K to 12 Information Literacy: The Dark Side
Advertising, Forms, and Search Engine Optimization

Hey kid, wanna buy a videogame?
Hey you, lookee over here. I've got cheat codes.
Hey, sucker, why not just buy your essay?
Sign up here for a free mailing list.

It is essential that we teach information literacy skills to our learners – and today the younger the better. We are already getting great at teaching how to select great sources, directories and indexes, fulltext searching skills, advanced and introductory modes, and the evaluation of quality. We're getting better at warning our learners about the bad guys, the four horsemen of gambling, sex, stalkers, racists, and other bad guys in black hats. What do we need to focus on next?

This column is about some of the stuff we need to teach with which we are less comfortable, mostly because it doesn't involve information so much as manipulation. I'm talking about advertising literacy and media literacy in the web environment. It can also be quite contradictory. After all we accepted television advertising in return for free TV. Now we generally pay cable fees for access and still they're ads. We pay access fees for the Internet but we still see thousands of ads weekly. Are we ready for some of the more advanced advertising techniques coming down the wire? It's changing so fast we have to prepare our students to be aware of range of techniques already there. If we don't, who will?

After all, the Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered in its 2005 report that: “Some 38% of those who have used a search engine are aware that there are two different kinds of search results, some that are paid or sponsored and some that are not. The remaining 62% are not aware of this practice.” [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Searchengine_users.pdf] People can’t always tell what an ad on a search engine list is and what isn’t. What do sponsors bring us? NPR, PBS, Hallmark Hall of Fame . . . Sponsors often bring us the higher quality content! So who could blame search engine users for thinking that clicking on that sidebar link will bring them better content? I wonder how many apply their skills about judging bias and partisanship in ad links if they don’t even know it’s an ad.

Hands in Our Pockets
So, what would be the components of student learning to develop advertising and media literacy skills in the web environment? I think I'll call these alternative information literacy skills for now. I don't purport that this is anywhere near a complete top 10 list but these are the ten that I think are important to start with (I am sure you could add a dozen more!):

1. **Advertising in General**
   First of all let’s remember that advertising is not always evil. Think about charity drives for instance. Let’s also make sure we know that this is a big economic engine for the modern economy. Whether we like it or not, the cost of TV, the web, radio, and magazines such as this one would be prohibitive without ads. So we should start with a good discussion of the good and the bad of ads, the white hat and black hat advertisers, and the information component of ads. We should also remind our learners that ads don’t just sell products and services but can be used to sell ideas, political positions and lifestyles. Either way, the web has become a huge advertising medium. Indeed, Google alone recorded profits of over $1 billion in just the first quarter of 2007.

2. **Pop Up Ads**
   We are challenged daily by pop-up ads and pop-under ads and introductory pages using Flash technology. It’s only a matter of time before ads are introduced to YouTube, podcasts and other nextgen faves. Here’s a tool that every student needs to know how to use – the pop-up blocker on their search toolbar (almost every search engine offers a good one and they are commonly pre-installed now on home PC’s and many public PC stations. If they haven’t already installed one, they should. And then they need to know how to use it. Unfortunately, pop-ups have many valid uses and many website sign-ins and content arrives using pop-up technology, so blocking them permanently results in limited access to many useful websites. Sooo, we need to make sure they have the skills make their surfing more effective with blockers and can make good choices of when to block and unblock.

3. **AdWords**
   This is one of the least understood aspects of the web. Too many folks don’t understand that the ads delivered to them can be quite targeted and contextual. People, companies, charities and political parties choose to make sure that their ads are delivered in context to you as part of every search. Have your class learn more about AdWords from Google and the other ad programs from Yahoo!, Amazon, MSN, Ask, MySpace, Facebook, and more. It’s not hard to find out more. And knowing is half the battle. Have them learn to place an ad. Ask questions. What is your click worth – 5 cents, 25 cents, 42 dollars? Why? An aware searcher is a smart searcher.

4. **Search Engine Optimization**
   This is scarier than Ad Word. Ads in banner, sponsored links and pop-ups are clearer and above board. What about the entire search engine
optimization industry? Have your class learn more about SEO from websites like Search Engine Watch and Search Engine Land. Have them read the marketing websites for people who put themselves out for hire to organizations so that their sites appear in the top pages of hits. Help them to learn about white hat and black hat optimization. It’s one thing for Ford Motor Company to make sure they get top hits for their cars. It would be quite another thing for their competitors to use their name to highjack hits. Is it OK for the American Cancer Society to optimize searches to collect donations? Is it OK for a a quack to offer cures using their good name? These are the issues that must be understood and learned in class. Should special interest groups ensure that their positions are always on the top page of hits on issues like elections, gun control, abortion, evolution, death penalty, eminent domain, or any other topic of current interest. Should the results of search engine searches be subject to extreme manipulation? And by whom?

5. Wikipedia Entries
Wikipedia has the image of being the socially engaged encyclopedia. This is largely true. It’s very difficult to outright lie on the major pages of Wikipedia. About topics people care about, such as civil war history, it would be unusual for errors not to be corrected quickly. There are issues here too. How many pages in Wikipedia are put up by special interests? When a new page coincides with a major marketing campaign, should it be trusted? When the page is written by the organization that it’s about, it that authoritative? Maybe. Either way, these are opportunities to build critical thinking skills in our students.

