

Beware! The Blade of Information Technology Has a Rough Edge

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Quality scholarship depends upon honesty, openness, and access. When we read a published book, article, monograph, or government report, we assume, unless given reason to believe otherwise, that the information contained therein is complete, true, and not taken out of context. These are among the most cogent rationales for citing others' work when we employ it. Information consumers may then check the accuracy, the completeness, and the context of cited work if any doubt is raised or if there is a need for more in-depth analysis.

Modern cutting edge information technology has a potential negative side to it. Scholars now have at their disposal volumes of seemingly useful, interesting information via the internet and the world wide web. Search engines can locate data we could only dream of seeking just a few years ago. Something is missing, however, in much of this available data: consistent citation of sources within electronically distributed texts. What we often get with our computer searches is information with no attributed original source, no clear evidence of timeliness, and no way of checking out this data without personally contacting whomever placed the data in electronic form or by blind luck.

Students and scholars need to be cautious when using such uncited information. I retrieved some data on Hong Kong from the web and discovered serious problems relevant to claims about an event that occurred while I was in Hong Kong -- at the very scene

being reported upon. This web report was either fabricated or wildly distorted. Nothing of the sort reported in the article occurred. I verified my perceptions with others who were there and we all agreed that the web report was bogus. When I checked with the people at the web site, I was told that they got the information from an unnamed Chinese source. More depressing was that the web site story promulgator seemed unconcerned with the lack of the story's accuracy/truth nor was he concerned with the story's potential effects if believed by others.

In truly scholarly work, we expect to find detailed citation of material and are thus able to verify for ourselves whether what we read has merit. Most of what is on the web is not scholarly in style and verification is thus impeded by the lack of citation. There are no editors as gatekeepers; there are no peer reviews to monitor and assess the calibre of disseminated materials. There are some web sites that are designated as scholarly on-line journals or as places designed for scholarly exchanges. The on-line journals I am familiar with are edited [many are peer reviewed]. Thus, information found at these sites approximate the scholarly written sources we are familiar with. You will find traditional attribution strategies being employed at these sites.

Until there are standards for citation on electronically transferred ideas and/or until scholarly information is clearly marked distinct from that qualifying for the Enquirer, we need to

be cautious about what we believe and use from such sources.

Many students laud this plethora of accessible information and they use it liberally in their papers and oral reports. Some students seem to think that citing the web site is adequate and sufficient to claim the information true, accurate, and relevant. Yes, the professor or other reader can go to the acknowledged site, but if the data found there is not properly attributed, what good was accomplished? For uncited material, caution and corroboration is needed to better assure information voracity. Just like the lack of absolute truth in cited scholarly works, corroboration will not ensure truth; but it raises the likelihood greatly.

The information super highway has great promise; but like our automobile super highways, there are clunkers on the road that need to be recognized and avoided. Drive/surf with care!