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ABSTRACT: The author argues that recent data suggesting an emerging culture of gullibility among young Internet users is best explained by the latter's non-culpable misapplication of common testimonial norms to Internet settings. The author further argues for the likelihood that the norms relative to such settings will gradually change, basing this upon research done on the types of norms of trust that tend to evolve in repeated transactions involving significant informational asymmetries.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, college-age, credibility, gullibility, judgment, information literacy, Internet, lemons markets, testimony

1. INTRODUCTION

We all have our anecdotes. The bright young student who wrote her paper on immigration reform, relying on cached pages from what turns out to be a White Power website. The sincere young activist who argues that adoption is dangerous for children, based on statistics compiled by an organization proclaiming on its (unread) homepage that it opposes the interference of the state in what it calls the sanctity of the biological family.

And not all of our anecdotes are so rarefied or are confined to academia. There is the modern Moll Flanders who goes looking for a paramour through a Facebook page complete with a fake name, a fake occupation, and a photo from a fashion model website and is stupefied when she discovers that the young man that she has managed to snag through this method has engaged in a parallel deception. There is the enterprising high school boy from a Milwaukee suburb who manages to persuade thirty-one of his male fellow students to send him images of themselves nude: this based solely on the high school boy's representation of himself in an online chat room as a high school girl (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Feb. 10, 2009).

"What's going on here?" we ask ourselves. Even high school boys must surely know that not everyone who claims to be something or other actually is that something or other. Even they must surely know as well that looking at typed letters on a screen is not a particularly effective way of determining whether what one says about ones bodily attributes is true. By the same token, it seems a natural assumption that if a person has

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evolved a strategy for deviously exploiting the relative anonymity of the Internet, that that person would be wary of the use of such a strategy by others and would in some way prepare for or at least anticipate it.

More to the point, in terms of what I will be talking about in this paper, given the incredible ease with which a traditionally-aged college student can access a planet-wide compendium of useful information, it is jarring to see some apparently unable to click one page away from the page on which they discovered the data that they were looking for to check for the mission statement of the organization offering that data or in some way to verify the organization's *bona fides*. The best explanation for this is probably that they saw no need. And that is perhaps the most jarring thing of all.

These are just anecdotes. But in the last few years, more and more data has been compiled on how traditionally-aged college students (ages 18-21), and young people in general, use Internet sources for recreation and socialization, as well as for research and other argumentative purposes. With respect to the latter, which will be the primary focus of this paper, one very common interpretation of this data is negative. It is that the subject group as a whole tends to be, as I shall call it, gullible with respect to these sources. That is, they appear to act in accordance with certain common norms with regard to these sources' authoritative or evidential value that are in an important sense rationally suspect or degraded. Some popular commentators have even gone so far as to see this data as supporting a thesis of an emerging culture of youth gullibility with respect to the Internet—a "dumbest generation" as one writer has deemed it (Bauerlein 2008)—with dire consequences for rational argumentation and civic discourse in an increasingly Internet-dominated age.

It is the thesis of this paper, however, that—anecdotes notwithstanding—such fears are misplaced and that the apparent gullibility of college-age Internet users is best explained by their application of a set of norms for testimonial reliability that are well-founded in many other contexts, but that are often inappropriate when applied to online encounters. In what follows, I will seek to provide an outline of these norms and show how acting in accordance with them would produce the phenomenon in question. In addition, I would like to make a prediction. For it is my belief that we are probably in the midst of an emerging amendment of these norms relative to certain Internet contexts. I base this on some more recent data on the use of the Internet by the target population and on the predictive power of a particular model of information use and exchange which I think captures well what is often going on in cases of this kind.

