

# The Google Effect: Googling, Blogging, Wikis and the Flattening of Expertise

TARA BRABAZON

Media School of Computing, Mathematics and Information Sciences, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK

This article presents the consequences to librarians and teachers for the flattening of expertise, or the Google Effect. As blogs continue to fill the Web with the bizarre daily rituals and opinions of people who we would never bother speaking to at a party, let alone invite into our homes, there has never been a greater need to stress the importance of intelligence, education, credentials and credibility. The problem is not only accuracy, but also the mediocrity initiated through the Google Effect. The concern is not with the ba-

quality of information – there has always been a plurality of sources in the analogue environment. The concern is the lack of literacy skills and strategies to sort the trash from the relevant. This paper addresses not only the social choices about computer use and information literacy, but the intellectual choices we make in our professional lives as teachers and librarians. In such a time, the Google Effect raises stark questions about the value of reading, research, writing and scholarship.

With the public sector, education, the welfare state – all the big, ‘safe’ institutions – up against the wall, there’s nothing good or clever or heroic about going under. When all is said and done, why bother to think ‘deeply’ when you’re not being paid to think deeply?

Dick Hebdige (1988, 167)

Face it: You’re always just a breath away from a job in telemarketing.

Douglas Coupland (1996, 17)

## *Democracy and expertise*

In the *Time Magazine* of May 8, 2006, Jimmy Wales was listed among the one hundred people “who shape our world” (Anderson 2006). A former options trader, in 1999 Wales started an online and free encyclopaedia termed Nupedia. He commenced by commissioning scholarly, refereed articles. After eighteen months of this rigorous process, he had twelve entries. [1] To correct this lack of expertise, Wales utilized wiki, a software programme that enables the quick and trackable

transformation of Web documents. The readers of websites became the writers of websites. Since the wiki-reconstruction of the initial refereed and scholarly project in January 2001, Wikipedia now includes over one million articles in English, making it ten times larger than Encyclopaedia Britannica.

I summon Wales in this article to note the Jonah within. While *Time Magazine* celebrated him as “a champion of Internet-enabled egalitarianism,” he preferred another descriptor: “anticredentialist” (Anderson 2006). This is a significant and densely disturbing distinction. [2] While many of us are old enough to remember the techno-enthusiasms of Sherry Turkle (1995) and Howard Rheingold (1993), and the sense that analogue inequalities would melt away as cyberspace morphed institutions into The Well (Hafner 1997), there has been a damaging twist to the utopian trust placed in the digitizing community. There is confusion in digital discourse between affirmations of democracy and a denial and destruction of expertise. Wales has ridden that confusion. Now, as one of *Time’s*

Tara Brabazon is Professor of Media Studies in the School of Computing, Mathematics and Information Sciences at the University of Brighton and Director of the Popular Culture Collective. School of CMIS, University of Brighton, Room 610 Watts Building, Lewes Road, Brighton BN2 4SG, England. E-mail: T.M.Brabazon@brighton.ac.uk

'100 People Who Shape Our World,' his anti-expertise agenda no longer requires the mask of egalitarianism or digital democracy. While called "peer production," it is really peer-less production, where mediocre, banal and often irrelevant facts are given an emphasis and interpretation which extends beyond the credibility of scholarly literature. [3] The ideology of Wikipedia assumes that if more people are involved in the process of writing entries, then their accuracy will increase. Popularity and participation inevitably determines truth. This justification of mediocrity through popularity is part of what I call the Google Effect, the notion that the popularity of 'hits' determines the relevance of the results. Ironically the assumption that collaboration must inevitably result in progress and improvement in the quality of information has been described by Wikipedia editors as a "social Darwinian evolutionary process" (Svoboda n.d.). The notion that Social Darwinism can be cited as a political justification of digital selection without awareness of its historical passage through colonialism, Eugenics and fascism merely confirms the necessity for refereeing and accredited peer review.

Jimmy Wales has a reason to deny credentials. He is using Wikipedia to rewrite his own history. He frequently edits his own biography, removing references to Larry Sanger, the co-creator of Wikipedia. Up until December 2, 2005, Wales had 'peer produced' – or edited – his own biography on Wikipedia eighteen times (Cadenhead n.d.). He altered the description of a pornographic website that was one of his earlier publishing enterprises. When editors tried to reinstate the phrase "soft-core pornography" to describe an earlier business venture, Wales confirmed that "the correct terminology is adult content ... I do not think we should adopt the definitions of the Taliban" (Cadenhead n.d.). This manner of 'correction' has a name in literature: vanity publishing. The notion that one man has claimed both the credibility and integrity of bringing democratic information to 'the people' while using the wiki editing function to rewrite his own history, needs to be discussed with care, research and – unfortunately for him – credentialed expertise.

