
Book Review

***Finding Reliable Information Online: Adventures of an Information Sleuth* by Leslie F. Stebbins**

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Students frequently have assignments requiring them to find and reference outside materials. For students enrolled in online courses (and for many students who are not), virtually all such materials will be found via a web browser. Searching for reliable information online, then, becomes an essential skill for the eventual success of online students.

Leslie F. Stebbins' *Finding Reliable Information Online: Adventures of an Information Sleuth* walks the reader through different methods of searching for and evaluating online information. Stebbins does not gear her explanations to college students specifically, but instead takes a conversational tone, talking about her personal searching experiences and explaining why certain search techniques provided better results than others.

Despite her book's focus on searching outside of academia, Stebbins is no stranger to scholarly searching; she holds Master's degrees in Education and in Information Science and has 20 years of experience working in library research instruction and information literacy within higher education settings. Stebbins seems to have written *Finding Reliable Information Online* with its potential for use in formal teaching settings in mind, providing an instructor's manual (Instructor guide, 2015) and the chapter on scholarly research (The wisdom of a crowd of experts, 2015) for free on her personal website.

Most of Stebbins' examples are applicable to everyday life rather than for gathering evidence to use in college-level writing, but her techniques can be easily applied to academic searching. For instance, Stebbins talks about how most people stop at the first relevant Google result; in higher education, many students using scholarly databases likewise stop at the first relevant result—both searchers are working under the assumption the algorithm is sorting for reliability (when in actuality, it merely sorts for relevance). Stebbins refutes this presumption by acknowledging the failings of even the best available information. After all, researchers (like

most content creators) often publish in such a way that ensures their careers continue to exist—whether that be being predisposed towards affirming their prior hypotheses, fabricating data, or merely by tacitly acknowledging that sponsors only provide funding when results are likely to be marketable. Since there are so many fallible sources out there, online information seekers need search techniques that favor the good sources and expose the unreliable.

Stebbins uses a framework of six strategies while performing a search:

1. Start at the source (Look for a specific source to search instead of just searching for the information itself)
2. Pay attention to the psychology of search (Understand how your psychology is affecting the search terms you choose)
3. Expert, amateur, or crowd (Identify whether you need an expert, or if amateur or crowd-sourced information is sufficient)
4. Context, motivation, and bias (Understand the context of both the source and your own searching needs)
5. Comparison and corroboration (Compare the source to other independent sources and check that the claim itself holds up)
6. Going deep, or not (Decide when the information is important enough to keep digging deeper) (Finding Reliable Information Online, 2015, pp. xxi-xxiv).

In each chapter, Stebbins applies these six strategies to evaluate the processes she used in answering a specific research question. This framework is helpful not only as a self-evaluation tool for students to use, but also acts as a grounding mechanism that summarizes all the twists and turns Stebbins took in getting her answers.

One major theme of this book is that the search for information will usually be messy and sometimes may result in failure. Stebbins' first major search example ends with her failing to find a clear answer to her question about whether the adage that "red wine is good for you" is verified by science. Given that "being wrong in science is expected and necessary," Stebbins recognizes she must be patient and wait for more experiments to be conducted before she can have a more definitive answer (2015, p. 18). In another instance, Stebbins ends up losing several days in trying to track down one particular researcher who is quoted by science blogs but was otherwise unfindable; here, the lesson is it's important to recognize when you've become too

distracted from your goal and need to switch tactics. Despite the lack of guaranteed success, though, Stebbins remains an advocate of trying to learn more, as digging deep will often allow you to make more informed decisions.

Another reoccurring theme in this book is why experts should be sought out when amateur or crowd-sourced information can easily “satisfice”—that is, be considered good enough to use (p. 63). Using the first hit on Google may be acceptable when looking for purely factual information, but it’s less so when looking for subjective answers to important questions. Users often end up clicking on first-page websites, but these are often deeply flawed. Review sites and blogs in particular are often highly subject to the influences of inconsistent evaluation scores, fake reviews, monetary incentives to be overly supportive, confirmation bias, the network effect, content farming, search optimization engine (SEO) manipulation, and other factors that make it hard to judge a website’s information accurately. Established professionals in the field, however, have spent the time necessary to see nuances that others would miss and are more likely to judge things consistently and reliably. In some fields, these professionals are part of industries that have explicit codes of ethics that control for various biasing influences, making their stated opinions all the more valuable.

Of particular interest for higher education purposes is Chapter 3, which focuses on finding reliable scholarly research (The wisdom of a crowd of experts, 2015). This chapter shows the reader how to combine the strengths of free cumulative databases (like Google Scholar) and library subscription databases (like Web of Science or Scopus) to find the best applicable research. Stebbins has learned to not simply let the database determine what articles are valuable, but instead goes to literature reviews first to understand who is recognized as having made important contributions and get a sense for where the scholarly conversation currently sits. She uses this information to track down those cited articles and tracing forward to see what other articles build on that information. In this way, Stebbins is able to create a more complete picture of the entire scholarly conversation to see what sticks and what has been abandoned.

Overall, *Finding Reliable Information Online* is a valuable text for anyone who wants to learn more about information literacy. Any instructor who teaches students how to find online

information should consider reading this book, whether that be to enhance their own understanding or to use as a required part of the student curriculum.

References

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