2. EVIDENCE OF THE PROBLEM

The first thing to know about the research that has been done on this topic is that researchers have not always had in their sights the same quarry. Some researchers, for example, Metzger and Flanagin (2007) and Rieh and Hilligan (2007), have been interested in exploring what they call student credibility assessments. That is, they have been interested in examining how it is that students make the judgment that one Internet website manifests or communicates expertise and trustworthiness to a greater degree than another. They pay special attention to those standards of credibility that they deem to be appropriate in cases of this kind—accuracy, comprehensiveness, professionalism, sponsor credentials, the content of policy or mission statements, the use of advertising, and firm or author reputation—and determine to what extent students cite these as a basis for their judgments (Metzger & Flanagin 2007, p. 18).

Other researchers, such as those working for the Educational Testing Service (ETS), are looking for something broader. They are investigating the extent to which college-age students are embodying something they call Information and Communications Technology (ICT) literacy. A student is reckoned by these researchers to have this form of literacy when they have successfully completed a set of fifteen separate tasks on a standardized seventy-five-minute test. Some of the tasks—such as determining a website's objectivity and identifying trustworthy sources—clearly overlap with the work being done on credibility assessments. Others—such as organizing emails and files into appropriate folders and ranking webpages according to a variety of arbitrarily selected standards—clearly do not (*ICT Literacy Assessment* 2006).

Still other researchers get at the topic more indirectly. This includes Grazioli and Jarvenpaa (2000) and Yamagishi and Matsuda (2002), who investigate the question of student credibility assessments by studying patterns of student risk-taking in relation to online sites, surreptitiously invented by the study authors, offering the subjects various products and investment opportunities.

However, despites these differences in focus and extent, when it comes to those areas where they do overlap, the stories told by these researchers and others like them are remarkably similar. In November 2006, when the Educational Testing Service gathered together over six thousand traditionally-aged college students and administered their seventy-five-minute exam, they found that, while most of the students knew that dot-edu and dot-gov sites tend to be less biased than dot-coms, only about half, in the judgment of the researchers, were able to correctly judge the objectivity of a given site when "selecting a research statement for a class assignment" (*ICT Literacy Assessment* 2006). Irvin Katz, the senior scientist at ETS, put it this way: "While college-age students can use technology, they don't necessarily know what to do with the content technology provides" (Bauerlein 2008, p. 116). In 2005, when the educational policy group EDUCAUSE did its "ECAR Study of Students and Information Technology 2005: Convenience, Control, and Learning," they discovered that there was among their subjects an inverse relation between a student's technological aptitude and his or her level of comfort or ability with respect to manipulating or evaluating content (ECAR Study of Students and Information Technology 2005, Executive Summary). It is information such as this that has led one California webdesign consulting firm, the Nielsen Norman Group, to advise its clients to make the language of their youth-directed websites sound as objective and evidence-based as possible, so that "users don't suffer the added cognitive burden of distinguishing fact from bias and exaggeration" (Bauerlein 2008, p. 151).

And there's more. According to a study of over 2500 college-age participants done by Fogg, et al (2003), the single most crucial element for a student in determining whether or not a website is credible is how it is designed, which includes the quality of its graphics, the beauty of its layout, its navigability, and its overall functionality (Rieh & Hilligan, 2007, p. 63). According to a study reported by Thacker in his article "Are College Students Techno Idiots?" (2006), less than one percent of all Google searches by college-age students extend beyond the second page of results, despite the students' knowledge that such entries are ranked purely on the basis of how many hits each one receives. In a study of eighty college-age students in the year 2000, Grazioli and

Jarvenpaa discovered that when it came to providing third party seals of approval for their products or services, Internet vendors did not need to provide these subjects with evidence that their corroborators were independent—or even that their corroborators had approved of the vendor's claims. The vendor's assertion on the company website that their corroborators were independent and approved of the vendor was enough. A similar experiment by Yamagishi and Matsuda (2002) suggested that, for this population, even high risk for a buyer does not tend to be associated with a request for evidence about the corroborator's *bona fides*. So long as the subject has heard nothing negative about the corroborator—even when she or he has heard nothing about the corroborator either way—the subject will tend to accept the vendor's assertion of corroborator independence and approval.

