Chapter 13
Establishing Credibility in the Information Jungle: Blogs, Microblogs, and the CRAAP Test

Dawn Emsellem Wichowski
Salve Regina University, USA

Laura E. Kohl
Bryant University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors locate blogs and microblogs such as Facebook and Twitter in the information landscape. They explore their diverse habitats and features, as well as the explosion of uses discovered for them by academic and journalistic researchers. The authors describe an approach to evaluating the quality of blogs and microblogs as information sources using the CRAAP test, and they show how a consideration of digital ethos in the application of the CRAAP checklist imbues the test with flexibility and effectiveness, and promotes critical thinking throughout the evaluation process. The chapter demonstrates how the special features of blogs can be leveraged for rigorous assessment. For the purpose of defining examples, it focuses on blogs and microblogs such as Facebook and Twitter, but the authors see their approach as having application across other yet-to-be developed platforms because of its flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we demonstrate that blogs and microblogs represent a significant source of information for researchers and contribute to scholarly and journalistic discourse. We show how blogs have characteristics that differentiate them from more traditional scholarly sources such as periodicals and monographs. We center the discussion around our assertion that expanding some of the criteria of the CRAAP test to encompass the concept of digital ethos makes the test applicable to social media applications like blogs. While some scholars argue that checklists like the CRAAP test are inappropriate and mechanistic evaluation tools, we refute this assessment, arguing that this checklist is a useful device especially for students new to research or scholars new to social media applications.
resources. We demonstrate how application of the CRAAP test can promote critical thinking. At the core of the chapter is the concept of digital ethos, which, as we apply it, contrasts with the model of authorship in traditional scholarly publications.

The concept of “digital ethos” plays a starring role in scholarship surrounding credibility on the Internet, whether in the fields of human-computer interaction, rhetoric, or information science (Flanagan & Metzger, 2007; Warnick, 2004; Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Enos & Borrowman, 2001; St. Amant, 2004; Marsh, 2006). “Digital ethos” diverges from traditional concepts of authorship in several significant ways. The credibility of authors of more traditional publications may be assessed by such measures as institutional affiliations, advanced degrees, and recognition in mainstream and scholarly press. The concept of digital ethos is more fluid. A blogger’s true identity and affiliation may be unknown. A blogger may actively hide his/her true identity to make candid observations. Or a blogger may choose to highlight interests in a blog which stray from his/her professional specialization. In traditional evaluation frameworks, sources created by authors with these characteristics would be considered unreliable. However, we leverage the CRAAP test criteria to account for these differences in author ethos and evaluate the sources according to the more progressive concept of digital ethos. In more traditional scholarly sources, proper use of grammar and vocabulary is a significant indicator of credibility. In a blog, authentic use of slang and cultural-specific idiom may be a better indicator of credibility. We address these differences, and how the CRAAP test is well suited to address them.

Our perspective as librarians contributed to our choice of the CRAAP test as a foundational tool for assessing the quality and authority of social media sources. Our positive experiences in the classroom using the CRAAP test to help students navigate the open web made it an obvious choice, and further comparison with other evaluation approaches confirmed this choice for us. This tool has been accepted and used by information literacy professionals for other pedagogical reasons. The most obvious attribute is its name. As a mnemonic device, the CRAAP test is effective. Sharing this tool in the classroom, we are often met with amused laughter. As its creator, Blakeslee, of California State University, Chico pointed out, it is memorable and works contextually when instructing users about evaluating a wide variety of resources. “For every source of information we would now have a handy frame of reference to inquire, ‘Is this CRAAP?’” (2004, p. 7). The test also incorporates all the widely accepted criteria for evaluating print and online resources.

A CRAAP Test Overview

The CRAAP test consists of five overarching criteria for evaluation: currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose. The application of checklists such as the CRAAP test are widely taught by professionals in the library and information literacy fields, particularly for evaluation of online resources, research papers, or other multi-step academic projects (Doyle & Hammond, 2006; Blakeslee, 2004; Dinkelman 2010).

Throughout the information literacy literature there are multitudes of lists of evaluation criteria based on similar concepts (Kapoun, 1998; Blakeslee, 2004; Doyle & Hammond, 2006; Burkhardt et al., 2010). Doyle and Hammond (2006) summed up the criteria contained in most tests: “to decide whether something can be trusted, we need to consider who thought it up, who made it accessible, what are their motives and biases, and what features, if any, might reassure us that the influence of these motives and biases are minimized” (p. 58).

We see the CRAAP test criteria as the most concise, flexible, and memorable evaluation tool of the series of checklist tests that have been proposed since the late 1990s (Kapoun, 1998; Blakeslee,