

Social Media as Information Source: Undergraduates' Use and Evaluation Behavior

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ABSTRACT

A survey study was conducted to investigate what kinds of social media are used as information sources and why. It also examined what kinds of actions users take in order to evaluate the trustworthiness of information provided by social media sources. A total of 446 undergraduate students from a public university participated in the study. A Web-based survey questionnaire consisting of two parts was used in the study: one part on the use and evaluation of social media sources and the other on the user characteristics. The study found that Wikipedia, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) and online user reviews were among those frequently used for finding information, and that Wikipedia, YouTube, Q&A sites were used in both everyday-life and academic/course-related information seeking contexts. The study also revealed that strategies for evaluating the trustworthiness of information vary depending on sources (e.g., for Wikipedia, often check the quality/quantity of references/links provided; for YouTube and Q&A sites, check others' reactions). Based on the findings, suggestions were made for information literacy education.

Keywords

Social media; source evaluation; source use; undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

With advances in technology, more information becomes available to the public through a wide range of channels. Users can access information not only through the traditional, printed sources, but also sources in various formats via the Internet. Research shows that users, especially undergraduates, frequently rely on open resources available on the Web (Holliday & Li, 2004; Gardner & Eng, 2005). Recently, social media whose content is contributed by end-users (e.g., Wikipedia, blogs, YouTube) has become increasingly popular as information sources, while the trustworthiness of information from such sources is often questionable and difficult to assess. Understanding what kinds of social media are frequently

used as information sources and why, and also how users evaluate the quality of information from such sources is important because it can help identify challenges that users encounter when selecting non-traditional *social* sources to use, and offer guidelines for the source evaluation.

BACKGROUND

For over a decade, researchers have paid close attention to changes in information sources and their use in the digital era. A Pew study reports that social media are getting more popular among all generations of users, including undergraduates (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zikuhr, 2010; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Smith, 2011). More than 70% of teens and young adults who go online use at least one social networking site such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn. Twitter use has increased from 8% in 2009 to 13% in 2010, whereas blog usage among young adults has declined (Lenhart, et al. 2010; Smith, 2011).

While more studies are being done on social media, most of the extant research focuses on the general trend of social media use or the use of a particular type of social media (e.g., Wikipedia (Lim, 2009; Head & Eisenberg, 2010); social networking sites (Hargittai, 2007; Counts & Fisher, 2010); blogs (Hollenbaugh, 2011); online Q&A community (Rosenbaum & Schaf, 2010)). As social media are gaining popularity, and some of them seem to be playing an important role as an information source, it is crucial to understand what kinds of social media are used for what purpose, and if they are used as information sources, what users do to evaluate the quality of information provided by such "non-traditional" information sources. Although the use and evaluation of sources in general (Agarwal, Xu, & Poo, 2011; Kim & Sin, 2011; Zimmer, Henry, and Butler, 2008) and the source credibility (Rieh, 2010) have been researched, little attention has been paid to the evaluation of social media: how various types of social media are used and evaluated as information sources. It will be important to understand how undergraduates, in particular, evaluate and use non-library sources such as social media since researchers consistently report that these undergraduates prefer electronic resources, especially open Web resources even for their academic assignments; and that they tend to apply criteria other than quality (e.g., accessibility) when

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selecting information sources. The current study will serve as a stepping-stone for more comprehensive and systematic research on the evaluation of such newly emerged, *social* sources.

METHODS

The purpose of the study is twofold: (1) to examine what kind of social media is used for what purpose, and (2) to investigate what users do to evaluate the trustworthiness of the information provided by social media. The study was conducted using a survey method. An online questionnaire was developed using *Qualtrics* (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>) – an online survey software program – in order to collect data on users’ characteristics and their use/evaluation of social media. Participants were recruited using a mass e-mailing service. Data were collected in late spring of 2011, from undergraduate students in a public university. A total of 446 students completed the survey: 35% of them were male and 65% female students. Their academic backgrounds were diverse: arts and humanities (21%), social sciences (20%), health science (14%), natural science (14%), engineering (13%), business (13%), and education (5%). Most of them were junior (36%) and senior (33%), followed by sophomore (25%). Freshmen were underrepresented (5%).