This article presents the consequences to librarians and teachers of the flattening of expertise, or the Google Effect. As blogs continue to fill the Web with the bizarre daily rituals and opinions of

people who we would never bother speaking to at a party, let alone invite into our homes, there has never been a greater need to stress the importance of intelligence, education, credentials and credibility. Learning requires pedagogical strategies to be effective. Teaching requires expertise in not only content but context. Librarians require dynamic, contemporary strategies for not only creating an information scaffold, but also affirming the diverse values and forms of information.

The problem is not only accuracy, but also the mediocrity initiated through the Google Effect. The concern is not with the banality of information – there has always been a plurality of sources in the analogue environment. The concern is the lack of literacy skills and strategies to sort the trash from the relevant. This paper therefore addresses not only the social choices about computer use and information literacy, but also the intellectual choices we make in our professional lives as teachers and librarians. Lew Zipin and Marie Brennan, in evaluating the contemporary Australian university sector, believed that "professional identity crises – with deeply ethical implications – are brewing" (2003, 351).

The disrespect of those who work in education in Australia is – depending on the perspective – either caused, enhanced, framed or facilitated by a forty percent decline in operating budgets for universities since 1996, with the attendant necessity to generate alternative income streams. University researchers must now market, sell, commodify and simplify their expertise. During the same period, student numbers increased by thirty percent, while teaching-only staff were reduced by eight percent and teaching/research staff reduced by one percent (Nelson 2003). Such an environment confirms not only a political disrespect for the sector, but a changing set of social goals where a large number of students must be taught by much fewer staff. In such a time, the Google Effect raises stark questions about the value of reading, research, writing and scholarship.

### *Proliferation of Google*

Google, and its naturalized mode of searching, encourages bad behaviour. When confronted by an open search engine, most of us will enact the ultimate of vain acts: inserting our own name into the blinking cursor. Googling is a self-absorbed

action, rather than an outward and reflexive process. It is not a search of the World Wide Web, but the construction of an Individual Narrow Portal. A persona is constructed and summoned through Google that is not a neutral avatar, but configures a self on the basis of popularity. It is addictively riveting to see how an identity is constructed through Google. For example, Paul Morley, one of the most iconoclastic and talented of popular cultural writers, put his own name into the blinking cursor.

I decided to ... punch my name into the Google search engine to see how I have been gathered, collected, framed, defined on the World Wide Web. Who am I on the net? I figured that this would be a pretty good description of who I was, or who I have been. It would be accurate, neutral, and would sum up my achievements inside the media, as a writer, as a personality, as some kind of operator in arts and entertainments. The Google search engine raked in versions of myself from across the virtual universe, and from the results you could piece together a version of me that is as good a biography as anything. What you could see straight away, from the very first mentions, is that I did become famous as a rock-and-roll writer of all time. I say this, without believing it, while knowing it to be fairly true, and would say that, on various occasions, during the late seventies and early eighties, while writing for the *New Musical Express*, I did materialize now and then as the greatest but overall, in the lists of greats, I would just about put myself inside the top twenty. Well, inside the top ten. About seventh. Or sixth. All in all, I think I was the fifth-greatest rock-and-roll writer of all time. Maybe the fourth. Actually, the third. The greatest non-American, anyway. And I could take on the top two Americans any day of the week (2003, 118).

Morley shows how the 'objective' ranking can slide into subjective meanderings of social worth. These rankings and returned hits have an addictive quality. Particularly with the proliferation of blogs – and the ambiguous application of libel laws in this environment – bizarre opinions from one person can be granted an unnecessary importance. Googling provides the platform for the subtle but continual weathering of the credentials and expertise of information professionals. The search has replaced research. The assumption is that once the hits have been returned for the user, that they also hold the interpretative skills to manage the results. [4]

It is important to be completely honest about the Internet – let alone the Web – that is being searched by Google. The Web is large, occasionally irrelevant, filled with advertising, outdated ghost

sites and is increasingly corporatized. It seems appropriate that Google is ubiquitous at the moment when teachers and librarians are overworked and less available to see students. David Loertscher confirmed that,

Search engines such as Google are so easy and immediate that many young people, faced with a research assignment, just 'Google' their way through the internet rather than struggle through the hoops of a more traditional library environment (2003, 14).

