BOOK REVIEW

Net Smart:
How to Thrive Online

Reviewed By Laura Jennings, School of Communication, Point Park University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

The Internet permeates many online users' lives as a source of information, a tool for communication, and a nexus for entertainment. The Internet allows anyone with a smartphone or a laptop to be an online publisher or critic; however, issues of misinformation, trust, privacy, networking, and mass collaboration abound. With that, author Howard Rheingold, a trailblazer in Internet exploration who coined the term "virtual communities" in the mid-1980s, presents an in-depth overview of digital literacy, a skill Rheingold notes should be a part of a school curriculum along with reading, math, and science. In the introduction, Rheingold offers a detailed history of his personal interests, enthusiasm, and, more importantly, his experience in computer-mediated communication over the past 40 years. These bona fides establish credence to Rheingold's examination of past, current and future digital literacy issues. *Net Smart* is not a "60-second guide" to digital intelligence but a thoughtful, detailed analysis to being a better digital citizen. The author divides the book into five chapters, each highlighting a specific digital literacy: attention discipline, crap detection, participation power, social-digital know-how, and why networks matter.

In the first chapter, "Attention," Rheingold examines how attention and the shifting of one's attention work while engaging in social media. The author believes that "mindful use of media" (p. 43) requires goals to alleviate distractions that are unproductive, unhealthy, addictive, and socially alienating. Rheingold centers on simple tasks to "retrain" attention while being online. One task deals with refocusing attention habits by actually writing down goals for online use—a small start but useful when training oneself to keep track of the time spent online and avoiding

the temptation to go down the Internet rabbit hole. The author also notes that rather than multi-tasking, an online user could engage in a single task for a set amount of time, then move on to the next task. Rheingold argues that establishing these routines can keep an online user more aware of time spent online, and by repeating them, makes paying attention to online activities more of habit.

Rheingold addresses the most important digital literacy of "crap detection" (a term coined by Ernest Hemingway and used most appropriately here) in chapter 2. As more and more people use online sources for breaking news, health information, and research, applying thoughtful analysis and examining credibility is critical. The proper evaluation of information found on the Internet should include the basics: "thinking skeptically, look for an author, and then see what others say about the author" (p. 78). Rheingold discusses how to evaluate URLs (an acronym for Uniform Resource Locator) and website ownership so that users can begin to judge for themselves whether the site is a legitimate source of information or purposeful misinformation or bias. The author urges that users not be fooled by professional website design as indicative of honest contest—or vice versa. Rheingold also mentions the use of hoax-debunking websites or political fact-checking websites as credibility-checking tools. Most importantly, the author highlights an essential journalistic tool of triangulating information by finding multiple—Rheingold suggests three—sources of verification before passing that information along to online friends and followers. If rules of digital literacy were to be rated, this should be No. 1. Reposting misleading, wrong or inaccurate information makes for bad digital citizenship. Rheingold writes, "Crap detect thyself before broadcasting something as an assertion of fact" (p. 249).

Understanding why users "google" information is also key. Does an online user just need to know how to spell "Albuquerque" or need information for a student thesis? Rheingold demonstrates how search engines work (and how they can be manipulated), the use of advanced search options, and the evaluation of a search results page including sponsored posts, and top-of-the-page results evaluation. The author also shares his conversations with experts at Bing and Google regarding search literacy and using critical thinking in online searches. Rheingold stresses that online users should look inward to become more aware of personal biases and tendencies to reinforce personal beliefs in evaluating information found online. Finally, Rheingold turns to "infotention"—attention to information—to avoid an overload of headlines and links. The author offers ideas to sift through the information by employing RSS feeds, dashboards, and other content curation tools that stream and filter the news and information to focus on individual interests.

