

So-Called "Digital Natives" Not Media Savvy, New Study Shows

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That may not be true, as it turns out. A [new study](#) coming out of Northwestern University, discovered that college students have a decided lack of Web savvy, especially when it comes to search engines and the ability to determine the credibility of search results. Apparently, the students favor search engine rankings above all other factors. The only thing that matters is that something is the top search result, not that it's legit.

"I Googled It"

During the study, one of the researchers asked a study participant, *"What is this website?"* The student answered, *"Oh, I don't know. The first thing that came up."*



That exchange sums up the overall results from this study: many students trusted in rankings above all else. In fact, a quarter of the students, when assigned information-seeking tasks, said they chose a website because - and only because - it was the first search result.

Only 10% of the students made mention of the site's author or that author's credentials while completing tasks. However, in reviewing the screen-capture footage of those respondents, the researchers found that even in this supposedly savvy minority, *none* actually followed through to verify the identification or qualifications of the site's authors.

Google was not the only search engine used in the study, but it was one in which the students put a lot of trust. The students felt emotionally tied to the service in some cases, noting how much they loved it and depended on it. (Those who used Yahoo! said they merely "liked" it.)

Regardless the choice of search engine, though, the first step in information-seeking was always the use of such a service, which was typically referred to as a verb. And yes, in addition to "google it," some even said they would "yahoo it."

Wikipedia Not Trusted as Much

Another interesting finding from the study involved the use of Wikipedia. Perhaps because of teachers' insistence over the years that the user-generated encyclopedia is not a credible source of information, only a third of the students used Wikipedia to search for answers when given particular tasks. This is a drop from earlier studies (like Raine & Tancer, 2007) which showed Wikipedia use at 46% among students.



Other popular trusted sources included SparkNotes (a study guide site), WedMD, Planned Parenthood, CNN, BBC, Microsoft (specifically Encarta and Office-related resources) and those sites with a .gov or .edu extension. Some students even thought that .org domain name meant a site was inherently trustworthy - they weren't aware that the .org extension can be freely registered just like .com and is not for nonprofit use only, as may have originally been intended.

Students Need Media Literacy Education

Over 1,000 students were surveyed and then the researchers randomly sampled 102 students from 1,060 students who had participated in the survey. The demographics of the group were both ethnically and racially diverse, reaching a representative sample of first-year college students at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

In summary, the findings showed that students are not always turning to the most relevant clues to determine the credibility of online content, said the researchers Eszter Hargittai, Lindsay Fullerton, Ericka Menchen-Trevino and Kristen Yates Thomas. Further initiatives that help educate people in this domain are needed, they claim.

Note: This article was corrected to read "University of Illinois, Chicago," not "University of Chicago." The original student count details were also clarified: 1,060 students were surveyed, but 102 were activity monitored. We apologize for the error and confusion.

Image credit in original article: flickr user [Paulo Fehlauser](#)

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