There are consequences for the proliferation of Google. There is also a reason for the limited vista of this virtual landscape. Google is a business and a brand. [5] Larry Page, one of the founders of Google along with Sergey Brin, developed the technology while a doctoral candidate in engineering at Stanford University. [6] The word Google is derived from the mathematical term googol, a one followed by 100 zeros. This etymology is important, as founding ideologies invariably frame the meaning of structures in the long term. The cultural orientation of the search engine was engineering and mathematics, not education, library, Internet or media studies. The aim of Page's initial study at Stanford was to understand 'back linking,' or the 'BackRub project' as he termed it. His goal – modelled on scholarly citation practices and 'impact' measurements – was to find a way to count the number of back links on the World Wide Web. PageRank was the algorithm created that recognized and measured the number of links into a particular site, and the number of links into these other sites. This equation determined the order of the Google returns. Alta Vista and Excite ranked on keywords: Google initially searched the words in titles, then developed full-text searches. Frequent upgrades, updates and improvements have emerged since the initial release. There is now a suite of Google products, including the image search and Froogle – a virtual shopping mall.

The key to understanding the Google Effect is to grasp the consequences of PageRank, which is an 'objective' measurement of the importance of Web pages by assessing the number of links that point to them. As Russell Brown described,

Google embodied a simple, brilliant idea. It was, effectively, to ask us what we thought was important. If a website had many links to it, or its key people were name checked elsewhere, it was considered to be a trusted part of a community, and its ranking reflected that. In doing a Google

search, we could draw on the knowledge, experience and good taste of everyone else (2005).

The confusion between popularity and quality emerges at this point. While there may be a relationship between the number of back links and importance, it must not be assumed. Ponder the serious consequences when students click onto highly ideological sites that are assessed by popularity, not qualitative importance or significance. There are many ways a ranking could be assembled, particularly with intervention by librarians and information managers. The assumption of Google is that the popularity of sites is a validation of quality. This is an incorrect premise. For example, bloggers link to each other's blog. A few people can manufacture high Google returns by simply linking between their Web logs.

### *Speed or accuracy?*

Blogs are – at their most overt – one person (over)-valuing the minutia of their day. As a diary for public circulation, they make the writer feel important and published, without going through the processes of refereeing, editing and proofing. They can also be – and frequently are – subjective commentaries untempered by argument, research or analysis. Most bloggers demonstrate the self-confidence of Dr Phil on steroids. Blogs are available so that the (over) Web-confident can confirm their importance. Google then measures the popularity of these words. In anti-intellectual times, the lack of rigour, citation or scholarly protocols is framed as an advantage and strength, not an excuse for mediocrity. For example Meg Hourihan stated that,

What's important is that we've embraced a medium free of the physical limitations of pages, intrusions of editors, and delays of tedious publishing systems. As with free speech itself, what we ask isn't as important as the system that enables us to say it (2002).

The 'tedious delays' are the basis of quality assurance mechanisms. The refereeing and reviewing takes time, but also ensures the calibre of writing and research. Blogs are free from such 'constraints.' That is a problem, not a strength.

The concerns with the Google Effect of blogs are perpetuated and enhanced through Wikipedia. It is a 'free' encyclopaedia that allows 'anyone' to

edit it. This 'anyone' refers to the Web literate with time on their hands. The famous example of these concerns with quality control was the entry on the British pop star 'Jamie Kane.' Actually Kane was fictional, a character in an online game launched by the BBC. A staff member of the organization had added the entry with the goal of viral marketing. When it was realized, the entry was corrected, but the original was not deleted (Brown n.d.).

That these banal blogs and resurfaced wiki entries are returned through Google is not a scholarly barrier if re/searchers recognize that they are the words of one person and require interpretation, contextualization and further citations. Without understanding the importance of this analytical matrix, a blogger's views, or the interpretation of an active wiki editor, could be granted as much value as a scholar's refereed research. Certainly, there are advantages in this user-driven content. For example, when David Lange, former Prime Minister of Aotearoa/New Zealand, died, Russell Brown revealed that there was no online biography of him on *Te Ara*, the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand Online, the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* or the online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It was Wikipedia that had the main entry for David Lange, and reported his death two hours after the public announcement (Brown n.d.). The issue is whether librarians and teachers are prepared to trade speed for accuracy.