For those worried about an emerging culture of youth gullibility, the Grazioli and Jarvenpaa study is especially troubling. For what Grazioli and Jarvenpaa did in their study was to set up a fake website, complete with a fake seal of approval from the Better Business Bureau. They then directed their student participants to "buy" products and services from this and other websites, if they so chose, based upon their judgments of those sites' trustworthiness. (The students, you'll be happy to know, did not spend any real money in these transactions. There was, however, among the students, some social stigma attached to spending one's notional dollars foolishly. This provided what the researchers deemed a significant enough risk to make the study informative.)

But there was a twist to the experiment. For what Grazioli and Jarvenpaa also did was to create a link on their fake website, through their fake Better Business Bureau graphic, to the actual website of the Better Business Bureau, which was collaborating with the researchers. On this website, an enterprising student could easily discover both that the fake website was a fake website and that the Better Business Bureau had not given the website its seal of approval. And yet, even in this experimental situation, where some risk was attached to making the wrong decision and the evidence necessary to demonstrate the falsity of the website's claims was only a click away, only eight out of eighty students availed themselves of this option. Indeed, out of the eighty student participants in this study, seventy-six percent ended up ordering one of the products advertised on the bogus site (Grazioli & Jarvenpaa 2000, p. 403). It is research such as this that has led Metzger and Flanagin (2007, p. 18) to conclude "Empirical studies […] find that credibility is not a primary concern of young people when using digital media."

Now I know what you're thinking. Where's the control group? Where's the evidence in all of this that justifies even an initial claim of an emerging culture of *youth* gullibility as opposed to gullibility across the board. And the answer is: there isn't any. For all we know, a gaggle of eighty fifty-five year olds would have been just as likely to buy whatever items were being purveyed on Grazioli and Jarvenpaa's sham website as sixty-one eighteen to twenty-one year olds were. The difference, the advocates of the youth gullibility thesis would say, is that the fifty-five year olds are still also operating with other media and other standards, which have structured their reactions differently. For example, according to Beltramini and Stafford (1993), older Americans are more likely than younger ones to be aware of the existence of the various organizations, like the Better Business Bureau, that provide seals of approval and of the reasons behind their claims of independence. Older individuals are also more likely to use books, magazines, and newspapers as their primary sources of entertainment, edification, and information about the world. And, in doing so, they are more likely to accept the implicit “gradation for quality” that is involved at every step of their publication and distribution (Bauerlein 2008, p. 159).

Contrast this, however, with the vast majority of eighteen to twenty-one year olds, for whom the Internet has become the almost exclusive source for all of the above, with its incredible “democratization” of knowledge and access. According to a study by the National School Boards (July 2007), the use of the Internet by college age students expands every year, with thirty percent of students with online access running their own blogs. According to a report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001), one-half of all US teenagers are “content creators,” making webpages, posting art, photographs, fiction, and videos online. And this trend is only going to continue with the next generation. For, according to the 2003 Kaiser Study of Entertainment Media and Health, six month to six year old children already spend as much time looking at a screen as they do playing outside (about two hours a day). And fifty-four percent of eight to eighteen year olds daily spend forty-eight minutes of their time online.

In addition, it is argued, what alternative models of communication and communication assessment students do have available to them are mostly imposed upon them through structures and by institutions that are external to their immediate social milieu: in other words, colleges and universities. And while such entities, through their curricular offerings, may emphasize the need for slowing down the process of research and for double-checking on sources found on the Internet, this seems barely to have made a dent in students’ use of these resources outside of the classroom setting, where the best evidence suggests that they prize above all “time [that is, speed], convenience, access, familiarity with resources/systems and so on” (Rieh & Hilligan 2007, p. 57). As one commentator puts it, summarizing the data along these lines, students believe that “the things that have traditionally been done—you know, reflection and thinking and all that stuff—are in some ways too slow for the future” (Prensky, in Bauerlein 2008, p. 87).

