



Researchers and User-Generated Content: What we Get, What is the Quality, and how we Ascertain the Credibility? Three Mandatory Questions for Internet Resource Users

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Abstract

The advent of computers and subsequently the Internet have been sources of relief for human beings. Internet could be described as the treasure-base of unlimited of resources/information. Yes, there is no doubt that there are millions of resources available on the Net. These user-generated contents, which are written by any person irrespective of their academic status, are raising lots of questions that are begging for realistic answers. These questions need to be answered, and answered correctly. No doubt, the credibility of those resources generated daily and posted/uploaded on the internet has attracted the attention of many scholars. Thus, this paper begins with an overview of User-Generated Content (UGC) and the definition of some salient terms. Types of User-Generated Content and ways users generate the information were concisely discussed. It highlights the fears expressed by researchers' on the trustworthiness of the available Internet resources/materials by outlining the drawbacks of UGC. Furthermore, the benefits of UGC were not left out. The paper goes further to list some evaluation criteria that will guide Internet users and researchers on the use of abundant User-Generated Content that abound on the Internet. The article also examined the challenges for evaluation of internet resources, and the promises of internet user-generated resources.

Keywords: Internet Resource, Researchers, Evaluation, User-Generated Content, Instructional, Materials, Online.

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INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements have changed the way we think and live; in fact, our environments have been reshaped or redesigned. The advent of the Internet is one of the technological breakthroughs' that has remodeled our thoughts and actions. There is no doubt that millions of information/resources abound on the Internet. In fact, it has been a very helpful tool, especially as we write academic papers. It has given scholars in all fields the capability to carry out research easily and at less or no cost. Since these information/resources are user-generated contents whereby the credibility of the information so uploaded could hardly be ascertained due to some unavoidable factors, users require much caution relying on them for any serious academic work.

At the onset of the Internet, information from the Internet was considered authoritative or trustworthy, for the reason that people who could publish at that time worked at research centers, universities, and the information was scholarly by nature (<http://www.gsn.org/web/research/internet/eval.htm>). Users could use the information without the fear of "virus." But presently, unlike textbooks, journals and newspaper articles, where editors scrutinize information to be published, anyone can publish anything to global audience without verification, and with less or no cost at all. In as much as there are lots of information on the Internet, we can also find some of them that are mere opinion piece, fallacies, and erroneous information.

Thus, we need to be very skeptical of most of the information we come across on the Internet. There are lots of problems encountered daily on the Net as regards to these user-generated contents, particularly when authoritative research is to be undertaken on a given topical issues. In this circumstance, how can we easily judge, ascertain, verify and authenticate the quality of millions of information on the Internet? Something needs to be done, and done correctly. These user-generated information needs to be evaluated to ascertain their credibility. Hence, we need to compare and contrast different information resources in order to get the authentic ones.

However, before delving into the evaluation of user-generated contents on the Internet, it will be pertinent to examine the meaning of the following major terms as listed hereunder for a better comprehension of the entire subject matter.

User-Generated Content: This term is also referred to as User-Created Content (UCC) or User-Generated Content (UGC). This is a Web content created by ordinary users; that is, information written by everyday users (Geoghan, 2012). Khadilk (2012) conceptualized it as "any material piece or content that a user creates or leverages from existing sources and uploads or shares on a Web site for others to view." It is any form of content created by users of a system or service and made available publicly on that system. "User-generated content includes any site where the user (that's you or possibly your customer) can write and publish content, whether it is video content, blog posts, advice websites, and the like" (Pulizzi, 2009). UGC has also been defined as "any type of content that has been created and put out there by unpaid contributors or fans. These information are created by consumers or end-users of an online system or service and is publically made available to other consumers and end-users.

Researcher: A researcher is someone who conducts research, i.e., an organized and systematic investigation into something; someone whose job is to study a subject carefully, especially in order to discover new information or understand the subject better: (<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/researcher>) and (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/researcher>).

Instructional Material: These are information and devices, be they real or representative that the teacher uses to communicate effectively with the students in order to make the lessons more meaningful and realistic so that the students will understand what he/she has to put across (Okwo and Ike, 1995).

Internet Resources: These are millions of information/materials that are generated by users and deposited online that aid teachers', students', researchers', and other Internet users in teaching-learning process and informative purposes.

Evaluation: With respect to evaluation of Internet resource, it refers to a form of ascertaining the worth of an endeavour in terms of set objectives; it deals with the appraisal of value or the estimation of worth of a thing ... in order to reach meaningful decision about that thing (Ogunniyi, 1990). In the same development, Singh (2008) sees evaluation as an inclusive concept, which indicates all kinds of efforts and all kinds of means to ascertain the quality, value and effectiveness of desired outcomes.

