Popular and Scholarly Sources

As you have probably experienced, it seems like you can find just about anything on the web these days. While this is not completely accurate, it is true you can find a great variety of types and quality of information on the internet. How to make sense of it all? How can you tell if what you find is from a reliable source and if it is appropriate to use for academic purposes in a paper or class presentation? How can you tell when it is okay to use something you find online as a source and when you should use a library database? Unfortunately there is no simple answer or rule that will always apply here. You can sometimes find some amazing things online and we are indeed fortunate to have access to so much and such varied information. But just as often it is all too easy to get lost, confused, or frustrated when what seems like a simple question or fact you need proves difficult to find. One key distinction that may be of use here is the difference between popular and scholarly sources.

This chart gives you some basic characteristics of popular and scholarly sources. Keep in mind this is more of a continuum than a strict either/or. Often times a source could be both popular and scholarly, or more popular but with some scholarly elements or vice versa. Still these are basic features you can look for.

The reason this is important, especially when you’re searching the open web, is that you can find both popular and scholarly (or mixed) sources on the web. If you can identify whether something
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is more popular or scholarly, you will have a better sense of whether it may be appropriate to use for a class (or whatever information need you may have)—no matter whether you find it from a Google search, in a library database, a print book, or wherever. Sometimes well-meaning professors will tell you that you can’t use the internet, that you have to actually go to the library and find an actual book or print journal article. This may a useful exercise in itself—oftentimes you really do have to track the paper copy of a book or article. Probably what they really intend is for you to find a scholarly source. But the problem is you can’t do research these days without using the internet in some way. You can find scholarly material on the internet; you can find books, journal articles, statistics, government reports, all sorts of entirely authoritative, valid, and valuable material. You can find full fledged scholarly journal articles, you can find very informative and well designed websites for the general reader which are solidly supported by research. You can find many sites which are useful but sometimes of dubious quality or authority (such as wikipedia). Then of course there are the tetrabytes of blogs, social networking sites, and advertising or commercial sites. These are almost always more popular.

In general, it is easier and quicker to find more scholarly material through the library’s databases rather than the open internet. Yes, you use the internet to access the library’s databases, but as you have probably already seen you have to login to most of the library’s databases because these are not freely accessible to the general public. You may be curious why this is so. Why isn’t all information freely and openly available to all? The answer would lead us into a whole other area of information literacy dealing with copyright and intellectual property laws (which we may touch on later in the semester).

To sum up: Information comes in all sorts of packages. It can come in a print book, a website, a magazine, a television news story, a journal article from a library database, a DVD, and so on. No matter how it comes to you it can be more popular or more scholarly. So there are popular books and scholarly books, there are popular websites and scholarly websites; same thing with journals, magazines, DVDs. Some sources may contain elements of both. One is not “good” and the other “bad”, it depends on what you need or what is required for a given assignment.