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How the library better can support students to analyze and evaluate sources when using popular media platforms

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Abstract:

Printed material is no longer the only source for information. The media landscape of today consists more and more of films, vlog and video. Despite this, printed sources are often the only referred to in the students' academic work. Umeå University Library conducted interviews and workshops with student groups from different disciplines. From this we learned that the library can play a crucial role to facilitate guidance to evaluate the reliability and credibility of films and how to cite different online sources.

Together with HUMlab we aim to develop a new way of guiding the students in source criticism, both in technical and pedagogical aspects.

Keywords: source criticism, film, references, digital pedagogy

Background

The amount of and access to material available on popular media platforms, films on news sites, vlogs etc. has increased and pose new challenges for both educators and students. One challenge regard how we analyze, evaluate and refer to this kind of material. Traditionally the library has focused on educating students in evaluating printed and textbased material. We now face a media landscape where students to a larger extent use different kinds of sources both in their studies and in their future professional careers. How do the students evaluate the reliability and credibility of these sources and their content?

To tackle the educational issues of source criticism, Umeå University Library and HUMlab have established a collaboration. HUMlab works within the fields of humanities, culture and information technology at Umeå University. Umeå University Library is the largest academic research library in Northern Sweden with 33 000 students.

Start of the project

We started the project by conducting two pilot interviews, asking student groups questions about literacy, source criticism and film. One finding was that students often have established search strategies, starting their search broadly using Google. Another common way to find information is to search for sources recommended by teachers. These recommendations are considered credible. The students also viewed films differently than text-based sources. They could use film as a complement to a difficult text or as inspiration. The students found it difficult to evaluate the reliability and credibility of sources in general and film in particular. It was suggested that the library can assist with this.

Workshops

After the pilot interviews, we selected a number of films with different characteristics and different producers. Three student workshops were arranged where students discussed the selected films, focusing on various forms of evaluation and analysis of media content. The aim with the workshops was to identify key elements present in media content such as author/authority, methods, user comments, references and other elements in order to assess the credibility and reliability of the source. We also discussed ways in which visual and technical elements can shape our perception of content and its credibility.

The students that participated in the workshops came from different disciplines and programs, both theoretical and more practical educations were represented.

Findings from the workshops

All three student groups used films on popular media platforms as a source of inspiration and recreation but the individual use varied from modest to heavy use. Film was rarely used for their written assignments and papers. All three groups commented that they rather consulted printed sources in this case. They believed that the university lecturer did not appreciate the use of film as a reference, which contributed to the reluctance to use it as a source. Even in those cases when film was used as a primary source there was a resistance to put it in the reference list. A common solution was to search for a printed source with similar content to use instead. The lecturer´s choice and attitudes determine what sources the students use and if films are seen as credible, the role and impact of the lecturer is profound. The common belief in the student group was that there would be a shift of attitude when a new generation of teachers enter academia. They also believed that education in the future will be even more based upon watching films in advance and then in class discussing and asking questions, so called flipped classroom.

Some of the students stated that film was seen as a fast way to find and sift out information. They discussed the role of films to explain aspects that are difficult to understand in text books. Films can explain phenomena in a way that is easier to grasp and is a good way to get an introduction to a subject. Films can also be used to get another perspective on the subject. The advantage of using films for students with dyslexia was emphasized in one group. Recorded lectures were viewed as beneficial since students can go back and watch them again and discuss them with other students.

One of the groups initially thought that they seldom used films in their studies, but realized during the workshop that they actually use it quite a lot. Their university program consists of several practical elements and watching films and tutorials makes it easier to understand certain procedures and is beneficial for visualization of bodily functions and examinations. They have also watched feature films with the purpose to gain a patient perspective. The films are seldom on the reading lists of the courses, but are posted directly on the learning management system.

Another barrier to use films as a reference was that the students did not know how to cite it in a paper and they found it hard to find examples on how to do it available on internet. They expressed that it would help them if a film was reviewed by "experts". The students stated that they would use a film collection which had been distributed by Umea University.

When assessing the reliability and credibility both the publisher and the platform were important to all three groups. Harvard University, Kahn Academy and TED Talks were mentioned as credible publishers. Films posted on Swedish Public Television site were seen as more reliable than films on YouTube. It renders credibility to a film if a professor or expert participates. Another aspect that contributed to the reliability was if sources were stated. However, all three groups mentioned that they rarely check the sources.

Compared to a book where you can find information about publisher, author and publication date a film can be very anonymous. All student groups showed high trust in printed books, with tendencies of overconfidence to the reliability of printed material.

One factor that influences the credibility is if and when the film is produced. One person stated the importance of the URL. URL like edu and gov are considered more trustworthy. Also the number of views and the number of films from the same publisher influenced the credibility.

The technical quality was discussed and they concluded that most film today has a high quality and that this is something the audience expects. Poor quality and dull presentations can deter students from watching. Films produced in a home-environment are considered less serious. Furthermore, when it comes to presentations it is important that the information presented is clear and that facts are not introduced too fast. The presenter should sound serious and have a "pleasant" voice. It is also easier to comprehend the film if you can see the person talking. Text should function as a complement to the oral presentation, but too much irrelevant information in text format should be avoided since it is distracting.

We asked about the role of comments made by other viewers and learned that the students perceived a great difference depending on platform. On Facebook most people agree with one another since they are friends who tend to have similar opinions. On YouTube the comments

vary more since the audience is much more diverse. No student in any of the groups posted comments on their own on the media platforms. Reading comments was mostly done because of its entertainment value, rather than using it is a tool to assess the credibility of the film. Notably, some students stated that they would rather watch films with a lot of "likes" and skip those with a lot of "thumbs down".

How can the library better support students to analyze and evaluate films?
Film is often used as a source for studies, but as the students are unsure if it´s allowed as a reference they avoid using it in their academic work. In the cases that they do use film, they are also uncertain how to cite them.

It's an interesting phenomenon that film is recommended by lecturers but rarely put on the reading list. This is probably due to a traditional view from the academia of what a reading list should consist of. Film hasn't got its given place as a reference whilst books and articles have.

The library can play an important role in creating tools and scaffolding for students to use so that they can act in a more critical manner.

We have learnt that the library user education must focus a great deal on the need to be critical to all sorts of media. Students must be made aware that also printed material should be analyzed and evaluated with critical eyes, just like any other source. Concerning the students' capability to cite different sources in general and film in particular, there is a need to further develop the library guides. First of all there should be information on how to cite film in the existing guides on writing references. We also think that it would be user friendly to create more visual guides where different types of film are used to exemplify how to analyze, evaluate and cite.

When it comes to the library's own production of tutorials and database demonstration, we have got useful input from the students. Aspects like information overload, texting, voice, visual appearance of the speaker and publisher are of most importance.

These workshops have given us the knowledge of the need for guides in source criticism with a new pedagogical and visual approach. Umeå University Library aims to develop these guides together with HUMlab. A fusion between the library's competence in source criticism and HUMlabs research in digital pedagogy, gives opportunities to develop new tools for evaluating, analyzing and citing films.