

Not As Web Savvy As You Think

EurekaAlert

Google it. That's what many college students do when asked to read an excerpt of a play for class, write a resume or find the e-mail address of a politician.

They trust Google so much that a Northwestern University study has found many students only click on websites that turn up at the top of Google searches to complete assigned tasks. If they don't use Google, researchers found that students trust other brand-name search engines and brand-name websites to lead them to information.

The study was published by the *International Journal of Communication*.

"Many students think, 'Google placed it number one, so, of course it's credible,'" said Eszter Hargittai, associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern. "This is potentially tricky because Google doesn't rank a site by its credibility."

In the published, study 102 students at the University of Illinois at Chicago sat at computers with researchers. Each student was asked to bring up the page that's usually on their screen when they start using the Web.

The activity on their screens was captured on video as researchers gave the students a variety of hypothetical information-seeking tasks to perform online. Time and again, researchers watched students navigate to brand-name search engines--usually Google--and to brand-name websites to find information. Researchers also asked students questions about websites they chose.

After using Google to get to a website, this interaction occurred between a researcher and a study participant:

Researcher: "What is this website?"

Student: "Oh, I don't know. The first thing that came up."

"Search engine rankings seem extremely important," Hargittai said. "We found that a website's layout or content almost didn't even matter to the students. What mattered is that it was the number one result on Google."

Aside from Google, other online brands that students mentioned most often to complete tasks were: Yahoo!, SparkNotes, MapQuest, Microsoft, Wikipedia, AOL and Facebook.

Some of the students did give more credibility to websites ending in dot-gov, dot-edu or dot-org. However, Hargittai said most didn't know dot-org domain names could be registered by anyone, and thus are not inherently different from dot-com sites.

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"Just because younger people grew up with the Web doesn't mean they're universally savvy with it," said Hargittai, who is also the first author of the paper. "Educators should show specific websites in class and talk about why a source is or isn't credible."

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