### *Flattening of expertise*

The Internet, Web, Google, blogs and wikis as an artefact, program, medium or matrix, are not the cause of ignorance, mediocrity or conformity. What is a concern is the rise of these media sites and applications when teachers and librarians are demeaned and discredited. The information age requires information management. Unease occurs because the proliferation of sources has emerged at the very moment when the credibility of librarians and teachers has declined. For example, in 2003, the Expanded Academic Database, one of the most important full-text databases for education and the humanities in particular, featured a link to Google at the top of every search page. This process still does not occur the other way: Google encouraging movement into more specialized databases. Without the help of such software prompts, teachers and librarians must take

responsibility for the shift into refereed research, stressing that Google is the start – not the entirety – of a search. There are major consequences to our students, their future and our educational system if we are apathetic rather than pro-active in the building of an information scaffold, rather than allowing a search engine to define the parameters of effective research. Instead, through the proliferations of blogs and wikipedia, a large quantity of low quality material has emerged, untempered by equivalent attention to literacy and interpretive skills.

At schools and universities, we are starting to see the consequences of a flattening of expertise. Students commence my first year course demonstrating superficial research and comprehension skills and awkward writing modalities. They do not seek out diverse views to construct an argument. Rather, they presume that if they find text on a screen, returned through the first ten Google hits, then it must be correct and relevant. Making students think, rather than assume, and read rather than cut and paste is proving a challenge. I am now setting minimum – and indeed minimal – standards for the number of scholarly references to be consulted and cited in university essays. My days are spent enforcing and lifting both the level and scale of reading.

From: Elizabeth  
Sent: Wednesday, 12 April 2006 10:43 AM  
To: Tara Brabazon  
Subject: assignment

Hey Tara

I know this is last-minute but unfortunately I'm a last minute girl. I need help with my assignment. I'm getting confused with the topic and I can't seem to find good references, or enough references for the topic. When are your consulting hours? Because I desperately need help.

Love Liz

This email was sent five hours before an assignment was due to be submitted. She was troubled that I demanded that students deploy at least ten references from their 'Reader.' At Murdoch University, we gave all our students a collection of readings from the most relevant and current sources. No Web materials were required for these assignments, as I had already assembled an extensive collection of digital and analogue scholarly

articles. To prepare for assignments and the weekly tutorials, they simply had to read the materials that were purchased, prepared and photocopied for them. No further 'searching' was required. Yet the students fought this – too low – minimum.

From: Sam  
Sent: Friday, 24 March 2006 5:11 PM  
To: Tara Brabazon  
Subject: RE: Creative Industries HELP!

Hi Tara

Sorry to be painful but this should be my last question. Do we really need to have ten references from the readers?

It's just that by coincidence (my parents bought me a subscription to Time) I have found a couple of articles, one regarding obesity in America and one about everyday people creating wealth through the internet (with blogs, short films etc). I'd like to use these but I feel that I am getting too wound up on having ten references from the unit material,

Have a good weekend

Sam

From: Tara Brabazon  
Sent: Saturday, 25 March 2006 7:40 AM  
To: Sam  
Subject: RE: Creative Industries HELP!

Hi Sam -

Hope you are well. Thanks for your message.

Sam – the assignments in creative industries – they have been written to use *that reading*. We do not want any further reading at all. And remember there are *many more articles* than 10 in these relevant sections of the course, so students can choose what suits them. But they must choose from the quality material that we have gathered from around the world. That is the relevant stuff. That is what we are testing is being used.

The reason that we want *these references* is to confirm that students have done the reading and are working at a level where they can interpret that material.

So *Time magazine* is not at a high enough level for University work. It's interesting and great to read, but we are asking a precise question, using a precise body of knowledge. Remember too, the quotes may be four or five words in length, that's all. But you need to confirm that you can read and use them.

Also – one of the criteria by which we're assessing your work is the use of reading. So you need to position yourself to get the marks from that part of the marking mix, O.K?

Let me know if I can do anything else...

T

Yes, a student is complaining about the use of ten references in a university-level assignment, from readings that had already been provided for him. Thirty-eight separate extracts for students to use were presented to students in the first six weeks of the course. Asking students to select ten from this list is neither excessive nor inflated. Obviously many more references were required for a distinction grade. It is startling that by placing a (quite low) minimum level of compliance, students still had difficulty reaching this figure. Fascinatingly, Sam attempted to argue that *Time* would be an adequate substitute for the carefully selected international scholarship. This is the Google Effect. For this student to think that *Time* is equivalent to higher levels of scholarship is part of the intellectual flattening of expertise that needs to be corrected and addressed. We need to teach – overtly – the meaning and purpose of refereeing. Content and context must be aligned. Further, we must ensure that these tools are actually used, rather than taught and ignored.

Actually, content is not the key. Context is the imperative. Only when technology has a social purpose and appropriate context is it useful. It must be embedded in social practices and daily life so that it ‘disappears.’ Internet literacy is not inevitable, triggered by the availability of hardware, software or the Google prompt. Questions of motivation and context, rather than access and content, are necessary. As educators, it is our first job to teach students why education is important, and why learning must be respected.

