Social Media as a Primary Source: A Coming of Age

What is a primary source? Many research guides created by academic librarians for students define a primary source as an original object or document—firsthand information that was written or created during the time under study. These guides include examples of various types of pre-Digital Age resources such as diaries, news-film footage, and interviews. In addition, traditional primary source documents tend to include public voices as records of historical events. But what about today? What is a primary source in the Digital Age?

Signs indicate that the research guides are being rewritten to accommodate the impact of social media on informational resources. Social media expands our reach more quickly, much further, and at a grander scale through words, pictures, and videos. Social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram empower individuals to share their voice in a media-centric model. With communication of information fundamentally changing, the definition of a primary source needs to reflect this change. Considering that Twitter alone generates over one million tweets daily and that “an estimated 61% of adults and 74% of teens interact with social media sites,” it is easy to see that “the definition of event reporting is confounded with the instantaneous recording of historical information.”

Indeed, some researchers and scholars deem Twitter to be one of the most informative resources available with regard to what’s going on locally, nationally, and globally in modern-day culture. Consequently, in 2010 Twitter announced that it was donating its digital archive of public tweets to the Library of Congress. “The Twitter digital archive has extraordinary potential for research into our contemporary way of life,” said Librarian of Congress James H. Billington.

Social media allows students, faculty, scholars, and the public at-large to communicate and collaborate in ways that disregard institutional boundaries. In September 2012, students in a journalism course at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University used mobile devices and social media to cover the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. The course not only allowed the students to obtain practical work experience but also exposed them to traditional and emerging communication theories and concepts associated with social media in the digital world.

In a recent study of social media sites currently popular among scholars, the most frequently used sites for scholarly work were listservs, non-academic social networks, blogs (read or comment), online document management, media repositories, and wikis. When respondents were asked to indicate the benefits of using social media among scholars, the following were the top five answers:

1. Keeping up-to-date with topics
2. Following other researchers’ work
3. Discovering new ideas or publications
4. Promoting current work/research
5. Making new research contacts

Yet some shy away from social media as a primary source for news, or even as a secondary source for research, because in many instances there is no evidence of credibility to the information. In the past, the integrity of information and research data was a staple for media and researchers alike; evidence and documented sources were needed to print information. In today’s Digital Age where social media reigns, such credibility can be suspect. As a result, the mining of social data as a primary data-gathering tool is not without limitations.

Information literacy, a cornerstone for 21st-century education, entails teaching students how to search for information and evaluate its validity, credibility, and usefulness. Given the abundance of information available over the Internet, students as well as educators and researchers want trusted filters. In regard to the filtering of social media information and alleviating the concerns about the credibility of social media information sources, the researcher Semil Shah notes: “It is the realization that who shares information online is oftentimes more important than what that information is.” He explains: “In order for me to read something, I need a social signal to trigger and capture my attention.” Hence, he evaluates the authenticity of content in part based on the trust he has in the individual sharing that content.

Looking to the future, some are concerned as to whether social media platforms are merely fads with limited lifespans. Services have lost their relevance (e.g., Myspace and Friendster) as users migrate to new platforms. However, academia has reached a tipping point in terms of scholarly communication, collaboration, and the sharing and dissemination of information with those who are trusted. Social media tools will continue to evolve and flourish because they are not so much about the platform as they are about the content and about the credibility of the individuals producing and sharing the content.

Social media has come of age as a primary source, and there is tremendous opportunity for academics—and academic librarians—to begin treating it as such. The question is: How do we harness the potential of social media sites to enhance the
research process and scholarly communications? Where do we begin?

First, we can assume a proactive role in rewriting the rules by acknowledging in research guides that social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook do contain firsthand accounts of history and are tremendously informative in terms of modern-day culture and trends. Also, social media is a gateway to many thoughtful blogs and online conversations that advance scholarly conversations and serve as viable secondary sources.

Second, we can expand efforts with information literacy to include approaches for students to take in developing trustworthy academic and professional social networks. Hence, we can offer tips on how students should select Twitter users to “follow” and Facebook users to “friend”—with the expectation that those individuals and organizations will help students to filter trustworthy information in support of their academic needs.

Third and last, we must keep current with the social media channels that scholars of varying disciplines use, understanding that users often migrate from their preferred social media platforms. By doing so, we can more readily make referrals to credible information sources.

Notes

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