle haphazardly poured. Which does not prevent students from binging on it.

According to online sources, the number of World Wide Web domain sites has increased from fewer than 10,000 in 1995 to over 170 million at the end of 2002 [Internet Software Consortium]. One domain often has multiple pages. In 1999 it was estimated that at least 800 million pages existed (Lawrence & Giles, 1999). Extrapolating from the growth rate of site domains, it is a safe bet that well over one billion Web pages exist today, and probably closer to 2 billion. Over the same time period the number of users in the United States alone has increased from about 17 million in 1995 to 165 million [Harris Interactive at CyberAtlas/CIA Factbook]. While a significant part of this growth has consisted of official Web sites posted by reliable sources, a much greater percentage is now represented by individual pages, commercial sites, or sites sponsored by organizations with biased agendas. [see ISC Website].

As ease of access to the Web has increased along with the proliferation of sites, students have become increasingly reliant upon Web-based sources for their papers and presentations. In these same work products, unfortunately, many students exhibit a striking lack of discernment between the trustworthy source and the tainted.

Regardless of university campus or discipline, anecdotal evidence for student misuse of Web-based sources can likely be gathered in the nearest faculty lounge. Beyond the anecdotal, evidence for concern about Website credibility is suggested by the quality and quantity of academic institutions with Web pages addressing this issue. Notable among those are Stanford, Berkeley, Purdue, Illinois, Cornell and Virginia Tech, among many others. Other

prestigious organizations are also dedicating time and talent to encouraging Website honesty and helping people detect fraudulent intent or bias. These include Consumers Union, Knight Foundation, Librarian's Index to the Internet, Online Computer Library Center, Open Society Institute, Library of Congress, Pew Trust, U.S. Security and Exchange Commission, and the WWW Virtual Library.

In the academic literature, concern over uncritical student reliance on Web-based sources has been articulated in a wide variety of journals. The following journals contained articles on this subject recently and are mentioned here for illustrative purposes: *British Medical Journal* (March 1999), *Computers and Education* (Nov 2003), *Consumer Reports* (Jan 2001), *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* (Jan 2002), *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Feb, 2000), *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* (Winter 1998).

Surprisingly, with some notable exceptions, relatively few empirical studies have been conducted. Building on a pilot study conducted last spring, this study attempted to determine if a relatively short and straightforward intervention (a brief presentation with examples) can sensitize students to credibility issues to the degree that those exposed to the intervention perform significantly better on an evaluative instrument than those who are not when the two sets of analyses are compared.

Again, the question at hand here was: can a 25-minute lecture (intervention) significantly improve students' ability to correctly evaluate a Website's credibility or lack thereof – lack due to being biased or completely bogus. The study was conducted at Western Carolina University during late September and early October, 2003. Students were asked to evaluate five Websites (two biased, two bogus, one credible). Seventeen class sections (n=287) were surveyed, alternating the control/treatment groups. (Control groups were asked to complete the Website evaluation instrument before the lecture.) Classes surveyed were primarily freshmen, but included approximately 60 juniors & seniors. Findings are summarized separately, but essentially: *a statistically significant difference was found between control and treatment groups (ANOVA). Most of that significance was due to improved site evaluations by males. No significant differences were found by year in school.*