From: Eric  
Sent: Wednesday, 27 July 2005 9:24 AM  
To: Tara Brabazon  
Subject: COM102

Hi, I enrolled in COM102 but I wasn't able to make it to the first lecture.  
I was just wondering how I should go about signing up for a tutorial or anything else important I missed.  
Thanks

Eric

Before Eric sent this email, he had three months holiday between semesters. The tutorial lists were outside my door for the month preceding the first lecture. They were still there when this young man sent his email. The ‘anything else important I missed’ clearly did not include the lecture itself.

Access was not Eric's problem. Motivation was the key to his behaviour. I have an even more disastrous example of how the systematic disregard and disrespect of education, reading, writing and thinking has facilitated disrespectful behaviour from students.

From: Bernie  
Sent: Friday, 12 May 2006 3:34 AM  
To: Tara Brabazon  
Subject: MCC106

My name is Bernie and I am enrolled in MCC106. You would not know me, as even though I am enrolled I have not been coming to uni at all this semester. I have not submitted any work that has been due as honestly I had lost interest in university after some events that transpired in recent times in my life made it seem irrelevant. However, I now realise this has been a big mistake and I really want to complete this unit and therefore my course at the end of this year. I am very interested in completing this unit even though it is for credit points towards graduation. Is there any way that something can be worked out so I do not fail this unit?

I am eager to come in and see you at any time to discuss this [I am unavailable tomorrow Friday 12<sup>th</sup> due to work], which I think is the best thing to do. I just hope I have not left it too late.

Can you please get back to me and advise me of anything that can be done?

Regards,  
Bernie

This email was sent in week ten of the semester. Two assignments had already been submitted and returned. Ten tutorials and lectures had been delivered. What do we – as workers in education – do with such an email? I obviously replied and – yes – I gave him a chance to complete the semester's work. Then, the following Sunday night before the next week's lecture and tutorial, he informed me that he was unwell and would not make it to the eleventh week of teaching. After sending three more follow up emails, without a reply, I realized that I was merely perpetuating the disrespect of universities, academics, reading and writing by chasing him and giving him a chance. An opportunity for learning is not what he required. He deserved to fail. He did fail. What is significant is that – before email access to teachers and librarians – Bernie would have had to make an independent decision, rather than involving us in his messy life and fuzzy choices. The results gained

from increasing access to the digital environment cannot be guaranteed in advance. It is the start of learning, not the end.

### *Assessing the quality of information*

Google has increased the accessibility of not only library and teaching staff, but an array of Web sites, transforming the landscape of digital information into a manageable formation. It also encourages sound bite solutions that are not researched or theorized. [7] Google makes searching for information easier, but it is also demeaning of the scholarship involved in well-theorized interpretation and scholarship. [8] More information does not – intrinsically – create more effective and convincing research.

The Internet is not a library. Google is not a library catalogue. These are dangerous metaphors. The characteristic of a library – the organization of knowledge into preservable categories – has left few traces on the Internet. A catalogue of accessible holdings is not a collection of numbers, but a sequence of ideas. This ordering is not an archaic relic of the analogue age, but holds a social function: to allow users to search and assess information and build larger relationships to broader subjects, theories and ideas. While the Web may appear to remove the physicality of information, we are yet to make this leap conceptually. Words like flexibility and interactivity displace a discussion of educational motivation. The digital library is determined as much by research training, database instruction, computer support and document delivery as the availability of search engines. Information literacy integrates documents, media, form, content, literacy and learning. The expertise of librarians and teachers must – overtly rather than implicitly – support new modes of reading, writing and communicating, integrating and connecting discovery, searches, navigation and the appropriateness of diverse resources.

Our first lessons in schools and universities must teach and re-teach how to evaluate the quality of all information, including Internet-based data. I encourage students to ask ten pivotal questions as they approach any text, and attempt to build an interpretative matrix from it.

1. Who authored the information?
2. What expertise does the writer have to comment?

3. What evidence is used? Are there citations in the piece?
4. What genre is the document: journalism, academic paper, blog, polemic?
5. Is the site/document/report funded by an institution?
6. What argument is being made?
7. When was the text produced?
8. Why did this information emerge at this point in history?
9. Who is the audience for this information?
10. What is not being discussed and what are the political consequences of that absence?