Online: This refers to a service operating under the direct control of a computer or other electronic devices connected to a network (such as Internet). Online is the condition of being controlled and served by, or facilitated by, or available through a system and, especially by means of a computer or other devices, such as telecommunications system (Internet) and ready to use or be used by other computers or devices. Online activities could be Internet forum, or message board (online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages).

Criteria for Internet Resources Evaluation

Often times, when people are asked to evaluate Internet resources/materials, most of them concentrate on the evaluation of the websites. This is not the case with this particular evolution, as this concentrates on the evaluation of the information on the website/page rather than on the websites. Yes, mention could be made on website/pages for the evaluation of its content, but not the evaluation of the website itself.

In as much as the contents of Internet materials are doubtful due to numerous information available to it, it becomes important to evaluate such information in order to make the best use of the millions of the resources available. Thus, the following criteria could be applied for the evaluation of Internet resources/information.

Authority

- The first information to ascertain on any Internet user-generated content is the author or the editor of the information. You have to find out if the name of the author or creator is on the information.
- You should find out if his/her credentials (position and occupation) are available for verification? Ascertain the expertise and experience the author possesses that qualify him/her to write on the topic.
- Ascertain the credibility of the author by justifying his/her academic qualifications that qualifies him/her to write on the said topic.
- Check if the author has a fixed address or contact, such as – phone number, email account, institution or organization. Verify if the information is linked to any home page.

These are easily found on the homepage with the following captions (contacts, contact me; contact us, about me and about us).

- Based on the topic on which the author is writing or researching upon, find the agency, body/organization that published the information. That is, check if the home page is institution based-Education (.edu), Non-profit Organization (.org), Government (.gov), Military (.mil), Commercial (.com) and Internet Service Provider (.net).
- Other relevant information retrieval sources could be used to authenticate information, such as, Biography index, Biographical sources, Search engines, Who's Who, Dictionaries and Encyclopedic sources could be used to determine the author's credentials.
- Reference Librarians could also be consulted for this purpose. These domain names are very important because if you are researching for information on military issues, it will be appropriate to use materials gotten from military (.mil) homepages than commercial (.com).

Reliability and Credibility

When discussing the reliability and credibility of information, we are concerned with the origin of the information:

- Has the author the authority to publish the information?
- Is there any information or link about the author on the web page to verify his/her credentials?
- Is the publisher credible enough to undertake the publication of the said information?
- Is the content well-researched and has it enough evidence that will convince anyone to believe the information?
- Are there sufficient references in the text to support and/or to cross-check the authenticity of the information presented?
- Is there any hard print format of the said information that is presented on the Internet to verify its legitimacy? That is, can you compare and contrast the information on the Internet with similar hardcopy of the same information elsewhere?

Objectivity

- Is the purpose or scope of the author very clearly stated? Did the author express his/her point-of-view objectively and impartially?
- Check if the information covered is factual, or does it merely represent the author's personal opinion or a propaganda material?
- Is the intended audience clearly defined?
- Does the language of communication suit the content? That is, what is the level of grammar used? Can the intended audience read the material without much difficulty?
- Is the author affiliated to any institution and organization?
- Is the information clearly and logically presented?
- Does it suit the intended audience?

Accuracy and Currency

- Is the material free from much grammatical, spelling, and punctuation, and typographical errors?
- How current is the information presented? Is it well researched?
- How accurate is the information presented to the intended audience?
- Does the author clearly list sources that will help to verify the information presented for factuality?
- Do you have independent sources of verifying the information presented; or, can you perform the aforesaid function based on your own outstanding knowledge?
- Verify that the information is reviewed or refereed?
- Is the website where the information is gotten of good quality? Is it well designed and user-friendly? Is the site constantly updated?
- For those in the academic circle or researchers, the timeliness of any information is very imperative. Is the material presented on the Internet up-to-date?

Links

- Authors' usually present links to the information presented. The question now is, "Are links related to the topic and useful to the content and the website?"
- Are the links presented up-to-date, have they outlived their usefulness? That is, are they at their dead ends?
- Are the sources linked actually related to the content?
- How factual are the links? Are they evaluated or annotated?

Plagiarism Checker

Such tool as Grammarly's Plagiarism Checker could be used to locate contents that are not original. This tool has been of immense help at dictating plagiarized works which is very common today. Again, the Online Writing Lab (OWL) presently at Purdue University provides in-depth advice and examples for evaluating sources, both on and off the Web (<http://www.whoishostingthis.com/resources/evaluating-web-resources/>).