In the third chapter, "Participation Power," Rheingold spotlights participatory culture and participation skills surrounding online discussions, open-source software, file sharing and Web 2.0 social networks. The author highlights researcher Henry Jenkins' work on participatory culture, noting that it lies in opportunities for social engagement as well as learning and creation. The author goes on to discuss participation skills (liking, sharing, bookmarking) as a basis for engaging in online activities. These actions can lead to blogging, a beginning tool for content curation, and allow for the filtering of information or collaboration. Curating requires more tools for participation including searching, monitoring, verifying, updating, organizing, contextualizing, editorializing, aggregating and syndicating. The book also describes keyword tagging for websites that create niches or categories as building blocks of participation. In conclusion, Rheingold looks at the microblogging channel Twitter and the ease of feeding the net with a mix of information (personal information, news of interest, photos) and tuning into a mixture of people (friends, colleagues, celebrities) and interests (gardening, baseball).

Rheingold takes on online collaboration and social norms in chapter 4, "Social-Digital Know-How: The Arts and Sciences of Collective Intelligence." The author underlines the successful "thinking aloud" (p. 153) of collective intelligence, virtual communities, and crowdsourcing

efforts. Rheingold emphasizes the importance of online users (regardless of their background) who network to solve problems (climate change) or create information repositories (Wikipedia). The author offers important tips for collective intelligence efforts including casual online conversation (to establish trust), diversity of the group, and the easy ability to contribute. With virtual communities, Rheingold draws on his experience as a member of the WELL (http://www.well.com) in the mid-1980s to offer norms of behavior: sample the community before joining, assume goodwill amid the lack of social cues, add value when possible, and reciprocate online courtesies and favors. The author adds that an online community needs to be cultivated with a positive effort to honor established rules, value mentorship and leadership, and employ decision-making protocols. Finally, crowdsourcing—and by extension crowdfunding—have gained interest, popularity, and success in recent years. Rheingold notes the impact of tackling any number of problems or issues with online citizen manpower during emergency situations, humanitarian crises, and natural disasters.

The author centers on network awareness in the fifth chapter, "Social Has a Shape," by highlighting social network analysis, networked individualism, and social capital. Rheingold focuses on the reach and transformational natures of small-world networks as global, networked groups offering virtual instantaneous communications in a public space to vast numbers of Internet users. *Net Smart* also demonstrates the growing acceptance of networked individualism that allows individuals the freedom to create online connections via shared interests. These individuals are technologically savvy, have diverse networks, cultivate personal brands, and function effectively in different networks, according to Rheingold. They develop greater social capital of strong and weak ties through online actions of trust and courtesy.

In conclusion, Rheingold shares excellent personal and professional examples, as well as references for learning more about evaluating online information beyond the book. Rheingold showcases the importance of the five digital literacies that are not standalone concepts but interconnected ideas that form the basis of better digital citizenry. Rheingold provides tools to apply to everyday Internet use for parents, children, teens, students, businesses, educators and "before-the-web" adults. Intertwined among the digital literacy discussions are overviews of social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), search engines (Google, Bing, Yahoo) and an abundance of emerging scholarly research on Internet use and users.

Throughout *Net Smart*, Rheingold's quirky personality and impressive experience shine through like a grandfather telling a story about the early days of the automobile with "shiny new toy" charisma and old-school skepticism. The amount of information the author presents can be overwhelming and overwritten at times, but just like when using the Internet the book can be consumed in small chunks with the goal of allowing online users to become better informed and healthier digital citizens.

Laura Jennings is completing her Master's in Communication Technology at the School of Communication at Point Park University. She obtained her B.A. in journalism with a minor in history at Pennsylvania State University. She has more than 25 years of experience in newspapers, editing, design, and news websites. Her primary interests include social media, digital literacy, digital storytelling, and participatory culture. While pursuing her M.A. degree, she worked as a graduate assistant with the Point Park News Service and participated in the school's Wood Street Communications initiative. She supervised student writing, photography, and videography, as well as assisted the Pittsburgh region's nonprofits with social media and other communications.