



Use and Evaluation of Information From Social Media in the Academic Context: Analysis of Gap Between Students and Librarians



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ABSTRACT

Recent research shows that some types of social media such as wikis and social networking sites have emerged as important sources of information. While social media are becoming increasingly popular, the quality of information available through them varies widely and is difficult to assess. This study examined the main purposes behind undergraduate students' use of different social media platforms in information-seeking and the strategies they use for evaluating information from social media in academic contexts. The results were then compared with what academic librarians deem useful. The comparison helped identify gaps between students and librarians regarding the use and evaluation of information from social media. Two web surveys were conducted: one for undergraduates ($n = 1355$), and the other for academic librarians ($n = 189$). The study found the two groups similar in terms of social media platforms used for information-seeking, and also the main purposes for using them. However, a significant gap was detected in the strategies that students used, and those that librarians found useful, for evaluating information from social media. Based on the findings, suggestions were made for information literacy education and future research.

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INTRODUCTION

With advances in technology, more information is made available via a wide variety of channels. Social media has become one of those channels, although its original purpose was mainly for supporting socialization. Studies show that many online teens and college students turn to social media for finding academic as well as everyday information (Head & Eisenberg, 2010a, 2011a; Jones & Fox, 2009; Pew, 2012). The usage of some social media platforms, such as wikis and social networking sites, for information-seeking seems especially widespread: over 70% of college students reported that they use such platforms for information-seeking purposes (Kim, Sin, & Yoo-Lee, 2014; Head & Eisenberg, 2010b) even in completing their coursework (Head & Eisenberg, 2011b). Research on the effective use of different social media platforms for information-seeking purposes, however, is still in its nascent stage.

Students' usage of social media as an information source is a concern for librarians and educators. This is in part due to the varying quality of information available via these forms of media. Their concern is further aggravated by the fact that, even before the rise of social media, students' information-seeking and evaluation behavior had been found rather inefficient (Metzger, Flanagin, & Zwarun, 2003; Tomaiuolo, 2005). Undergraduate students, for example, often neglect to evaluate

the quality of information from web resources (Metzger et al., 2003). Issues related to the questionable quality of information from social media are similar to those related to open web resources. Social media, however, may bring even more challenges to information evaluation. Social media messages may often be short, which can make the credibility assessment difficult. Furthermore, rumors and misinformation can spread quickly through various social networks and channels (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). When they get the same inaccurate information from a number of different sources, unsuspecting users may misjudge the information as credible based on mere repetition (Begg, Anas, & Farinacci, 1992; Channouf & Rouibah, 1995; Dechêne, Stahl, Hansen, & Wänke, 2010).

While there is early evidence that students do take some evaluative actions when using information from social media (Head & Eisenberg, 2011a; Kim & Sin, 2015), it is unclear whether students' use and evaluation strategies are effective in the eyes of librarians who have more experience and expertise in information literacy. There is a dearth of research surveying librarians' recommendations on how to evaluate the information obtained from social media. Empirical research is needed to better understand why and how students use different social media platforms in information-seeking, and to compare what students do with what librarians view as useful for using and evaluating social media information. Findings of such a study will help identify the improvements needed in information literacy education to support students' effective use of social media as an information source.

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By focusing on undergraduate students and academic librarians in academic contexts, this study aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What are the main purposes behind students' use of different social media platforms for academic information-seeking, and how different are those purposes from what librarians deem each platform useful for? and (2) What strategies do students use when evaluating information from social media, and how different are their strategies from those that librarians regard as useful?

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Social media, especially social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, have become widely popular across users in different age groups. Over 70% of online adults use SNS, and more than half (52%) of internet users use multiple social media sites (Duggan et al., 2015). Younger adults between 18 and 29 years of age are especially avid users of social media. They use various social media platforms at higher rates than other online adults. For example, among those aged 18–29, 37% are Twitter users, compared to only 23% of all internet users. Similarly, over 53% of those younger adults use Instagram, a much higher percentage than among all internet users (26%).

Because of their popularity, the possibilities and pitfalls of social media cannot be ignored. Many librarians have actively leveraged social media to communicate with users and to reach out to potential audiences (Chua & Goh, 2010; Gardois, Colombi, Grillo, & Villanacci, 2012; Mahmood & Richardson, 2011). Others have also explored ways to use social media for sharing instructional materials (Bobish, 2011; Click & Petit, 2010; King, 2015). Another major area of discussion is the impact of social media use on students' information behavior, information literacy and education (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Kim et al., 2014; Spiranec & Zorica, 2010). However, empirical research on the use of various social media platforms as information sources is only beginning to emerge.

