Website Credibility: Perceptions of Stakeholders.

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to determine the credibility (in terms of misinformation) of web-based information and users' evaluation and perceptions. The survey technique was adopted for this study. The respondents were academic staff of Computer Science Department, staff of the Central Records Processing Unit, staff of the University Network, and also final year students of Computer Science Department, all of the University of Benin, Benin City. The data was collated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results showed that the Web is truly deceptive and misinformation exists on the Internet, in different guises such as parodies/spoofs, malicious misinformation, promotion of false products on commercial sites, personal opinions presented as facts, and also E-mail hoaxes. This study also revealed that the problem of misinformation is greatly reduced since most people do not believe every information source they read on the Internet, and also that most of our respondents take time to check the authorship/sources of the information they receive from the Internet. Recommendations for checking misinformation on the Internet include, among others, ensuring quality control on websites, this is done by proper scrutiny of the information we get from the Internet.

(Keywords: misinformation, perceptions, credibility, deceptive practices, survey research)

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1991, the Internet-based hypertext system, World Wide Web (Web), has become a complex and very large repository of documents in the form of hyperlinked webpages. The Web is now known to be the richest source of information – and misinformation – ever known to man (Björneborn, 2004 as cited in Nwagwu and Omoverere, 2008). Studies indicate that as online information resources proliferate, college students are making fewer visits to the campus library to retrieve information, and that their use of the World Wide Web as an information resource is increasing overall (Lubans, 1998, 1999; Pew Research Center, 2002; Shackleford et al., 1999). In fact, college students are increasingly taking advantage of the Internet and Web to complete course assignments (Browne, Freeman, & Williamson, 2000; Lubans, 1998, 1999; Pew Research Center, 2002; Shackleford et al., 1999). The movement away from the libraries and towards cyberspace raises important concerns about the nature of information obtained by students and their ability and desire to evaluate online information effectively. Accordingly, groups such as the American Library Association, the National Institute for Literacy, and a myriad of librarians and instructors have called for schools and universities to teach Internet literacy skills, with an emphasis on evaluating Web-based information (Metzger, et al., 2003)

Over the last several years, the Internet has become one of the most consulted sources of information. Since the Internet is a global network, an essential characteristic is its many-to-many character. People who seek information can access the medium without much difficulty. For people who provide information, it is almost equally easy to distribute information. Because of both the ease with which the information is accessible and the ease with which information can be dispersed, it is also relatively easy to be misled and to mislead, intentionally or unintentionally. While the Internet was approved by business leaders, activists, researchers, and policy makers alike for greatly increasing information and easy access to information as

never before, many observers remained cognizant of a danger involved in such rapid and widespread movement of information; namely, the potential for misinformation to cause serious damage.

Misinformation on the Internet assumes very diverse forms, such as phony business rumors to spur or induce stock activity, bogus or false quotations or actions attributed to public figures, fabricated medical breakthroughs citing names of respected or nonexistent researchers, social statistics citing anonymous government reports, malicious rumors designed to defame individuals, vengeful flames against companies from dissatisfied customers or employees, urban legends or celebrities, and so on. Tools of the Internet misinformation trade include websites, e-mails, and postings on message boards, chat rooms, cybersquatting and other methods. Providing individuals with a nearly limitless reservoir of information just a mouse-click away, the power of the Internet for altering social life has been undisputed. The danger, however, is that left unchecked that power could produce extremely negative effects if the information that is shared and acted upon happens to be false, slanderous, malicious, or mere rumor.

This study discusses the various forms of misinformation on the Internet and used the survey technique to elicit information from key focus groups on the existence or otherwise, of misinformation on the Internet. The study also discusses Nigerians involvement in fraudulent misinformation, especially the notorious 419 scams on the Internet, and the loss and damages suffered by the victims. It also reports on the various measures the Nigerian Government are taken to check this menace. The study concludes that misinformation really exists on the Internet, and recommends several measures to check the authenticity of Internet information.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The descriptive survey design was employed as a research design in which a sample of relevant subjects was drawn to sample opinions from the population. The responses of our sample was analyzed to ascertain their experiences, knowledge and general opinion on misinformation on the Internet.

Population, Sample, and Instrument

The study focuses on the responses of the following subjects: Final year undergraduate students and academic staff (Lecturers) of the Department of Computer Science, Staff of the Central Records Processing Unit (CRPU), and staff of the University Network Unit (UNU), all of the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. The instrument used is the Questionnaire.