The above are necessary questions to put forward to ascertain the authenticity and suitability of Internet resources for any serious academic work.

Types of UGC and Ways Users Generate Them

Internet content is generated on daily bases, and there are various ways of generating these contents that flood the Net. Khadilkar (2012); Davey (2017); Beal (n.d.), and Wikipedia, (2014) have outlined the multimedia types of User-Generated Contents as follows:- Images, Video, Audio/podcasts, and Flash-enabled content. In the same context, short text UGCs include:- Posts, Tweets, SMS/text messages, Comments, Chat rooms, and feedback/likes. Long texts UGCs comprises of Blogs, Wiki, Discussion forums posts and Q & A, Product/service reviews. In the same development, others include: - User contact and profile, Location-based check-ins, Game content, and Opinion polls.

These UGCs don't just come to the Internet; there are several means through which these information are disseminated to the Internet. These means comprises of Computers, Mobile devices, Web Cams, Cameras, and others from WWW. These are the technologies that are behind User-Generation Content on the Internet.

Benefits of User-Generated Content on the Internet

Timely Information

The role of UGC cannot be overemphasized. Presently, we are witnesses to recent events (both local and international) as they happened and the rate at which they are posted on the Internet within seconds for people to read. Examples are electoral debates, and protests, riots, demonstrations and agitations for one reason or the other. Video clips of most of the information are posted on the Internet for users to watch. Majority of the information would have been covered and buried in traditional news only.

Voice of the People

UGC represents the voice of the people; it gives every person a voice to air out his/her views on any given issue. Pulizzi (2009) affirmed this stated when the author declared, "It's not debatable that UGC gives people around the world a voice, whereas traditional content does nothing of the sort."

Simpler to Generate

UGC is easier for every person, as it does not require much expertise to publish information on the Internet. In fact, site owners' are favoured. That is, instead of writing or contributing content/information for their sites, users rather contribute the content for them, thereby reliving them of much academic stress.

Easily Updated

User-Generated Content is easier to update than the traditional printed information.

Accessibility

The enormous content generated by Internet users are easily accessible to almost to everybody who has any of the technological devices that are networked. In the business circle, UGC can help you reach new customers, engage old ones, develop your brand and increase overall sales (<http://boast.io/4-drawbacks-of-user-generated-content-and-how-not-to-fall-victim/>).

Advertisements

UGC provides cheap avenue for people to advertise their products and services. In the process, companies and individuals get quick feedbacks for the services they offer and products in order to perfect their services for bigger profits.

Easy Communication

People can communicate with relatives and at the same time meet people with same or similar interests and share their knowledge on a specific subject matter. Customers' can easily access websites of their choice and get vital information about the product they propose to buy with little or no cost, as opposed to travelling on ground or air.

Drawbacks of User-Generated Content

Credibility and Reliability

Millions of articles on almost all disciplines are published on the Internet via Wikipedia. There are no doubts that many questions are usefully asked on who are the people that generate the content on the Internet and how professionals are they? Lots of wrong, incredible and sometimes dangerous information are disseminated daily throughout the world through many websites and other social media platforms.

Bias

Most of the information generated are full of prejudice. No person checkmates what is published on the Internet, everything goes. The materials are not subjected to editorial board or peer review as is the case of journals articles and most textbooks.

Ownership Issue

It is most times very difficult to ascertain actually who owns the content on user-generated sites. This is not the case with the traditional content because it is simple to identify who the owner of particular information is. The issue of identity in user-generated content possesses serious problems.

Lacks Corrections Sections

Users are all human beings, and they cannot claim to be infallible as acknowledged by Moran (2011). The scholar pointed out that all scholarly journals and newspapers contain "corrections" sections in which they acknowledge errors in their prior work. It has been acclaimed that these UGCs, especially the Wikipedia articles are hardly objective and has not place to acknowledge errors made in previous write-ups. So, these materials must be used with almost care. Hence, the author further advised that users should always verify important information by confirming it with multiple sources.

False Identity

It has been acclaimed that most of the information on Wikipedia have no identifiable authors or editors. Even when some of them have, very few Wikipedia editors and contributors use their real name or provide any information about who they are (Maron, 2011). Consequently, researchers are usually skeptical of information on the Internet with anonymous authors.