6. YouTube
YouTube doesn’t have explicit ads in it - yet. Have your students find the ads. It’s a great awareness campaign. (Hint – look for the Dove real women videos.) Also, have them review the political videos for bias. All of the current US presidential campaign entrants have videos, sometimes several, on YouTube. Have them discuss the role of YouTube in influencing the election or presenting certain ideas. Have them review the anti-videos or satirical videos such as the famous Apple mashup about Hillary Clinton. Compare the raft of first person war footage from Iraq with videos that aren’t first person. Either way, you can have them learn through experience that YouTube isn’t Switzerland.

7. Sign Ups and Registration
This is one of the most important Internet literacy skills. When and how should we fill out forms and registrations on the web? How much information do websites need to permit access to their site? What is the minimum? Have them review the various registration forms that they encounter. Have them look at the registration forms for the major sites like MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, New York Times, CNN, etc. Are spam or mailing lists being built? Is this a permission-based marketing site? Then have them review the privacy policies. They’ll learn stuff. They’ll
be aware and they'll be engaged citizens. Let them learn that mailing lists can be forever. Is that Coupon worth it? Are those cheat codes for EverQuest or World of WarCraft worth it? Maybe, but the decision should be conscious. In older grades ask them how many e-mail ads they get from those university and scholarship registration sites. Just have a discussion.

8. **Product placement in PC Games and virtual worlds**
Are your learners aware of paid product placement? It goes beyond the can of Coke, that Apple PC and Toyota we might notice on our favourite television shows. It goes beyond the Reese’s Pieces in ET: The movie (M7M’s refused the placement as too expensive – oops). Law book publishers place their books and online services on TV dramas. Every major studio movie has hundreds of subtle but blatant ad promotions. Advanced product placement strategies are already showing up in PC games and Web gaming. Check out the Billboards in Second Life. Just being aware is a good start.

9. **Election Tools**
Here’s the list of web 2.0 tools that are purported to be the ones that have their digits on the pulse of the American public for the 2008 presidential election and major parties and candidates plan to use them to have an impact on the results:

1. YouTube
2. Second Life
3. MySpace
4. Facebook
5. Wikipedia
6. Ning
7. Twitter
8. Mozes
9. NowPublic
10. MyBlogLog

All of them are already in use by the major parties and candidates. Advertising and influence are getting more and more sophisticated. We need to create a more sophisticated generation of web and Internet users. That requires us to teach advertising and manipulation. Have them review these sites and find the politics. An informed citizenry is the basis of a good democracy.

10. **Lastly, just focus on Google.**
Google is the big Kahuna! Virtually everything about Google is a lesson for your learners. Google’s success is not about actual search, they’re just the best advertising sellers in the world. Many other sites deliver better information, display it better and get more traffic. Our learners deserve to know that and choose based on content, quality and need, and not just reward ad sales success.
Three Google Soundbites
Sometimes we need little soundbites to focus our conversations or get someone in our student or administration groups to think twice.

Soundbite number one:

Why would we follow the Google model on our website, portal or intranet? Google is very successful at selling ads but that's not the primary business of most libraries and librarians. We're more interested in looking at those sites that attract attention and users in the context of information, decisionmaking and learning. Sheesh - Yahoo! gets more hits than Google, over twice as many. They just aren't as good at ad sales.

Soundbite number two:

I heard of a neat study recently that Google is the most powerful brand name in the world. Number one! How powerful is it? Well, someone put the Google identity on top of the search results from the other search engines (like MSN, Yahoo!, Ask, etc.) and focus groups always preferred the Google results whether they were Google results or not! Hmmmm. So much for the informed end user!

I wonder what would happen if they saw better results displays such as those in Exalead, Clusty, KartOO, etc. in a Google brand? Would they notice the improvement? Is the brand so strong that users have stopped thinking? Will we need Coke vs. Pepsi blind taste tests to prove the differences?

Soundbite number 3:

Google finally passed one billion dollars in profit for the first quarter of 2007! Hmm - libraries don't pay much of that but some deliver up their users. Are we being clear enough on the power to manipulate Google search results? No one is paying US$ billions to be on page 100. When the Pew research showed that a very small minority of users went past the first page of hits or could even identify an ad on the results page, I worry. Sponsored Links!? Sponsors bring us NPR, PBS, Hallmark Hall of Fame and the better content. Hmmmm. The entire Search Engine Optimization industry (SEO) is doing very well ensuring that their clients’ stuff shows up on the first pages of links in the search engines and in particular Google.

So, how many libraries serve up their OPAC and database search results to special interest groups, politicians and advertisers to manipulate? Would we even been comfortable with white hat (vs. black hat) SEO? Is everyone differentiating the library strategies from the ad-based world of
search? Are we teaching it to our users? What component is it in our marketing mix?

As an aside, I have to add that amongst us chickens - teachers and librarians - we use the term information literacy to discuss an important topic at a professional level. Never use it with the civilians! For parents we can teach internet safety and homework success skills and attract good-sized audiences. For students we have to focus on their motivations, especially when these training sessions are optional. Here’s a challenge – brainstorm a list of good names for research skills training with your students and colleagues.

Either way, we don’t ask learners to admit to any level of illiteracy. They already have pretty high confidence in their skills and we can build on that. It’s just not good marketing to ask them to admit to illiteracy and to dig themselves out of a hole when we are really building on some good digital natives’ foundations. Imagine going to a Beauty Salon and having it called the "Ugly Salon" where you’ll be improved and you get the idea.

So, there you have it. It’s just a lesson or two reinvigorated every couple of years to make it stick. We’ll need to update it regularly. It seems that every day there’s a new way to attract our attention to some product, service, opinion or idea.

Now if they could just learn one thing and one thing only, that would be that your library – school, public, college or university – is your partner and an excellent source for non-partisan advice and answers, biased towards quality and your personal needs. That would be Information Utopia.

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