Searching in the Dark

For a new generation, students are trusting too much in—and not raging against—the machine

BY [CLIVE THOMPSON](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/ArticleArchives?author=2181952)

* [EMAIL](http://posting.bohemian.com/northbay/Tools/EmailFriend?oid=2274495)
* [PRINT](http://www.bohemian.com/gyrobase/searching-in-the-dark/Content?oid=2274495&mode=print)
* [ADD TO FAVORITES](http://posting.bohemian.com/northbay/Profile/MyFavorites?add=2274495)
* COMMENTS

click to enlarge

* **GOOGLE MANIA** Homework relies ever more on internet research, so why aren't effective teaching skills being taught?

We're often told that young people tend to be the most tech-savvy among us. But just how savvy are they? A group of researchers led by College of Charleston business professor Bing Pan tried to find out.

Specifically, Pan wanted to know how skillful young folks are at online search. His team gathered a group of college students and asked them to look up the answers to a handful of questions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the students generally relied on the web pages at the top of Google's results list.

But Pan pulled a trick: he changed the order of the results for some students. More often than not, those kids went for the bait and also used the (falsely) top-ranked pages. Pan grimly concluded that students aren't assessing information sources on their own merit—they're putting too much trust in the machine.

Other studies have found the same thing. High school and college students may be "digital natives," but they're wretched at searching. In a recent experiment at Northwestern, when 102 undergraduates were asked to do some research online, none went to the trouble of checking the authors' credentials. In 1955, we wondered why Johnny can't read. Today the question is, why can't Johnny search?

Who's to blame? Not the students. If they're naive at Googling, it's because the ability to judge information is almost never taught in school. Under 2001's No Child Left Behind Act, elementary and high schools focus on prepping their pupils for reading and math exams. And by the time kids get to college, professors assume they already have this skill. The buck stops nowhere. This situation is surpassingly ironic, because not only is intelligent search a key to everyday problem-solving, it also offers a golden opportunity to train kids in critical thinking.

Consider the efforts of Frances Harris, librarian at the magnet University Laboratory High School in Urbana, Ill. (Librarians are our national leaders in this fight; they're the main ones trying to teach search skills to kids today.) Harris educates eighth and ninth graders in how to format nuanced queries using Boolean logic and advanced settings. She steers them away from raw Google searches and has them use academic and news databases, too.

But, crucially, she also trains students to assess the credibility of what they find online. For example, she teaches them to analyze the tone of a web page to judge whether it was created by an academic, an advocacy group or a hobbyist. Students quickly gain the ability to detect if a top-ranked page about Martin Luther King Jr. was actually posted by white supremacists.

"I see them start to get really paranoid," Harris says. "The big thing in assessing search results is authorship—who put it there and why have they put it there?" Or, as pioneering librarian Buffy Hamilton at Creekview High School near Atlanta says, "This is learning how to learn."

One can imagine even more entertaining ways to help kids grok the intricacies of the search world. Why not let students start a class blog on a subject and see how long it takes for it to show up in search results?

Mind you, mastering "crap detection 101," as digital guru Howard Rheingold dubs it, isn't easy. One prerequisite is that you already know a lot about the world. For instance, Harris found that students had difficulty distinguishing a left-wing parody of the World Trade Organization's website from the real WTO site. Why? Because you need to understand why someone would want to parody it in the first place, knowledge the average eighth-grader does not yet possess.

In other words, Google makes broad-based knowledge more important, not less. A good education is the true key to effective search. But until our kids have that, let's make sure they don't always take PageRank at its word.

*This article originally appeared in* Wired.