So is there an emerging culture of youth gullibility or isn’t there? This is an empirical question that, as a philosopher, I am not professionally qualified to answer. I am, however, qualified to answer a different sort of question (or at least I am qualified enough to have my attempt to answer this different sort of question treated with an initial degree of interest and respect.) And that is the question: if college-age students were engaging in the activities suggested by this data, would that necessarily be a bad thing? More to the point, would it be evidence for the claim that they were all being gullible, that their standards of evaluating evidence based upon testimony (or authority) were lax or degraded? As I have already indicated, I do not think so. In such a situation, some would no doubt have degraded standards, but some might not. And the ones that didn’t would not necessarily be the ones that were doing something different in this situation from what’s being described. That’s my claim and I would now like to argue for it.

3. THE NATURE OF TESTIMONY

Out of the various pieces of evidence presented in the last section that have been offered in favor of the claim of youth gullibility, let us focus on the following four, which I take to be—and I think you would agree are—the most damaging:

- In a recent series of tests, half of all college-age participants were unable to judge the "objectivity" of a given website.
- In a recent survey, the single most crucial element for college-age students in determining whether or not a website is credible is how well it is designed.
- In a recent study, less than one percent of all Google searches by college-age students extended beyond the second page of results, despite the fact that they knew these are arranged solely by the total number of hits.
- In a recent experiment, only eight out of eighty college age participants checked the *bona fides* of a third party seal of approval on a vendor website, where a bad purchase entailed a level of embarrassment or exposure.

Is there a way of understanding the nature of testimony that would be consistent with a non-gullibilistic interpretation of these students' actions? I believe that there is when we think about what people communicate to one another and what each can learn through this process in terms of the commitments that communicators undertake when they take the trouble to make an assertion and what can potentially occur when these commitments are lightly or deceptively engaged in.

This, what we can call, "Commitment View of Testimony" is, of course, one that I have had the opportunity to advocate for in the past. Conceiving of it in its most basic or familiar form, the View's proponents are committed to picturing testimonial interaction, in the words of my colleague Fred Kauffeld, as consisting of:

> (i) a speaker who serves as the *Testimony Source (S)* and an addressee(s) to whom the testimony is given, the *Testimony Recipient (R)*; (ii) a statement which serves as *S*'s testimony; (iii) an expression of *S*'s consent to critical examination of her statement(s); and (iv) *S*'s pledge to speak truthfully (Kauffeld & Fields 2005, p. 233).

There are two unique elements in the Commitment View of Testimony. One is the contention that there exists a deep connection between S's act of making the statement referred to in (ii) and S's acts of consenting to an examination of her statement(s) and of pledging to speak truthfully. Although these can, of course, be discrete, explicit acts in certain testimonial encounters, characterized by separate, overt guarantees (Kauffeld gives the example of a statement by former Enron executive Kristina Mordaut to show what this would look like (2005, p. 233)), in many cases, they are not. In those cases, it is maintained, it is the act of testifying itself, of "deliberately and openly" asserting that something is the case, that signals to the testimony recipient R that S is also speaking with "the intention of answering investigator's objections" and the intention to communicate that she "attests to the veracity of her testimony" (Kauffeld & Fields 2005, pp. 233-234).

The reason why this act of testifying can operate in this way on the Commitment View of Testimony (indeed, one might say, the reason why we can think of it as an act of testifying in the first place) has to do with the pragmatic context in which S makes her assertion: a context that S is aware of and understands that R is aware of and understands that R understands that S is aware of and understands that R is aware of, and so on. This is the context in which Rs everywhere—a role that all of us are in at some point in time—are attempting "to collect and evaluate statements as evidence bearing on *R*'s inquiry into matters of serious concern to *R*" (Kauffeld & Fields, 2005, p. 235). Because such inquiries can "rarely be conducted entirely on the basis of [the] inquirer's first hand experience," the collaboration of others is needed. But this reliance on others creates a practical difficulty, for "persons responsible for a serious inquiry typically cannot just accept what others are willing to tell them on the basis of the other's say so" (Kauffeld & Fields 2005, p. 235). And those that are potential testifiers are as aware of this as those that are engaged in the various inquiries, as was just mentioned.

