

An Online Activity Diary Method for Studying Credibility Assessment on the Web

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Introduction

In recent years people have moved beyond information searching and reading of online content in their use of the Web. Today, they are increasingly engaging in diverse activities including sharing photographs and videos, rating and reviewing products and services, and blogging about their interests and everyday life activities. According to a recent Pew report, 23% of American adults are “heavy tech adopters” who are more likely to undertake information activities involving the online sharing of information, posting comments to a website, creating their own web pages, working on blogs, and taking online materials for the purpose of remixing them (Horrigan, 2007).

Another recent Pew Internet study reports that the number of adult Web users who maintain a profile on an online social networking site has grown from 8% in 2005 to 35% in 2008 (Lenhart, 2009).

One of the consequences of increasing user participation on the Web is that today credibility assessment is situated in diverse online activities and contexts. A new set of credibility research questions arise, e.g. what are the credibility assessment heuristics employed during the decision process when contributing original content or posting content found elsewhere? Do these heuristics differ depending on whether users are creating their own online content or commenting on an online forum? Those users who undertake information activities for the purpose of contributing and mediating online content merit closer attention from credibility researchers, given they are to a great extent influencing other users as well as making the Web a more dynamic and interactive place. There exists little research that examines credibility assessment heuristics across the range of online activities on the Web.

This study examines credibility assessment in the Web 2.0 context as part of a research project funded by the MacArthur Foundation. The research activities involved in this project include: (1) Web-based online information activity diary survey, (2) phone interviews with participatory Web users, and (3) experimental studies to collect behavioral data pertinent to the application of credibility assessment heuristics in the processes of information seeking and content creation. This poster reports on the first research activity: the use of the online activity diary method for studying credibility assessment.

This study specifically addresses the following research questions:

1. What credibility assessment heuristics have emerged across a variety of online activities?
2. What is the relationship between use of credibility assessment heuristics and a user's motivation for participating in an online activity?
3. What is the relationship between use of credibility assessment heuristics and a user's goal for participating in an online information activity?
4. What is the relationship between use of credibility assessment heuristics and a user's confidence in his/her credibility assessment ability?
5. What is the relationship between use of credibility assessment heuristics and a user's satisfaction with an online information activity?

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study arises from two related methodologies: the diary study method and the experience sampling method (ESM) (Kubey, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Diary studies have been previously employed in credibility assessment studies (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). While widely used in disciplines such as psychology, communication, and HCI (Palen & Salzman, 2002), ESM is a relatively new method in information science. An ESM participant responds to a researcher's signal, such as a phone ring or beeper, administered several times per day at random intervals, whereupon the participant completes a questionnaire, often in the form of an interview. In contrast, with diary studies the participant controls when and what to enter in the diary. The common goal in both methodologies is to capture data about the current activities and subjective states of people under naturalistic conditions.

This study employs a Web-based information activity diary survey. Similarly to ESM studies, a study participant responds to a signal from the researcher, in this case an email linked to an online activity diary form. Email is sent five times a day (9:00 am, 12:30 pm, 4:00 pm, 7:00 pm, and 10:00 pm) over a period of three days (Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday) for a total of 15 email reminders. Participants are required to respond to at least three of these emails per day, resulting in a minimum of 9 (but up to 15) activity diary entries from each participant. Participants thus exercise some control over the completion of their information activity diary forms.

A random sample of about 350 Michigan residents in the United States will be recruited by the Survey Research Operations department in the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan. Data collection will take place from April through June of 2009. Participants will be compensated for their participation in the study. In order to collect data on a diverse range of online activities, participants will be screened for regular Internet use, operationalized as Internet access both at home and outside the home (e.g., work or school), and daily use of the Internet for purposes other than email. The goal is to obtain a comprehensive picture of what people do on the Web.

Two types of questionnaires are completed by participants: a background questionnaire completed once at the beginning of the study, and an online activity diary completed multiple times during the duration of the study. The background questionnaire asks for demographic data such as gender, age, educational attainment and occupation, as well as Internet use characteristics and self-assessment of skill levels on various types of online activities. The online activity diary collects data on specific online activities and credibility assessments related to these activities. By asking questions regarding a specific online activity (e.g. the purpose of the activity), as well as questions about the participant's credibility assessment processes (e.g. the credibility assessment heuristics employed for that activity), relationships between online

activities and credibility assessment processes can be identified. The credibility-related questions identify how construct, heuristics, and interaction levels of credibility (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008) relate to each other in the process of assessing the credibility of information in the participatory Web environment.

Next Steps

Data analysis will be conducted during summer of 2009. Data will be analyzed to examine credibility assessment of the construct, heuristics, and interaction levels across various types of online activities as well as across a range of participating Web users. Users' credibility assessments will be characterized across different contexts of online activity (work and everyday life) and different purposes (information seeking and content creation), by collecting data multiple times each day on the behavior of heavy Web users. One of the anticipated results is the construction of a typology of online activities and associated credibility assessment heuristics. Similarly, a typology of purposes/goals and associated credibility assessment heuristics is expected to emerge. A typology of users based on people's orientation towards particular credibility assessment heuristics will also result from this study.

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