[**News archives »**](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/ArticleArchives?category=2124189)

* **Access Denied**   [**facebook.com**](http://www.lightspeedsystems.com/Archive/WebsiteDetails.aspx?domain=facebook.com) **is categorized as forums.social\_networking** The requested page has been blocked by the content filter because it is in violation of the internet acceptable usage policy set by the administration.
  + If you would like to authenticate you may login.
  + If you feel this website should be allowed you may submit it for review.
* **[Powered by Lightspeed Systems](http://www.lightspeedsystems.com/)**    [**Tweet**](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?original_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bohemian.com%2Fnorthbay%2Fsearching-in-the-dark%2FContent%3Foid%3D2274495&source=tweetbutton&text=Searching%20in%20the%20Dark&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bohemian.com%2Fnorthbay%2Fsearching-in-the-dark%2FContent%3Foid%3D2274495)  [2](http://twitter.com/search?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bohemian.com%2Fnorthbay%2Fsearching-in-the-dark%2FContent%3Foid%3D2274495)
* This page has been shared 2 times. View these Tweets.   **0**digg
  + [**StumbleUpon**](http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bohemian.com%2Fnorthbay%2Fsearching-in-the-dark%2FContent%3Foid%3D2274495)
  + [**Submit**](http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bohemian.com%2Fnorthbay%2Fsearching-in-the-dark%2FContent%3Foid%3D2274495)
* **4**

COMMENTS (0)

Subscribe to this thread:

[By Email](javascript://Subscribe)

[With RSS](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/Rss.xml?oid=2274495&id=comments)

LATEST IN NEWS

* [**A Tangled Web**](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/a-tangled-web/Content?oid=2282630)New Judi Bari documentary reignites raging controversy
  + **by Leilani Clark**
* [**Going Rogue**](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/going-rogue/Content?oid=2281540)
  + **by Rachel Dovey**
* [**Occupy Journalism**](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/occupy-journalism/Content?oid=2281557)Michael Levitin, editor of 'The Occupied Wall Street Journal,' speaks on the movement that confounded the press
  + **by Garrett McAuliffe**
* [More »](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/ArticleArchives?category=2124189)

AUTHOR ARCHIVES

* [**Keying in the Future Leaders**](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/keying-in-the-future-leaders/Content?oid=2184041)Software affects everything we do. Why isn't programming a required course?
  + **by Clive Thompson**
* [More »](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/ArticleArchives?author=2181952)
* [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/pages/North-Bay-Bohemian/80121576515)
* [Twitter](http://twitter.com/#!/nbaybohemian)
* [RSS](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/Syndication)
* [Subscribe](http://posting.bohemian.com/northbay/Newsletter)

FIND IT

EVENTS MUSIC DINING

-All Dates-

Friday, March 23

Saturday, March 24

Sunday, March 25

Monday, March 26

Tuesday, March 27

Wednesday, March 28

Thursday, March 29

Friday, March 30

Saturday, March 31

Sunday, April 1

Monday, April 2

Tuesday, April 3

Wednesday, April 4

Thursday, April 5

Friday, April 6

Saturday, April 7

Sunday, April 8

Monday, April 9

Tuesday, April 10

Wednesday, April 11

Thursday, April 12

Friday, April 13

Saturday, April 14

Sunday, April 15

Monday, April 16

Tuesday, April 17

Wednesday, April 18

Thursday, April 19

Friday, April 20

Saturday, April 21

Sunday, April 22

-All Categories-

CALENDAR

  Art

  Comedy

  Dance

  Events

  Field Trips

  Film

  Food & Drink

  For Kids

  Holidays

  Lectures

  Readings

  Theater

COMMUNITY

  Around Town

  Meetings

  Sports/Recreation

  Volunteers

-All Regions-

  Sonoma

  Marin

  Napa

[Submit an event](http://posting.bohemian.com/northbay/SubmitAnEvent/Page)

[BOHO BEAT](http://www.bohemian.com/blogs/BohoBeat/)

[**March 25: Eroica Trio at Mt. Tam United Methodist Church**](http://www.bohemian.com/BohoBeat/archives/2012/03/21/march-25-eroica-trio-at-mt-tam-united-methodist-church)

By Michael Shufro

[**March 27: Reduced Shakespeare Company at SRJC**](http://www.bohemian.com/BohoBeat/archives/2012/03/21/2282570-march-27-reduced-shakespeare-company-at-srjc)