For R, one way out of this practical difficulty would be to grill each of her potential sources beforehand to establish his or her sincerity and competence. But this would not be a very productive way in which to proceed. As we can see from actual conversational interactions, issues of honor and respect immediately come into play on those occasions where an individual's trustworthiness is called into question. The potential S in such a case may well simply withdraw from such an interaction, thinking, as Kauffeld puts it, "If you're not going to believe what I say, what's the point of answering your questions?" (Kauffeld & Fields 2005, p. 236) Moreover, conceptually, the attempt to engage in this sort of investigation seems confused. For if, in doing so, R is relying upon S's word to establish whether S's word is to be relied upon, the danger of a vicious circle arises. On the other hand, if R is relying upon the word of others to establish this, then the question arises of whether R ought not to cross-examine these other sources first, raising the spectre of an infinite regress (cf. Coady 1992, pp. 79-100).

So what is required instead in such a case is a solution that both allows R to rely upon S and allows this in a way that does not force R to try to establish beforehand S's credibility. And that, according to the proponents of the Commitment View of Testimony is the solution that we find in the situation just described. S, knowing the quandary that R is in and wanting to convince R that what S says is true, undertakes to assure R of S's trustworthiness in the only practical way that S can. That is by openly taking responsibility for what S maintains. Sometimes this is done overtly, as in the Kristina Mordaut case. But in other circumstances it must be the case that it is intended and understood. For why else would S imagine that S could be successful in S's attempt to relay p to R? Why else would R be willing to learn p from S unless S's commitment was understood: that is, unless S had through her very assertion raised the "unsettling risk of exposure" that functions to reassure R that S is honest? (Kauffeld & Fields 2005, p. 236)

The other unique element of this View is the assertion that that is what testimonial evidence consists of—claims made in this way, within this sort of pragmatic context. Going back to Locke and Hume, philosophers have searched for the special warrant that justifies taking what someone else has said as a rational basis for making certain sorts of claims about the world, claims not based upon one's own memory or perceptions. And the answers that they have come up with have been many. Some have seen this warrant in a general principle of charity that we must all embrace as a necessary precondition for the possibility of language (Coady 1992, pp. 152-176). Others have seen a more specific warrant arising in those situations where a speaker successfully survives an ongoing, though not terribly grueling, assessment in terms of trustworthiness done by a hearer or addressee (Fricker 1994, p. 145). Still others have held that there is no warrant to be found here, either general or specific, and that testimony as a species of evidence must always be checked against the beliefs provided through other, more fundamental, evidential channels.

Again, I have had occasion to defend the Commitment Theory of Testimony on this score in the past and I do not wish to rehearse those arguments here (Kauffeld & Fields 2005; Fields 2007). Suffice it to say that, as I see it, the View has two things going for it in this regard. It is much more feasible as a description of what people actually do and what options they seem to have available to them than the alternatives (see especially my discussion of Elizabeth Fricker in Fields 2007). And it can be made consistent with certain common notions of what evidence consists of. All that one need do is remind oneself that an openly undertaken commitment on the part of a testimonial source S can be seen as evidence in favor of S's trustworthiness and that this can in turn be defined as an ongoing disposition or propensity to reliably reflect and transmit the apparent truth of the world around us (Kauffeld & Fields 2005, pp. 240-241).

So, what does this Commitment View of Testimony have to tell us about the question of potential youth gullibility? As I see it, a great deal. Notice, first of all, that the motive force of this View is the concept of reputation. Reputation, on this View, is the only thing that a testimonial source S has to offer an addressee or recipient R that would help to convince R that S is cooperating with R in achieving at least some of R's epistemic and doxastic goals. By openly espousing certain claims and thereby inviting further inspection, S makes herself potentially vulnerable to embarrassment, scorn, even ridicule. She risks the likelihood of losing her reputation, of being designated by her peers as an unreliable collaborator in their respective searches, either with respect to some specific situations and subject matter or more generally.

