Chapter 3
Understanding and Evaluating Source Expertise in an Evolving Media Environment

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ABSTRACT

Recent technological changes have created a radically different information environment from the one that existed even a few decades ago. Rather than coming from a small number of sources, each with a substantial investment in the information production and delivery processes, information is increasingly provided by a wide range of sources, many of which can readily provide and deliver information to large audiences worldwide. One consequence of this evolution in information production is an almost incomprehensibly vast information repository in the form of the Web and other online resources. A variety of social media have extended this information and source fecundity even further by connecting individuals to one another and by providing significant opportunities to share myriad types of information generated by users themselves. This shift in information dissemination challenges longstanding models of the provision of credible information by suggesting circumstances under which sources that are not understood as "experts" in the traditional sense are in fact in the best position to provide the most credible information.

INTRODUCTION

Recent technological changes have created a radically different information environment from the one that existed as recently as a few decades ago. As digital network technologies have reduced the cost and complexity of producing and disseminating information, the nature of information providers has shifted. Rather than relying on only a few sources, each with a substantial investment in the information production and delivery processes, information is increasingly provided by a wide range of sources, many of whom can readily create and deliver information to large audiences worldwide. One consequence of this evolution in information production is an almost incomprehensibly vast information repository in the form of the Web and other online resources. A variety of social software applications has extended this information and source fecundity even further by connecting individuals directly to one another and by providing significant opportunities to share myriad types of information that are generated by users themselves.

While this explosion of information has created tremendous opportunities, it has also been accompanied by significant challenges. The traditional media environment typically had a limited number of sources and had barriers in place to control the public dissemination of information. In such an environment of information scarcity, the gatekeepers can produce and filter much of the information available, and also have an incentive to uphold quality standards. Gatekeepers, in turn, were widely regarded as experts and were relied upon for credible information. The Internet and related tools, however, present a very different environment—one of information abundance—which makes traditional models of gatekeeper oversight untenable due to the sheer volume of information to be vetted. In light of this, the origin of information, and thus its quality and veracity, are in many cases less clear than before. This has created a revolution in locating and identify-

ing expertise, and in discerning information and source credibility.

This shift in information dissemination challenges longstanding models of information provision by suggesting circumstances under which sources that are not understood as "experts" in the traditional sense are in fact in the best position to provide the most credible information. Under conditions where knowledge is esoteric, diffused among many individuals, and dependent on specific, situational understanding, it is often the case that the most reliable information is gleaned not from a traditional source that has been imbued with authority by virtue of position or status, but rather from a diversity of individuals lacking special training, credentials, or established reputation. Indeed, not only are such circumstances common, but given the power of social software, they are increasingly supported by precisely the kinds of tools required to harness the power of those with the most relevant, timely, and important information. These shifts in the provision of information suggest both new kinds of expertise as well as new ways to determine and identify it. New forms of expertise, in turn, suggest updated notions about the location and evaluation of what information is most credible.

To examine these issues, we reconsider traditional, top-down models of information authority in order to account for the more diffuse methods of information provision and dissemination supported by the Web and social software. We begin with an analysis of how social software complicates and shifts conceptualizations of source expertise by facilitating direct access to information compiled by a multitude of potentially lay authors. We then propose new forms of expertise rooted in the experience of individuals rather than based on their formal credentials, and consider several approaches to judging and conceptualizing expertise that attempt to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the contemporary online environment. We conclude by evaluating the advantages and risks posed by

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