Asking students to answer these questions is a way to limit the free range of searching on the Internet and the unquestioning acceptance of the Google ranking. They must pause, reflect and think. These questions create the recognition that finding information is not synonymous with understanding information. Without such critical pauses, the inclusion of the Internet into the school and university curriculum may ensure access to information, but it does not promote the development of high quality writing, wide reading and innovative interpretations. Importantly, Google's popularity does not facilitate or encourage the discipline and structure that many of our students require. The difficulty is that information – through Google – is seen to be both abundant and cheap. Because of this rapid ranking and return, 'anyone' can manage it. Actually, the abilities required to assess information are difficult and costly to obtain.

### *A path through information*

An early techno-celebrationist welcomed the Web in education, believing that "we can learn virtually anything from the very source of the information" ('Applications of learning' 2001). Everything can be learnt from the Web, except *how* to use it. What is significant, as Wikipedia and blogging continue these anti-credentializing imperatives, is that Google itself is transforming. It now has services for librarians, Google Librarian Center, and has splintered its product and brand to recognize the differentiation between non-refereed and academic work. The arrival of Google Scholar in 2004 was a welcome intervention that assists students, teachers and librarians in explaining and deploying the different modes of information. This service will be increasingly significant as online,

refereed journals increase in number and quality, and their cataloguing becomes more methodical. The difficulty with Google Scholar, which is not a problem caused by the company but by the commodification of information, is that international publishers have controlled the distribution of journal articles so that University and public libraries must buy the rights of access. This means that Google Scholar can list these journal articles by title but the full text script is not available. It is a great intervention from Google to recognize that there are different types of information which require distinct modes of search engine. The challenge is to ensure that the online and electronic journals submitted to their database are from around the world and in diverse languages. In its early incarnation, publishers from the United States and United Kingdom dominated the ranks of refereed articles. Actually – to avoid the commercial aggregators – Google Scholar administrators can seek out the freely available refereed journals produced by academics and universities, available online and without cost. Much of this material is produced outside of the United States and the United Kingdom, bringing ‘the world’ back to the World Wide Web. This indexing requires expertise from librarians to validate but captures the texture and depth of the online environment. Importantly, this range of material is starting to emerge through Scholar.

While the quality of retrieved online information is improved through Google Scholar, another ‘product,’ Google Print – that became Google Book Search – has a more archival function.

Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information, but much of that information isn’t yet online. Google Print aims to get it there by putting book content where you can find it most easily – right in your Google search results (‘About Google Print’).

The monograph content in Google Book Search is sourced from publishers and libraries. The entirety of public domain books can be viewed, but only a few pages from copyrighted material. While the availability of research material is uneven, Google is enacting a public (and commercial) service, and the results will be impressive in the longer term. Meanwhile, students continue to use Google, rather than the more complex services of Book Search and Scholar. However a potential for growth and intervention is there. The Fordist

search engine is becoming a post-Fordist sifter and sorter of text. There is also an outreach project to the profession through Google Librarian. Yet as Google is attempting to correct the flattening of expertise and information, Wikis and blogs are flooding cursors with opinionated, individualized, unreferenced verbiage. This problem is increasing in frequency.

Students require time, care, energy and good assessment to improve their digital academic research. Teachers necessitate professional development in library studies, Internet studies and literary theory to create a worthwhile intellectual journey through this new research landscape. Most importantly universities must value their libraries and librarians. As Cerise Oberman has argued,

For thirty years, librarians have been responding to the electronic age: we have forecast the paperless society, ruminated about libraries without walls, and pondered the impact of an increasingly digital world (1996).

We need to find structural ways to push our students back into libraries to discover the value of wandering up the corridors of monographs and journal stacks. Also, with library budgets declining, we need to remember and value the knowledge, professionalism and training of librarians. Librarians do not provide information, but a path through information.

Digital wallpaper has covered over the cracks of analogue injustice. While Googlers, bloggers and Wikipedia’s Jimmy Wales affirm the democracy being woven from their desks, it is necessary to remove the digital burka and see those who are working in the adjacent analogue environment. When times are truly bad, we are drawn to the light, the frivolous and the stupid. This phenomenon – which could be called the Paris Hilton Effect – is facilitated by Google, bloggers and Wikipedia, where bored surfers fill their cursors and minds with irrelevancies. We lose the capacity to sift, discard and judge. Google is white bread for the mind; creating pleasant, tasty searches with little nutritional content. Information is no longer for social good, but for sale.

### *Making students read and think*

My final teaching story demonstrates the consequence of this Google Effect on our students and



their future. The great gift of education, to read widely and interpretatively, instils the ability not only to make innovative connections between academic disciplines, but seemingly disparate ideas. The best scholarship encourages creativity and imagination. In a 2006 assignment, I asked my first year students to complete a policy submission, responding to a Creative Industries document from any social position. They could 'be' a fashion designer, musician, DJ, librarian, sportsperson or tourist operator. Their choices were only limited by their imagination. The readings were wide-ranging and diverse, supporting most identities students could assume.

