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**Format Agnostics or Format Believers?  
How students in high school use genre to assess credibility**

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## **Introduction**

Young peoples' activities in digital environments have attracted a great deal of attention in recent years, but the discussions have not always had their base in research. Williams and Rowlands note in their literature review of the information behaviour of young people ("the Google Generation") that very little research exists to address the myth that the "Google Generation are format agnostic and have little interest in the containers (reports, book chapters, encyclopedia entries) that provide the context and wrapping for information 'nuggets'." (Williams & Rowlands, 2007, p. 20) The types of format that the authors mention concern primarily genre affiliation, although it would be possible to increase the notion of format to also include, for instance, medium. Our research on information literacies and assessments of credibility and authority in two high school classes indicates that at least in some contexts, the myth mentioned above is just that: a myth; something that turned out to be the case with many of the claims about the Google Generation when Williams and Rowlands consulted available research. Young people's credibility assessments have been discussed in previous research, often with a focus on university undergraduates (e.g. Limberg, 1999; Metzger & Flanagin, 2008; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Hong, 2006; Liu & Huang, 2005; Mattus, 2007; Jacobson & Ignacio, 1997; Clark, 2000). We would like to add to previous credibility research by studying the issue with a socio-cultural approach to information practices and by relating credibility to information literacies and genre.

This paper presents findings concerning how high school students use genre as a tool when they assess the credibility of resources as part of school work (cf. also Sundin & Francke, submitted). We relate information practices to information literacies with a point of departure in a socio-cultural approach (Wertsch, 1998). Such an approach focuses on information literacies as tool-based practices (cf. Sundin, 2008; Veinot, 2007; Alexandersson & Limberg, 2003) carried out in different communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By genre, we mean social action (Miller, 1984) rather than a fixed form or a classification (Devitt, 2004, p. 3). That is, genres shape, and are shaped by, how people act around texts as well as how they construct texts. In our case, these actions concern credibility assessments in schools. The use of genre theory in teaching information literacies has been suggested previously, e.g. by Andersen (2006) and Simmons (2005).

Focus in the empirical study presented here was primarily on user-generated web sites. Wikipedia and blogs turned out to be the most common examples of such sites that the students returned to in their use and discussion of sources, but their information seeking also prompted them to reflect on other types of sources, both traditional and more recent ones.

## **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to understand the students' practices with regard to seeking and evaluating the credibility of sources, with a particular focus on user-generated web sites. An ethnographic approach was selected, which sought to get as close to the students' activities as possible within the context of their group-based school work.

The data collection took place in spring and fall of 2008, in two classes in different schools in western and southern Sweden. The students were 17 or 18 years old, in their second year of high school in the national Social Science programme. In each class, we followed the students' work on a project that required them to gather and evaluate information. In one class, the project was an independent group assignment on gender and equality, which was reported in an oral presentation. In the other class, the students were asked to work in groups, seeking information on nuclear power as though they were

writing an assignment on the topic, but instead of writing the paper, they should agree on a list of sources arranged in order of trustworthiness. All in all, approximately 70 students from the two schools participated in the study.

Participant observations, in total 48 hours, were carried out in the classes when they worked with the project. The students recorded their work in information seeking diaries in blog form. At the end of the project, group interviews focusing on their work were carried out with the students. In this paper, the field notes, interview transcripts, and blogs have been analysed with regard to how the students talked about and made credibility assessments related to the genre of the sources they encountered.

## Results and Discussion

Young people are often well aware of the differences in the publishing history of printed books and of web sites and take this into account when they assess credibility. Assumptions about the quality control and high publishing costs of book publishing and the relatively faster, cheaper, and uncontrolled creation of web sites are used by students as tools in making initial assessments of how credible sources are (e.g. Sundin & Francke, submitted; Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008, p. 58; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008, p. 1476). Knowledge of a resource's genre was used in much the same way by the students in the two classes that were studied. Examples from the genres of blogs, Internet discussion forums, student papers, and encyclopaedias will be used to illustrate this.

The students were quite restrictive in attributing credibility to user-generated resources, which they often associated with amateur writing. They were aware that it is easy for "anyone" to add to a Wikipedia article or publish a blog. Indeed, first-hand experience was one reason why they did not trust blogs: they themselves blogged, or they had friends who did, and if they could blog, so could anyone. Because their experience was primarily with opinion or "personal journal" type blogs, they closely associated blogging with opinions rather than with the facts they were interested in finding for their school work (cf. Sundin & Francke, submitted), and blogs were thus perceived as less useful in the school situation, even though they may have a function in other communities of practice. As one of the students put it: "Well, you may come across a trustworthy blog, but it's still a blog" (Interview B:5)<sup>1</sup> (cf. Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008, p. 1476). However, there is some rationale to this attitude: Herring and colleagues (2004) have pointed out that the majority of blogs in their study were of the "personal journal" type, and that researchers and blog advocates tend to overestimate the number of more serious blogs.

