

Chapter 13

Faculty and Undergraduate Perceptions of Expertise within Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media applications like wikis, blogs, and comments on online news feeds emphasize user participation, encouraging ongoing revision by volunteer expertise. Surveying undergraduate students and teaching faculty at two small liberal arts institutions enabled the researchers to examine how both students and faculty view this new expertise, and how appropriate each group sees this expertise for completing undergraduate research. The results show that students are using social media extensively for preliminary research and educational videos, with Wikipedia and YouTube being the most popular sites for this purpose. Students and faculty continue to value advanced degrees, publications, and experience as the most important indicators of expertise. Students and faculty agree that users must always question the accuracy of information on social media sites, but faculties are not satisfied with students' ability to evaluate such information.

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries and librarians have long been the gatekeepers of expert information. Through books and journals, they offered content that had undergone multiple stages of evaluation in the

form of editing and peer review. Moreover, budget limitations forced further pre-consumer evaluation, where collection development librarians selected from the information sources available on the market and chose those best suited to their patrons' needs within the financial constraints. The

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smaller the institutional budget, the more vetted the information readily available to users of that library. Similarly, information literacy programs had the straightforward task of assisting students in defining the differences between scholarly publications (thus scholarly information) and the more general books and magazines that they were apt to find in the public library or newsstand. However, as the Web became commonly available, the definition of “publisher” began to change.

At first, any provider of online information at least needed the technological skills and equipment to post the information and the user needed persistence to find it. Today, those barriers have been removed. The new generation of Web applications allows for—and encourages—interaction, user participation, and almost instant collaboration. Publishers of information do not need knowledge of coding languages such as HTML, and their information is easy to find through search engines like Google. Social media have not only drastically changed the nature and timing of information available to students, but also allow for ongoing revision. Vehicles such as Wikipedia, although sometimes disparaged by academics, indicate a new collaborative style of presenting information from volunteers not restricted by formal editing or publishing schedules.

Some traditional information sources are beginning to recognize the value of the new information contained in social media. The LexisNexis Academic database includes the full text of selected blogs, Britannica Online has been working on wiki-like features, and *Choice* book reviewers occasionally compare the coverage of new reference books to the corresponding entries in Wikipedia. *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Ericsson, Charness, Hoffman, & Feltovich, 2006) defines “expertise” with a citation from Wikipedia, arguably lending credence to the nascent idea of socially constructed knowledge as legitimate authority—a trend likely to continue. Present educators of undergraduates

must produce students who have the ability to utilize and assess an ever-widening array of information sources from an ever-widening array of “experts.”

Roger McHaney (2011) says we are near the “tipping point” with social media, referring to a book of that title by Malcolm Gladwell (2000). He states that “when a critical mass of 20 percent of teachers uses the new technologies favored by tech-savvy millennials, an irreversible tipping point will occur” (McHaney, 2011, p. 3). Already, 93% of young adults (ages 18–29) are going online, according to a recent national Pew report, and 72% of them are using social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). A report published by the Centre for Information Behaviour and Evaluation of Research (CIBER) surveyed more than 2,000 researchers from 215 countries on how they use social media in their research process. They found that 79.7% of survey participants use social media for research (CIBER, 2010). Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane (2011) surveyed “teaching faculty from across all of higher education” (p. 5) and found that more than 75% had used a social media site in the past month, 78% use social media for professional (non-teaching) use, and approximately 66% have used social media sites in their classrooms.

For the past decade, the general attitude of academia has been to disregard social media and to simply instruct students to avoid social media sites for class assignments. However, students’ use of social media has become so pervasive that it is past time to reconsider our position. In this chapter, we present the results of a survey given to undergraduate students and faculty at two small liberal arts institutions. The survey assessed how students and faculty viewed this information through social media, how they defined an expert, and how appropriate they regarded the content for completing undergraduate research. The results show that students are already using social media for class assignments, with or without their pro-

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