## 2. Policy Submission

You have been given the task of writing a policy submission to the Premier of Western Australia. You must assess the *Creative WA* document and recommend whether or not Western Australia is an appropriate site for the development of creative industries policies and initiatives. Remember: assume a position and argue your case, using the materials in the Reader to provide the evidence to verify your case.

Due Date: End of week twelve (May 26, 2006)  
Weighting: 40% of the course  
Length: 2000–2500 words

### Evaluative Criteria

- Capacity to evaluate the core document.
- Exhibition of wide-ranging reading from the course, demonstrating correct referencing.
- Effective writing, style, structure and tone. Please note: no singular presentation style is required for this document. Choose a structure to suit your argument.
- Level of interpretation and analysis

The most widely read students assumed the most creative advocate role and produced the most effective assignments. Surprises emerged through this assessment, as is common through all curricula change. Fashion models and bass players in cover bands argued their case alongside a public relations consultant for the Western Australian Cricket Association and a bar manager of a suburban pub. There was some great work produced. But the surprise – indeed shock – of the assignment confirmed the impact of the Google Effect which is just emerging in our universities after this generation of students have 'Googled' their way through high school.

Ten percent of the class chose a position I was not expecting. They chose to be themselves, to

represent an eighteen-year-old first-year university student. They could select any identity in the world, and they wanted to represent themselves. This odd subsection of the student cohort used little or no reading and replaced research with personal opinion. There are four separate interpretations of this decision to 'be themselves' when they had an opportunity to assemble a distinct identity from which to configure not only a political position, but a scholarly argument. Firstly, they showed a lack of imagination. They had no aspiration or creativity to construct an innovative identity from which to speak. Secondly, they demonstrated a lack of confidence. As they had not read widely through their prior scholastic lives, when they were confronted by refereed academic writing, they were unable to cope. They lacked the literacy skills to read and interpret higher-level work. Thirdly – and in a damaging combination with an absence of imagination and confidence – the students were self-absorbed. Because they had completed little research and reading through the course, the only topic they knew was themselves. Blogs and wikis have successfully validated the views of individuals as intrinsically being valuable. Students are now repeating this ideology in formal education, with staff having to explain and justify the importance of reading the words and understanding the life worlds of others. Finally, they are inexperienced in managing and negotiating diverse views to construct an argument. The notion that more is demanded of them than simply their opinion is not within their vista.

This was my experiment for one semester: take Google away from student and see what emerges. Most students – although initially flustered and confused – did begin to deploy scholarly material again. Their literacy skills improved, and they (re)learnt how to reference and construct a scholarly analysis. But for about ten percent of my students, they had no resources to understand what to do when Google, blogs and wikis were removed from them.

The problem is not – and never has been Google. The problem is that a Google Effect has flattened expertise and saturated inexperienced students with low-grade information, with little time spent actually teaching the difference between refereed and unrefereed material, and how to rank, evaluate and use this information within a scholarly environment. Perhaps only when teaching and

referencing without Google, at least for a semester, can the complexity and intricacies of research be returned to searching.

## Notes

1. Significantly, Jimmy Wales has rewritten this failure, not in terms of a lack of expertise to write peer-reviewed material, but because it was a 'top down model.' He states, "about two years before I founded Wikipedia I had founded another project called Nupedia. It was based upon the same concept as Wikipedia, which was that it was a freely licensed encyclopaedia that was written by volunteers. Unfortunately, we didn't use the Wiki software and it was a very top down model, which ultimately wasn't very successful," from "Jimmy Wales, CEO of Wikipedia," *nPost.com*, interview with N. Kaiser, November 1, 2005, URL: <http://www.npost.com/interview.jsp?intID=INT00126> [viewed May 31, 2006]
2. In the Wikipedia entry for Wikipedia, this 'advantage' is listed as the primary characteristic: "Wikipedia's slogan is 'the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,' regardless of qualifications," from "Wikipedia," URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia> [viewed May 31, 2006]
3. As an example of time being spent on the banal, during one month, May 2006, Jimmy Wales' entry into Wikipedia showed a history of 349 edits.
4. Sergios Charntikov confirms that through back linking, "Web surfers become victims of doorway pages with meaningless and countless key word links, smart redirect pages that throw you to places full of ads, and bad websites that managed to get gazillions links using their questionable techniques. All that commotion creates nothing but bad experience for anyone who is in search of information on the internet," from "Google, BackRub, Backlinking, and the link hunting obsession that takes its toll" « *Ezine @rticles*, August 10, 2005, URL: [http://ezinearticles.com/?Google,-BackRub,-Backlinking,-and-the-Link\\_Hunting-Obsession](http://ezinearticles.com/?Google,-BackRub,-Backlinking,-and-the-Link_Hunting-Obsession) [viewed May 31, 2006]
5. Naomi Klein, in *No Logo*, (London: Flamingo, 2000) stated that "it is online that the purest brands are being built: liberated from the real world burdens of stores and product manufacturing these brands are free to soar, less the disseminators of goods and services than as collective hallucinations," p. 24
6. Page came from a family of computer innovators. His father was a computer science professor at Michigan State.
7. Joshua Meyrowitz has argued that after Watergate and the crisis of leadership in the American Presi-