A questionnaire was developed to help get answers to the questions raised in the research. The questionnaire designed consists of three (3) sections. Section A consists of questions which contains demography or background information (such as gender, age and occupation) of the respondents; Section B consists of questions which contains information about the Internet experience of respondents; and section C consists of questions containing responses about misinformation on the Internet. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 5 students and 5 lecturers from the University of Benin City, Nigeria.

Data Collection/Analysis

Data were collected by personal distribution of the questionnaires to the respondents. The data collection took about 4 weeks. A total of 60 questionnaires were distributed and all were returned and found usable. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15.0 and depicted by frequencies, tables and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The sample population was primarily males. Results revealed that 39 (65.0%) are males while 21 (35.0%) are females. In addition, most of the respondents were aged between 21-40years. This only confirms the expectation that youths visit the Internet more often than others. The study revealed that all respondents have access to the Internet and at various locations, that is, 39 (65.0%) at the office, 11 (18.3%) at home, 7 (11.7) at a cybercafé, and 3 (5.0%) at another location or through other means such as mobile phones. In addition, most of the respondents, 27 (45.0%) use the Internet for information and knowledge search, 21 (35.0%) use it for E-mail, 9

(15.0%) use it for chat purposes, and 3 (5.0%) use it for entertainment and games.

This study also revealed that most of the respondents, that is 47 (78.3%) do not believe every information they read on the Internet, while 13 (21.7%) believe every information they read on the Internet. This only confirms the existence of misinformation. Results revealed that most information on the Internet could be false. Most of the respondents, that is, 42 (70.0%) in this study agreed that misinformation on the Internet is a problem, while 18 (30.0%) do not agree. Most of the respondents believe that the credibility of the Web may suffer due to misinformation, that is, 40 (66.7%), while 20 (33.3%) do not believe and most respondents (that is, 52 (86.7%)) doubt the originality of some information on the Internet.

Results revealed that there could be a problem with the learning of higher education students who may rely on the Internet for most of their information and knowledge search. About 55% of the respondents believe that Internet anonymity is a primary motivation to misinformation, while 33% do not. Most respondents believe that the unrestricted access to publish on the Internet makes it lack quality control. Most respondents suggested quality control measures to check the quality of Internet information.

Results revealed that misinformation could produce negative effects if left unchecked and that some information on the Internet are not as credible as those in the print media. The study also revealed that most respondents 37 (61.7%) check the authorship/sources of the information they get from the Internet, while 23 (38.3%) do not. The study, in addition, revealed that misinformation is spread on the Internet through different categories of websites with varying degrees as follows: 21 (35.0%) have come across counterfeit sites, 5 (8.3%) have come across spoofs or parodies sites, 4 (6.7%) have come across fictitious sites, 7 (11.7%) have come across product sites, 15 (25.0%) have come across malicious/hate sites, and 3 (5.0%) have come across hacked sites. Most respondents 53 (88.3%) have read some false and malicious information on the Internet, while 7 (11.7%) have not. 54 (90.0%) of the respondents have read some fraudulent information on the Internet, while 6 (10.0%) have not.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Internet offers tremendous resources and learning opportunities. Unfortunately, the Internet also contains a great deal of information that is neither valuable nor reliable. Our study revealed that many respondents use the Internet daily and have access to it from various locations and majority use the Internet as a tool for surfing/browsing of information and knowledge.

The study also revealed that misinformation on the Internet is a problem and this misinformation is usually spread through different categories of websites. In addition, misinformation is spread intentionally and unintentionally on the Internet since anyone can publish on it due to anonymity of the Internet. Results also revealed that misinformation on the Internet are, and will always be, a problem due to its widespread use and its anonymity which creates a free environment that lacks quality control. Findings also revealed that the problem of misinformation (or being misinformed) is greatly reduced since most people do not believe all information they read on the Internet, as some of them take time to check the authorship/sources of the information.

To ensure the reliability and credibility of information on the Internet, visitors to websites can check for authorship of the sites and whether contact information is provided for that person or organization, what the author's credentials, qualifications, and affiliations are, and whether the website is recommended by a trusted source.

In addition, website visitors should avoid sites that are poorly designed, unmaintained, biased, and not up-to-date in information content. Alternatively, visitors should look for fairness, in that it offers a balanced, reasoned argument, not selected or slanted and for citations, especially in instances where there is statistical data.

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