Studies show that most users including college students prefer to seek information from both human and online sources (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Head & Eisenberg, 2009; Kim & Sin, 2011). From these findings, we can infer that students are likely to turn to social media to find information, as social media may be perceived as fairly easy to access, similar to online sources, and quite convenient and user-friendly, similar to human sources. More research will help reveal whether such an inference would be supported. Previous studies on students' use of social media for information-seeking have primarily focused on Wikipedia (Head & Eisenberg, 2010b; Lim, 2009). It is only recently that more research is being conducted on students' use of a wider range of social media platforms, such as SNS and social Q&A, in different information-seeking contexts (Head & Eisenberg, 2011a; Kim & Oh, 2009; Sin & Kim, 2013).

Today, users can turn to various social media platforms (e.g., wikis, SNS, microblogs, social Q&A) for information-seeking, which can add to the complexity of information behavior research and information literacy training. There is some evidence that users favor different social media platforms depending on the purposes of information-seeking (Kim et al., 2014). For example, Wikipedia is a popular source used by students for background information (Head & Eisenberg, 2010b). Microblogs such as Twitter, and media-sharing sites such as YouTube are used rather frequently for obtaining news (Holcomb, Gottfried, Mitchell, & Schillinger, 2013; Pew, 2012). YouTube is also found to be used for learning purposes (Head & Eisenberg, 2011b).

In addition to the differing purposes of information-seeking, users may experience varying levels of difficulties while using different social media platforms. Microblogs, for example, seem to pose more challenges when it comes to the credibility assessment. This may be in part attributed to some system features, such as the limited number of characters allowed per message (Sankaranarayanan, Samet, Teitler,

Lieberman, & Sperling, 2009). Due to the diversity of use and the varying level of challenges users experience with different social media platforms, there is a need to investigate what strategies are effective for which types of social media, rather than assuming that one set of evaluation strategies would fit all types of social media.

While social media can be considered as a subset of open web resources, sharing similar characteristics (e.g., little or no peer review process, resulting in a varying quality of information), the use of social media deserves in-depth investigations for the following reasons. First, it has been found that an increasing number of individuals use various social media platforms in academic as well as everyday-life contexts. Even when working on their final projects in an academic setting, most college students seem to use some forms of social media constantly (Head & Eisenberg, 2011b). Second, social media has unique characteristics distinguishing itself from more traditional forms of open web resources. Specifically, social media is equipped with a wide variety of novel features that support higher interactivity in information creation, sharing, and community building. Social media allows people to create, share, and exchange user-generated contents in virtual communities and networks, based on a dialogic rather than monologic transmission system (Pavlik & MacIntoch, 2015). This can contribute to a rapid propagation of rumor and misinformation to a broader audience, which has raised strong concern among information professionals and scientists (Budak, Agrawal, & Abbadi, 2011; Friggeri, Adamic, Eckles, & Cheng, 2014). Finally, scholars begin to acknowledge the potential of social media as a useful resource for information acquisition and learning. It would be worthwhile to examine why and how various social media platforms are used for information seeking, which can foster effective use through user training and systems design.

INFORMATION LITERACY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

With the increasing amount and diversity of information being circulated through social media, information literacy (IL)—defined as a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information (American Library Association, 1989)—is important as ever. To be information literate, an individual should be able to identify adequate sources that can meet their intended purposes of information-seeking as well as properly evaluate information obtained from such sources. For an effective use of social media for information-seeking, users would need to identify social media platforms suitable to their information needs and also apply appropriate strategies for evaluating information acquired from the selected social media.

While sharing some similarities with other types of sources, social media platforms have unique characteristics that are not found in traditional information resources. User-generated content would be one of social media's distinctive characteristics: anyone can create and disseminate information without first undergoing a thorough review process. As the quality of information provided via social media cannot be guaranteed, users need to be particularly vigilant in evaluating the information retrieved.

Researchers have identified key criteria for assessing information credibility, such as accuracy, authority, and comprehensiveness (Rieh & Danielson, 2007; Saracevic, 2007; Schamber, 1994). Further studies have elicited criteria for evaluating information from the web and other social media including Wikipedia and social Q&A (Kim, 2010; Lim & Simon, 2011; Savolainen, 2011). Comparable criteria, such as author expertise and accuracy, are used for evaluating answers posted on social Q&A (Kim, 2010).

Studies show that college students who have received IL training are aware of key evaluation criteria (Hampton-Reeves et al., 2009; Kim & Sin, 2011). However, studies also show that students' knowledge of important evaluation criteria is not necessarily put into action. Students are still inclined to use accessible and user-friendly sources, even while

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