dency, credibility has been difficult to re-assemble because of the media environment. He realized that the perceived decline in credibility has "surprisingly little to do with a simple lack of potentially great leaders, and much to do with a politician's ability to behave like, and therefore be perceived as, the traditional 'great leader,'" from *No sense of place*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 269. With the public seeing too much of its politicians, the image of an untarnished great leader is difficult to create.

8. Kathy Schrock has constructed a solid checklist to assess the quality of information, including the authority of the author, bias, citation rates, dates published, efficiency, the positioning of information in context, disability access and information availability (1999–2000).

## References

- About Google Print. 2005. URL: <http://print.google.com.au/googleprint/about.html> [viewed May 31, 2006.]
- Anderson, C. 2006 May 8. Jimmy Wales. *Time Magazine*. URL: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1187286,00.html> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Applications of learning. 2001. URL: <http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/tips/resources/communicating.htm> [viewed May 31, 2006.]
- Brown, R. 2005 September 2. Information Entrepreneurs, *Public Address.net*. URL <http://publicaddress.net/print,2494.sm> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Cadenhead, R. n.d. Wikipedia Founder looks out for number 1. *Workbench*. URL: <http://www.cadenhead.org/workbench/news/2828/wikipedia-founder-looks-out-number-1> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Charntikov, S. 2005 August 10. Google, BackRub, Backlinking, and the link hunting obsession that takes its toll. *Ezine @rticles*. URL: [http://ezinearticles.com/?Google,-BackRub,-Backlinking,-and-the-Link\\_Hunting-Obsession](http://ezinearticles.com/?Google,-BackRub,-Backlinking,-and-the-Link_Hunting-Obsession) [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Coupland, D. 1996. *Microserfs*. London: Flamingo.
- Hafner, K. 1997 May. The Epic Saga of The Well. *Wired* 5(5). URL: [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.05/ff\\_well\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.05/ff_well_pr.html) [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Hebdige, D. 1988. *Hiding in the light*. London: Comedia.
- Kaiser, N. 2005 November 1. Jimmy Wales, CEO of Wikipedia. *nPost.com*. URL: <http://www.npost.com/interview.jsp?intID=INT00126> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Klein, N. 2000. *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.
- Loertscher, D. 2003. The digital school library. *Teacher Librarian* 30(5): 4–16.
- Meyrowitz, J. 1985. *No sense of place*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Morley, P. 2003. *Words and music*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Nelson, B. 2003. *Higher education at the Crossroads: an overview paper*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Oberman, C. 1996. Library instruction: concepts and pedagogy in the electronic environment. *RQ* 35(3): 315-23.
- Rheingold, H. 1993. *The Virtual Community*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Schrock, K. 1999–2000. The ABCs of Web Site Evaluation: teaching media literacy in the age of the internet. *Connected Newsletter*. URL: <http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/newsletter/abcs.asp> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Svoboda, E. n.d. One-click content, no guarantees. *IEEE Spectrum*. URL: <http://www.spectrum.ieee.org/print/3412> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Turkle, S. 1995. *Life on the screen*. New York: Touchstone.
- Wikipedia. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia> [viewed May 31, 2006]
- Zipin, L and Brennan, M. 2003. The suppression of ethical dispositions through managerial governmentality: a habitus crisis in Australian higher education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 6(4): 340–351.

*Editorial history:*

*paper received 11 June 2006;*

*final version received 15 July 2006;*

*accepted 28 July 2006.*



## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The Google Effect: Googling, Blogging, Wikis and the  
Flattening of Expe  
SOURCE: Libri 56 no3 S 2006  
PAGE(S): 157-67

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.librijournal.org/>