FINDINGS

Social Media Used As Information Sources

The most widely used type of social media was Wikipedia: 98% of the participants used it for finding or acquiring information. Interestingly, social networking (SN) sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn were also used as an information source (97%). Others include online user reviews (72%), YouTube (53%), and Q&A sites like Yahoo! Answers (53%). Apparently, blogs (32%) and microblogs such as Twitter (24%) were not particularly popular as an information source. Results confirm the popularity of Wikipedia as an information source found in other studies (Head & Eisenberg, 2009; 2011).

Contexts of Use

Results show that most of the social media were used in the everyday life situation. Seventy-five percent of participants responded that they used SN sites like Facebook for everyday life information seeking (ELIS), followed by user reviews (75%), Twitter (66%), and blogs (64%). However, some social media were used in both ELIS and academic/course-related situations. For example, 80% of participants responded that they used Wikipedia for both situations. YouTube (69%) and Q&A sites like Yahoo! Answers (60%) were also found to be an important source in both situations.

Reasons for Using Social Media

Apparently, different types of social media were used for different purposes. For example, Wikipedia was used mainly for getting background/introductory information and a quick overview ($M_{score} = 3.8$, score range: 1-4). SN sites

like Facebook were used mainly for keeping in touch with others ($M_{score} = 3.93$), for getting updates/news ($M_{score} = 3.43$) and for getting others’ opinions ($M_{score} = 3.04$). User reviews were used for getting others’ opinions/comments on products ($M_{score} = 3.85$), for getting help with purchase decision ($M_{score} = 3.8$). YouTube was used for getting recreational information ($M_{score} = 3.31$) and for finding solutions to a problem or how-to instructions ($M_{score} = 3.2$). For a problem-solving, Q&A sites were also used often ($M_{score} = 3.5$).

Evaluation of Trustworthiness

As the study revealed the popularity of Wikipedia, SN sites such as Facebook, user reviews, YouTube and Q&A sites as information sources, further analyses were done to examine what users do to evaluate the trustworthiness of information from such sources. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Social Media	Evaluation Actions*
Wikipedia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compare the content with other sources (3.1) - Check the quality/quantity of links or references provided (2.67) - Check notes on progress/completeness (2.48)
SN sites (e.g., Facebook)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Check others’ reactions/opinions (2.9) - Check information about the author/poster (e.g., his/her profile) (2.76)
User reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Check the consistency with other reviews (3.62) - Check how many other users agree/disagree with the review (3.5) - Check the tone/style of writing/argument (3.28) - Check whether the reviewer used the product for the same purpose as yours (3.28)
YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Check the quality of images/videos/audio (2.78) - Check others’ reactions/opinions (2.75)
Q&A sites (e.g., Yahoo! Answers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Check others’ reactions/opinions (3.34) - Compare the content with other sources (3.12) - Check the tone/style of writing/argument (3.06)

* Numbers in parentheses show the mean score (4: often used; 1: never used)

Table 1. Actions taken to evaluate the trustworthiness of information provided by different social media

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

It is found that different types of social media are used as information sources in different contexts. Some of them, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Q&A sites, seem to have emerged as important information sources even in academic contexts. While undergraduate students are known to select and use sources based on the accessibility rather than the quality of information (Berryman, 2008; Warwick et al., 2009), they seem to have developed some effective strategies that can help assess the information from social media sources. Unlike library sources, social media provide information that is contributed by users whose authority or trustworthiness is often unknown, and difficult to evaluate. Despite the difficulty, it is obvious that undergraduate students are making efforts to devise and apply strategies that can help with such evaluation.

Based on the findings, the authors suggest that information professionals and educators acknowledge the appeal and value of social media to users as alternative information sources, and that how to evaluate and use information from social media should be included in information literacy education programs. With the increasing popularity of social media, it might also be helpful that information professionals play a proactive role in improving the information quality of social media. They can consider contributing quality information to social media, providing additional resources that can be consulted and compared with, adding expert opinions, and so on. Further research is called for in order to better understand specific criteria that are, and can be, used for evaluating each type of social media, and ultimately to suggest key criteria for the evaluation.

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