

# Hashtag Information: Researching in the Era of Social Media

by Caroline L. Osborne

With the advent of the internet, our manner of accessing information has fundamentally changed. The days of thumbing through local and national newspapers hand-delivered to your front door or perusing the Digest System in print for relevant case law are visible only in the rearview mirror. Today, information is as close as your fingertips and a touchscreen. With LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, and Google, a social media interface is frequently the primary go-to for information. Finding information is easy. But what of the quality or veracity of the information found? One of the best and worst attributes of information available via the internet is that it is unfiltered. So how do legal information seekers acquire and use information in the era of the info dump, and what are the implications for the practice of law?

Attorneys entering the profession today are often: (1) format agnostic, (2) comfortable with a broad range of media that impacts the type of sources they seek and use, (3) likely to prefer visual over textual, (4) likely to seek concise summaries of information, and (5) most likely to go directly online as a starting point.<sup>1</sup> Blogs, wikis<sup>2</sup>, and message boards are accepted sources for both personal and professional work.<sup>3</sup> YouTube is a destination source. User generated content is given equal importance with authoritative content,<sup>4</sup> and searchers are more likely to begin with Google than an index or digest.<sup>5</sup>

How we interact with online information is fundamentally different from how we interact with print material.<sup>6</sup> Convenience is crucial.<sup>7</sup> Skimming and scanning are preferred to critical, in-depth reading.<sup>8</sup> Current information-seeking behavior seems to favor accidentally finding information that is immediately utilized, regardless of relevance, over a more systematic

approach.<sup>9</sup> Easily located information is deemed “good enough.”<sup>10</sup> Librarians even have a name for this concerning behavior — “satisficing” or doing just enough to get by.<sup>11</sup> Satisficing is the opposite of the thorough research required by our profession, and in years past might have been met by adjectives such as “incomplete” or “sloppy.”

Given that these search behaviors are not likely to change, renewed emphasis should be placed on basic information literacy skills.<sup>12</sup> Research questions should focus purposefully on an analysis and evaluation of information: Is this the law I need to make my argument? May I trust this source?<sup>13</sup> Veracity of information is paramount in an environment where anyone can and does post content. Taking time to confirm a source is trustworthy is an indicia of an information-literate consumer, yet studies show that internet information consumers often do not consider veracity — preferring to believe that if it is posted, it must be true.<sup>14</sup>

The key to researching law in today’s digital environment is to read critically, ask questions about what you find, and verify the veracity of your source. So, the next time you see something interesting or a newsworthy reference in a blog, on Facebook, or via Google, remember the maxim, “trust but verify.”

#### Endnotes:

- 1 A Wiki is a type of website that allows users to add, remove, or otherwise edit all content very quickly and easily, sometimes without the need for registration. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative writing.
- 2 Scanlon, *supra* note 2.
- 3 *Id.*
- 4 Caroline L. Osborne, *Annual Survey of Second and Third Year Law Students Research and Library Use* (Spring, 2017) (on file with Washington and Lee University School of Law).

- 5 See generally Guang Chen, et al., *A Comparison of Reading Comprehension Across Paper, Computer Screens, and Tablets: Does Tablet Familiarity Matter?*, 2 J. COMPUT. EDUC. 213 (2014) (discussing impact on comprehension of reading on the computer versus paper); Sara J. Magolin, et al., *E-readers, Computer Screens, or Paper: Does Reading Comprehension Change Across Media Platforms?* 27 J. APPL. COGNIT. PSYCHOL. 512 (2013) (discussing impact of online reading on reading comprehension).
- 6 Lynn Sillipigni Connaway, et al., “*If It Is Too Inconvenient I’m Not Going After It: Convenience as a Critical Factor in Information-Seeking Behaviors*,” 33 LIB. & INFO. SCIENCE RESEARCH 179, 181 (2011).
- 7 Lucy Holman, *Millennial Students’ Mental Models of Search: Implications for Academic Librarians and Database Developers*, 37 J. ACAD. LIBR. 19, 20 (2010).
- 8 *Id.*
- 9 *Id.*
- 10 Ellie Margoilis and Kristin E. Murray, *Say Goodbye to the Books: Information Literacy as the New Legal Research Paradigm*, 38 U. DAYTON L. REV. 117, 131 (2012).
- 11 Kristin Purcell, *How Teens Do Research in the Digital World* (Nov. 1, 2012), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Student-Research>.
- 12 Margoilis, *supra* note 12, at 154.
- 13 Carl Miller and Jamie Bartlett, “*Digital Fluency: Towards Young People’s Critical Use of the Internet*,” 6 J. OF INFO. LITERACY 35, 40 (2012).



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