

Credibility, materiality, and mediated interaction

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In this position paper, I would like to focus on two issues. The first one is a specific aspect of information literacy practices, namely how and based on what grounds people construct opinions about what is credible information/sources and how they act in accordance with these opinions. The second is the mediated nature of many information literacy practices, more specifically concerned with the materiality of various documents or artefacts through which we acquire information and construct knowledge. I am interested in how these two issues interact, that is: how is our use of various artefacts to find information shaped by the medium, architecture, and epistemic content of the artefact as well as by our perception and experience of information (digital, media) literacy and by the practices as part of which the information is intended to be used? How do these factors influence what we consider to be credible information?

A heightened interest in credibility often co-occurs with the breakthrough of new media. This was the case when radio and television entered the homes and now so with the Internet (Metzger & Flanagin 2008, 7). The Internet offers access to an incredible space of unedited as well as edited, free as well as fee-based documents and arenas for communication. Deciding what can be considered as credible (or credible enough) information in a specific situation is one of the key qualifications that is required or, in some cases, indeed, vital, when using online information. Yet a number of studies show that credibility assessments are by no means trivial (Rieh & Hilligoss 2008; Sundin & Francke 2009). One of the things that I have concerned myself with in two recent studies is the part played by the materiality of the document in credibility assessments. By a document's materiality, I mean the structures of a text (broadly understood) as manifested materially in a document in a certain medium and a particular use; close to what Foucault has called "the texture of the materiality" (2002, p. 115; cf. Francke 2008, p. 111 ff.). This includes media-specific properties and architecture, but also, for instance, the manifestation of certain genre conventions in a document.

In the first study (my PhD thesis work, Francke 2008), I addressed issues of how scholars narrate their research in digital media and how authors and publishers provide metadata and paratexts (Genette 1997) for these stories that can be used in credibility assessments. My study objects were documents, more precisely the web sites of Open Access journals published by independent publishers. I encountered a great variety in the types of metadata and paratexts provided in individual article files and on the journal web sites, apart from such basic data as author's name and the title of the article. The reader was offered varying

degrees of information that could form a basis on which to contextualise and assess the credibility of an article or journal. However, many of the journals drew on the credibility of the print journal by making a very gentle transference of the print journal article to the web. The conventions of the traditional journal were employed by a majority of the journals studied, both in terms of visual design, structure, and choice of file format (PDF, constructed to 'imitate' paper). It can thus be argued that the journals use the medium in ways which refer to another medium that is generally attributed greater credibility.

Whereas the scholarly journal article is traditionally considered to be a trusted genre, concern has been raised with regard to the credibility of other types of web sites. In the project I am currently working in, Expertise, Authority and Control on the Internet (EXACT),¹ we study collaboratory/participatory genres where contributors are often anonymous. The study includes a number of sub projects, with different study objects and methods. Among these are observations/interviews with high school students, teachers, and librarians as well as with Wikipedia editors and blog authors. Another part looks closer at the architectures of a few participatory web sites. In the study of how high school students negotiate credibility and authority of information, the ways in which the students talked about and acted with regard to medium and genre illustrated how the materiality of artefacts, the students' expectations on credibility, and the practices within the school, mutually constructed what was perceived as credible information (Sundin & Francke 2009; Francke & Sundin 2009).

There is a growing body of studies of various user groups' credibility assessments on the web, employing different types of methods. Some specifically look to the role of materiality in these assessments. At the same time, the web is increasingly moving from the home and work to the street, bus, café etc., enabled through, for instance, mobile networks and smart phones, which in some cases includes changing forms of materiality. I would like to discuss with you what the most interesting and pressing research questions for the near future are in light of this. How do we capture this change? It is bound to influence people's information practices, but do/will these changes in materiality and practices have consequences for credibility assessments? And, more broadly, how will they shape information seeking and use?

I find questions about potential influences on information practices by increasing use of mobile technologies to be interesting for future research. Not least, perhaps, concerning information practices in everyday life. Facebook and Twitter facilitate finding out the news of one's friends and acquaintances. How these services are used as sources of information is so far not fully investigated, even though studies are beginning to be published (e.g. Morris, Teevan & Panovich 2010). But there are also other questions emerging, for instance, how will we use and look for information when social media are increasingly combined with the various locating services for mobile phones that are becoming more widely spread?

¹ Olof Sundin is the PI for the project and the other researchers are Louise Limberg and Mikael Alexandersson. More information on EXACT is available at <http://projektexakt.wordpress.com>.

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