Chapter XIV
Shifting Trends in Evaluating the Credibility of CMC

Shawn Apostel
Michigan Technological University, USA

Moe Folk
Michigan Technological University, USA

ABSTRACT

Given the rapid development and dissemination of various information types within CMC, source evaluation methodology is increasingly difficult and has been complicated further by dominant academic approaches. We trace the reification of book-based evaluation criteria and how its exalted status has been undergirded by a mentality that reinscribes old patterns of credibility onto wholly new entities such as the World Wide Web. Additionally, we trace the development and implementation of these book-based criteria from an influential article to their various incarnations in the MLA handbook, an examination that reveals how CMC has been ignored, then sequestered, and ultimately embraced, albeit lukewarmly. Finally, we will recommend using a rhetorical approach to source evaluation, which can be easily applied to assignments in the composition classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the relative ease of mass communication provided by CMC, information dissemination is increasingly diversified, thereby enabling users to access information in various new media while still having access to more traditional sources such as books and journals. This diversity of information, in terms of presentation and authorship, leads to new concerns and challenges for consumers of this information, especially when establishing the source's credibility. We hope that by introducing instructors, as well as students, to a new mindset that acknowledges both the evolutionary and revolutionary viewpoints held regarding CMC, each will be more productive when negotiating the preponderance of information.

Indeed, in contemporary circles, negotiating computer-mediated information is paramount, especially in educational settings when instructors and students are grappling with historic conventions and promising innovations, but academics have been slow to set up a method to evaluate

proficiency in establishing CMC credibility. Recently, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) began offering the iSkills test, which is meant to measure students' proficiency in information and communication technology (ICT) for those in higher education. The ETS defines ICT proficiency as "the ability to use digital technology, communication tools and networks appropriately to solve information problems in order to function in an information society" ("iSkills"). In addition, the ETS acknowledges that academia provides similar challenges: "To succeed in today's information-driven academic environment, students need to know how to find, use, manage, evaluate and convey information efficiently and effectively" ("iSkills"). The results of the test so far, according to the ETS, have shown that "Despite the assumption that today's college students are tech savvy and ICT literate,…many students lack the critical thinking skills to perform the kinds of information management and research tasks necessary for academic success" (Bogan, 2006).

Granted, some would argue that the ETS has an interest in showing deficiency, but the fact remains that trying to quantify success with regard to CMC literacy is dependent upon audience, and the dominant audience would be those in educational settings whose outlook on CMC and ICT has been inculcated by decades, even centuries, of certain intellectual habits.

An in-depth look at Web site evaluation criteria illustrates the challenges surrounding the blossoming of CMC information; in fact, the iSkills test centers on academic applications, many of which are Web-based. ETS has deemed the following test results "surprising:"

[O]nly 52 percent of test takers could correctly judge the objectivity of a Web site, and only 65 percent could correctly judge the site's authoritativeness. In a Web search task, only 40 percent entered multiple search terms to narrow the results. And when selecting a research statement for a class assignment, only 44 percent identified

a statement that captured the demands of the assignment. (Bogan, 2006)

An in-depth look at the dominant trends in contemporary higher education help, to shed light on these figures and the intellectual discrepancies they reveal. Currently, most students are instructed to choose Web sites based on criteria that proved useful in establishing the credibility of books (i.e., focus on the author and publisher's credentials, etc.). In essence, valid means of criteria for one mode of production are used to evaluate another mode that has freshly developed without fully grasping the possibilities of that second mode. Such an approach is an example of first phase information literacy: methodologies used for book evaluation are just grafted on to the new technologies and modes of CMC (Apostel & Folk, 2005). Initially, this approach is valuable in that it provides grounding for the instructors (and students) who have internalized the value of printed sources; however, such an evolutionary approach neglects to account for the revolutionary nature of new CMC technologies. The traditional text-focus of book-based criteria is increasingly lacking in providing a solid understanding of Web site credibility in an age of omnipresent static images, moving images, moving text, audio, and the various permutations of them all.

Adhering to print as the guideline for the Web has numerous consequences. For one, instructors and students are "trained" to bypass what could be valuable sources of information in favor of those that more closely resemble books. By having students evaluate Web sites based on book criteria, and by having them ignore other sites, instructors effectively deem some discourses inappropriate. For example, many handbooks and library handouts instruct students to favor sources with an .edu or .gov URL, but this action indirectly tells students to avoid almost all blogs, video logs, online forums, personal Web sites, and content generated outside the United States. Furthermore, book-based criteria have a history

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