This would seem to be a powerful token and guarantor of S's cooperation. And it seems especially powerful when we consider the extent to which violations of trust and confidence are communicated between and among us and swiftly—though usually informally—punished (Livingstone Smith 2004, p. 140). By the same token, it seems an even more powerful avowal to those that are receiving it, when they also have no evidence that the speaker's reputation is not spotless. Given the alacrity with which a reputation for incompetence or insincerity spreads and the intensity of negative feelings that it tends to occasion, the absence of evidence of a bad reputation on the part of one who is testifying seems an especially compelling warrant for accepting what that individual has said. And this seems especially true in those cases where the speaker is engaged in communication with a great many individuals at the same time, where the likelihood of someone being able to discover a flaw in what the speaker has said is greatly enhanced.

At this point, you can probably already see where I am going to go next. Consider the claim that less than one percent of all Google searches by college-age students extend beyond the second page of results. Why is this so terrible? One completely plausible way of construing this is that these students see these sites as the ones that have survived the wear and tear of the ongoing reputation game. The authors of the content on these sites, in their eyes, have openly made a variety of claims; people from all over the world have read these claims and talked about them with their friends, family, fellow students, and fellow Internet users; and the result has been that (a) many, many people have flocked to that site, and (b) many of those who might have gone to another site, and moved it up the scale, didn't. In other words, the relative level of scorn, ridicule, and rejection is also fairly low.

The situation is similar for the fake Better Business Bureau logo. It is true that the students involved in that experiment did not click on this image to determine if it was genuinely bestowed. But then, why would they have suspected that the logo was a fake? It was displayed openly on the site—and indeed, as it turned out, with the approval of the Better Business Bureau. And if the logo had not been on a fake website, concocted for the purpose of their experiment by Grazioli and Jarvenpaa, it seems reasonable to assume that someone would have caught that the graphic was fake, let's say when they attempted to buy something from it and went to the Better Business Bureau for satisfaction. One could, of course, fault the students for their assumption that they were dealing with a genuine vendor's site. But this seems unfair. If I assume about my dog, based on everything that I can observe about him, that he is perfectly healthy, I certainly have made a mistake if he turns out to have distemper. But I think that I have only gotten one thing wrong here: the state of the dog's health. I don't think that I have also failed in another task: to do, at every moment, a complete physical to ascertain the dog's continued well-being.

The other two cases are slightly different, but involve similar sorts of problems. Take the case of the study indicating that college-age students see a website's design features as the single most crucial element in determining its credibility. Let's assume for the moment that that is true. On the surface, it sounds horrible—students going for all flash and no substance, a Twenty-First century redux of the ancient conflict between Socrates and the sophists. And yet when we focus on the notion of commitment, on the idea that a speaker, if intent on reaching a particular audience, will do what is pragmatically necessary to bring this about, improved design elements and positive student responses to them do not seem all that surprising. It takes time, effort, and/or money to create good design, or to buy the apps that enable one to do so. Were this all in the service of something of no account, or that could be quickly rejected, it would be a waste. It would be analogous to (though admittedly not identical with) the sort of negative effect on reputation that can occur when one stakes one's reputation on something false or misleading. It would constitute a substantive penalty on the speaker: or at least it is consistent with their not being gullible that students see it in this way.