Some of the students were active on various discussion forums, and a similar attitude could be found when it came to forums as for blogs. Forums seldom surfaced as part of the students' information seeking activities in the study, but one group working on gender issues in the Swedish military service found and discussed posts on two forums. One of them was a controversial forum run by an independent Swedish news agency (Flashback.se). Even though the information found there was referred to as "very uncertain in some way, since it's that kind of [inaudible] forum, so to speak" (Interview A:4), the particular forum post they had read was attributed some credibility because it was an account of somebody's first-hand experience ("these were his own experiences"). This experience was given extra weight by the fact that similar experiences were expressed by another person on another forum. This second forum was associated with the Swedish military and was part of their information campaign to women, about life in the military service. One of the girls admits that they never really checked who the person was who had written a particular post, but that they had a general impression of the site:

Well, it said that they were [...] members of that unit and stuff. So in some way it still felt as though they have been there, you had to have an access code to be able to write and stuff. And if they've been there, I don't think they would lie about it because it's a kind of help forum, so to speak, mainly for girls who want to do military service.  
(Interview A:4)

The other group members added that the forum had a trustworthy URL at the domain of the Swedish military and that the "question & answer" character of the forum made it more credible than a forum that was only "for talking about nothing in particular". Thus, the practice of generalising from a few resources the students had experience of to the entire genre was partly retracted in this case where there was a clear association with a trusted authority – the Swedish military – which counterbalanced the stamp of amateur culture.

What use the students saw in the resources had to do with the status or value they expected them to have in school (cf. Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008, p. 55). With a socio-cultural approach, this could be understood theoretically in terms of how learning and knowledge is formed in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For instance, the students had been warned by teachers on several occasions – often before they began high school – about using other students' school assignments. These are hosted on web sites that invite students to submit their school work so that it can be read (and used) by others (sometimes referred to as "paper mills" or "cheat sites"). The hesitation many of the students felt towards these types of papers, written by their peers, rubbed off on papers from higher levels in the educational system. The students often did not differentiate between the sites where students submit their own work and the institutional repositories where universities publish bachelor's and master's theses which have received a passing grade. For instance, one group was observed discussing "if it is possible to see what grade the papers have received, because they don't want to use a paper which has received a low grade. I ask: 'Is a paper from a university trustworthy?' 'We're not quite sure'." (Field notes, A/05-06) If there had been a sense of quality control in the form of a teacher giving the paper a high grade, the students would have been more willing to treat the paper as a reliable source. If they do not know that this is the case, the papers are attributed a subjective role where the content is viewed as based on the authors' opinions rather than on facts, and opinions are the subordinate part in a dichotomy of facts and opinions in the eyes of the students (Sundin & Francke, submitted).

The students are similarly hesitant towards Wikipedia because it has not been endorsed by teachers. At the same time, Wikipedia has a complex status because its genre – the encyclopaedia – gives priority to facts, and facts are useful in the context of the school. In this way, Wikipedia becomes the object of a genre conflict (Sundin & Francke, submitted) because it has the characteristics of a fact-based encyclopaedia but lacks the quality control which is generally associated with the genre. One of the students said, in comparing Wikipedia to a national print encyclopaedia:

They should have [professionals who write facts] in Wikipedia as well, so that it's not just someone who writes... well, anything. But otherwise Wikipedia is great. It's sort of fast and it's... If you want to find quick facts you can go there and find lots of facts on Wikipedia. (Interview B:6)

## **Conclusions**

The above quote illustrates two of the most prominent aspects that influence the students' practices surrounding the credibility of user-generated web resources in the school: Credibility is attributed to authorities and experts rather than to peers or authors whose work has not been submitted to quality control (cf. Williams & Rowlands, 2007, p. 17), and resources which are considered to contain opinions (which are seldom perceived as quality controlled) are viewed with suspicion in this community of practice, although they may be used for "inspiration". Genre is used as a tool for quickly assessing the credibility of a resource in the community of practice of the school. Genre thus forms an important part of the students' information literacy strategies. It is, however, a rather blunt tool. As the examples of blogs and student papers show, students may sharpen their information literacy tools by appropriating knowledge of variations and sub-genres as well as genres in general. Information literacy education may address this issue further by discussing genres and resources as part of situated practices in order to illustrate not only the clear-cut, textbook cases, but also resources whose credibility need to be determined in relation to the purposes for which the resources will be used.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes from the interviews and field notes have been translated from Swedish and partly adapted to written English.