



Rethinking Information

I've observed an unexpected effect of our current "uncertain times"—an increased willingness to reexamine many of our traditional routines and practices. Staying at home and, if we're lucky, working remotely require that we rethink virtually all our daily activities. For librarians and information professionals, this also means looking more closely at information—what it is, how we find it, and what we do with it.

SLA recently conducted a vote to approve proposed changes to its bylaws. One modification was the removal of the word "written" from the requirement for an annual financial report. A discussion ensued around how to require a permanent record of the report and what concepts were encompassed by the word "written." Would this preclude an oral report, with or without a transcript? What about a slide deck? Would the text on the slides be considered "written"? My gut instinct would be to define a written report as a permanent record of some combination of text and graphics in a commonly used format (DOCX, PDF, PPTX). Fortunately, I wasn't involved in the difficult task of drafting the bylaws revisions, but this did get me thinking about the impact of this ambiguity of what constitutes written content on our ability to conduct online research.

For starters, there is the issue of disappearing or changing content on the web and social media. Inflammatory tweets can be posted just long enough to go viral and then get deleted, offering at least some semblance of deniability: "Oh, as soon as I realized how awful that tweet was, I deleted it." Likewise, screenshots of fake tweets are circulated by people eager to share an apparent "gotcha" of a politician or celebrity. (Regardless of one meme's wide distribution, no, Donald Trump did not tweet in 2009 that he "would never let thousands of Americans die from a pandemic," even though the meme shows what looks like a real screenshot of the tweet.) While I have a smidgen of confidence that social media platforms can catch at least the most egregious deepfake videos, a faked screenshot in a viral meme often escapes algorithmic notice. Adding to the confusion is the dismaying proliferation of the web-scraping aggregator sites such as ResearchGate.net and FindWhitePapers.com that, while perhaps not illegal, often skirt the intentions of intellectual property protections.

As searchers, we need to continually reevaluate our choices of information sources. The considerations involved with social media and non-traditional sources become only more complicated with time. If we cannot be certain that an im-

age is an accurate representation of reality, how do we present it to our client or patron? If we provide content from social media that might later become inaccessible, are we responsible for archiving a record of the content? Likewise, if we find an archived version of content in, say, archive.org that no longer appears on the web, can we share that with our client?

Another information format that is continuing to challenge online researchers is video, and particularly—given its coverage—YouTube content. Recently, a competitive intelligence (CI) searcher described to me her conundrum when searching YouTube for information on a company. She came across a priceless interview on a local television station with an executive who perhaps over-shared about his company's internal sales goals and strategies—CI gold! The CI searcher's concern was in managing her client's expectations about what other YouTube content she could find. Since most videos do not have searchable full-text transcripts attached, a query will only retrieve content when the search terms are in the title or description of the video. Sure, she could use an automatic transcription service to generate a text version of individual video content, but she would first have to locate that content which, without good metadata, is not easily findable. She struggles to explain to all her CI clients about difference between serendipitously finding a YouTube gem and conducting a comprehensive search of YouTube content.

Her concern extends to all of us as we expand our resources to include more grey literature, social media, podcasts, slide decks, and other non-traditional content. If we include one YouTube video, do we include a footnote explaining that there may be other videos but the time required for a thorough search would have been prohibitive? Do we decide not to worry about explaining the concepts of recall, precision, and comprehensive searching, as long as we know that what we find will address the client's information need? Will their eyes glaze over if we natter on about the limitations of each information resource, or is this the time when it is even more important to discuss the information landscape?

In uncertain times, info pros can offer greater understanding of information sources, if not greater certainty in our search results.

Mary Ellen Bates (mbates@BatesInfo.com, *Reluctant-Entrepreneur.com*) wonders when she'll quit asking all these questions.

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