Finally, when it comes to judging the objectivity of a website, a variety of questions arise. Is objectivity the same thing as reliability? One can easily imagine a site that had as part of its mission statement to be objective, but that actually made more mistakes in what it presented than the one with a declared bias. Is it the same as claiming to be objective or what is generally regarded as being objective? Because, if it is either of these, then the basis upon which a student would have to determine that a site is objective is the site's reputation in that regard. In the first case this would involve determining whether or not the site was living up to its profession. And in the second it would involve determining what other people were saying about it. The fact that a student would not know how to answer with respect to either of these would certainly indicate a gap in that student's knowledge, a gap that may well need to be filled. But it would not necessarily indicate a gap in or a degradation of that student's epistemic standards. After all, because we are not born knowing all, we must gradually learn whom to trust and whom not to trust through experience—often painful experience—and the fruits thereof. As Thomas Reid famously put it:

> The infant, by proper nursing, and care, acquires strength to walk without support. Reason hath likewise her infancy, when she must be carried in arms; then she leans entirely upon authority, by natural instinct, as if she were conscious of her own weakness; and, without this support, she

> becomes vertiginous. When brought to maturity by proper culture [however], she begins to feel her own strength, and leans less upon the reason of others; she learns to suspect testimony in some cases, and to disbelieve it in others; and sets bounds to that authority to which she was at first entirely subject. (Reid 1997, p. 194)

4. THE FORCE OF EXPERIENCE

So I do not think that students are necessarily gullible if they are responding to information on the Internet in the ways that these studies indicate. But I am not entirely ready to let traditionally-aged college students off the hook nonetheless. For it may still be the case that they are incredibly ignorant about how the world works in general and in specific about what is going on the Internet. And this ignorance could itself be an explanation for why students use the Internet in the ways that they are alleged to do and it could also be something for which they are at least partially culpable.

Think about Thomas Reid's comments about the infant's slow progression to intellectual maturity. The most important catalyst for this process, to Reid's mind, is "proper culture," which he defines elsewhere as "knowledge of human life, and of the manners and characters of men" (Reid 1997, p. 194). Why is this so important? For the simple reason that without a "knowledge of human life, and of the manners and characters of men," the best principles in the world, moral or epistemic, can be most grievously misapplied. If it is a proper principle of testimony, for example, that one take into consideration the reputation of a speaker, not knowing enough about the world to know what the speaker's reputation is a significant impediment to gaining justified beliefs about the world. In addition, and on a grander scale, it constitutes an effective short-circuiting of the one element of a speaker's commitment to what he or she has to say that packs any sort of genuine punch.

And so one needs to know what is going on. One needs to know that there are White Power websites out there and what their reputation for reliability might be. One needs to become familiar in general with the difference in reputation between various academic journals and personal blogs. One needs to realize the extent to which the relative anonymity of the Internet makes it harder to track the reputation of its various participants and ask what this might do to the level of commitment with which those participants make the various claims that they do.

I am in general optimistic that, as the Internet ages, and as those that use it age and gain more practical knowledge, whatever mismatches currently exist between principle and practice will gradually get worked out. For I am a firm believer in the self-correcting nature of systems containing vast asymmetries in information. In such systems, sometimes called "lemons markets," there exists an endemic tendency towards misrepresentation. But there also exists a tendency towards a modification of those asymmetries that are present, based on the threat of withdrawal from the market on the part of those that have been burned (Akerlof 1970, p. 489). To some extent, this has already been felt in the area of Internet dating, which has seen many changes in the last few years. It is reflected as well in some of the most recent work with students in how they use the Internet. A 2005-2006 study with students at the University of Michigan, for example, revealed that, after consistent use involving both personal *and* academic searches, participants began to slowly develop their own private reputation rankings for sites in terms of credibility. So, for example, one student in the study, looking for a

Halloween costume idea, went to Google, specifically because the information there is so general. Another, in doing research for a paper on the Gulf War, said that he went to Wikipedia specifically because he was dealing with what he called "an encyclopedia topic" (Rieh & Hilligan 2007, p. 56).

We as educators can help in this gradual process. That is because it is we who have the knowledge and the expertise to guide students in that knowledge of "the manners and characters of men" (and women!) that they so often desperately need. But no purpose is served, in my opinion, in chiding students or clucking our tongues over what is purported to be a devastating deterioration in rational standards. Indeed, such chiding and clucking seems ill-founded. The standards are fine. It's just the knowledge background that's needed to make them work that needs some improvement.

Link to commentary

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