Diversity Issue

Research has proven that there is less diversity among Wikipedia editors. For instance, in 2009, a survey conducted by Wikimedia Foundation revealed that 87 % of Wikipedia editors are males, and ranges within an average age of 26.8 years. It was also discovered that these editors hail mostly from Europe and North America, and majority of them were in graduate school. The above report shows that the editors were geographically not spread, gender and age bias respectively.

Challenges Facing the Evaluation of Internet Resources

There is no doubt the majority of researchers today rely heavily on Internet resources, which come in different formats, such as, e-books, websites, e-journals, blogs, and e-newsletter, Wikipedia, etc., to accomplish their assignments. As good as these Internet materials can be, it is very difficult to determine the suitability of millions of the information at the time of need. The qualities of these materials/resources have always been problematic to Internet users because persons of questionable integrity have access to computers and other technological devices to upload any form of rubbish information on the internet.

It is on this perspective that (Kaushik, 2012) stated thus, “Too much of information is available on the Internet, but there is no uniform way by which reliability and authenticity of Internet resources can be judged.” The scholar further stated, “There is no filter works between us and Internet, information available on Internet not encompass through any standards/benchmarks prior to publish on Internet for public use. It is however very necessary for every user to check and evaluate the Internet information prior to use for any purpose.” This is the degree of challenges faced by users of Internet materials for any serious academic work.

On the same note, Notess (1998) identified another problem when she observed that search engines often link to ephemeral (short-lived) pages or documents, which often and simply move, vanish, or undergo changes after the database was completed; this she emphasized that most of the databases are not usually updated. Kovacs, et al. (1994) also advised all users not to believe everything that is found on the Internet. Schrock (1996) affirmed this by pointing out thus, “There is little or no editorial review of material and no official agency, specialist, or review process for Internet subject matter, but should identify the author’s background and abilities.

Another challenge of UGC is the language in which UGC is written. One must understand the language before evaluating the content. That is to say, some of the information generated are written in local languages, thereby making it very difficult to access the content.

The Promises of User-Generate Internet Resources

Presently and interestingly, the Internet appears to be a very promising medium for researchers, as the Internet resources remain the major and a very rich source for literature. These resources mean a lot for researchers, especially those in the academia. It provides for diversity or variety, easier access, convenience, lower costs and minimal time investment for information retrieval. It provides so many appealing features as Benfield and Szlemko (2006) observed, and I quote, “Who would want to collect data in six cities in three states without formal funding? It can add

unnecessary costs, time commitments, and headaches.” This shows the power of the Internet, as information is gotten without geographical limitations, with minimal or no cost, and limited time and efforts.

A piece of information that would have requested for a Visa to travel to most of the countries in the world could now be gotten with seconds. That is to say that time and geographic constraints that formally hampered the retrieval of information have at the present virtually disappeared. However, December (1994), while stressing the need for continuous evaluation of Internet resources asserted thus, “Even the best web spiders would not be effective if the Internet continues to be flooded with poor quality, redundant, and incorrect information.” The scholar, though stressed the User-Generate Internet Resources to be a good source for literature, warned that users of the Internet resources must continue to critically evaluate the sources for a meaningful research work.

Internet offers a variety of sources for information that can be found quickly and conveniently, and gives students, teachers and other researchers’ free access to information that would have been previously unavailable. Internet provides up-to-date information on various national and international events; presents a variety of viewpoints on topical issues, and gives users free access to websites of state and national online libraries, even when our school library holdings are inadequate. These resources could be gotten while sitting in our bedrooms, and at our convenient time with no restrictions. Internet provides acquisition knowledge and learning beyond the restrictions of bricks and mortar walls.

Finally and summarily, with continuous technology advancements, a greater access to higher education via conventional cum electronic means, there is high hope that Internet User-Generated Contents will be highly improved quality content.

CONCLUSION

The industrial age has resulted in influx of information on the Internet. In the same manner, information will definitely compete with others; but the onus lies on us to scan through such information to make out the best out of them. Therefore, Internet users should be very skeptical and very critical of any information they find on the Internet. Users need to carefully scrutinize such information for validity and reliability. It is also important that users download and print all pages of information they found useful for their research work because web pages are usually very vulnerable. As noted, the pages could be deliberately and accidentally altered, or may move to another page, or entirely removed without any notice to users. This method will enable you to accurately reference all relevant information retrieved from the Internet. As a last resort, the Librarians could be consulted to affirm the trustworthiness of any information found on the Internet. As Benfield and Szlemko (2006) stated, “Yet’ as long as humans continue to rely on the written word for the exchange of information, wisdom, and insight, effective and compelling writing will demand sources that are credible, authoritative, and accurate” (2011).

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