By Michael Shufro

[**March 24: Blood Beach at Christy's on the Square**](http://www.bohemian.com/BohoBeat/archives/2012/03/21/march-24-blood-beach-at-christys-on-the-square)

By Michael Shufro

[More »](http://www.bohemian.com/blogs/BohoBeat/)

FACEBOOK ACTIVITY

**Access Denied**

earching in the Dark

For a new generation, students are trusting too much in—and not raging against—the machine

BY [CLIVE THOMPSON](http://www.bohemian.com/northbay/ArticleArchives?author=2181952)

* [EMAIL](http://posting.bohemian.com/northbay/Tools/EmailFriend?oid=2274495)
* [PRINT](http://www.bohemian.com/gyrobase/searching-in-the-dark/Content?oid=2274495&mode=print)
* [ADD TO FAVORITES](http://posting.bohemian.com/northbay/Profile/MyFavorites?add=2274495)
* COMMENTS

click to enlarge

* **GOOGLE MANIA** Homework relies ever more on internet research, so why aren't effective teaching skills being taught?

We're often told that young people tend to be the most tech-savvy among us. But just how savvy are they? A group of researchers led by College of Charleston business professor Bing Pan tried to find out.

Specifically, Pan wanted to know how skillful young folks are at online search. His team gathered a group of college students and asked them to look up the answers to a handful of questions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the students generally relied on the web pages at the top of Google's results list.

But Pan pulled a trick: he changed the order of the results for some students. More often than not, those kids went for the bait and also used the (falsely) top-ranked pages. Pan grimly concluded that students aren't assessing information sources on their own merit—they're putting too much trust in the machine.

Other studies have found the same thing. High school and college students may be "digital natives," but they're wretched at searching. In a recent experiment at Northwestern, when 102 undergraduates were asked to do some research online, none went to the trouble of checking the authors' credentials. In 1955, we wondered why Johnny can't read. Today the question is, why can't Johnny search?

Who's to blame? Not the students. If they're naive at Googling, it's because the ability to judge information is almost never taught in school. Under 2001's No Child Left Behind Act, elementary and high schools focus on prepping their pupils for reading and math exams. And by the time kids get to college, professors assume they already have this skill. The buck stops nowhere. This situation is surpassingly ironic, because not only is intelligent search a key to everyday problem-solving, it also offers a golden opportunity to train kids in critical thinking.

Consider the efforts of Frances Harris, librarian at the magnet University Laboratory High School in Urbana, Ill. (Librarians are our national leaders in this fight; they're the main ones trying to teach search skills to kids today.) Harris educates eighth and ninth graders in how to format nuanced queries using Boolean logic and advanced settings. She steers them away from raw Google searches and has them use academic and news databases, too.

But, crucially, she also trains students to assess the credibility of what they find online. For example, she teaches them to analyze the tone of a web page to judge whether it was created by an academic, an advocacy group or a hobbyist. Students quickly gain the ability to detect if a top-ranked page about Martin Luther King Jr. was actually posted by white supremacists.

"I see them start to get really paranoid," Harris says. "The big thing in assessing search results is authorship—who put it there and why have they put it there?" Or, as pioneering librarian Buffy Hamilton at Creekview High School near Atlanta says, "This is learning how to learn."

One can imagine even more entertaining ways to help kids grok the intricacies of the search world. Why not let students start a class blog on a subject and see how long it takes for it to show up in search results?

Mind you, mastering "crap detection 101," as digital guru Howard Rheingold dubs it, isn't easy. One prerequisite is that you already know a lot about the world. For instance, Harris found that students had difficulty distinguishing a left-wing parody of the World Trade Organization's website from the real WTO site. Why? Because you need to understand why someone would want to parody it in the first place, knowledge the average eighth-grader does not yet possess.

In other words, Google makes broad-based knowledge more important, not less. A good education is the true key to effective search. But until our kids have that, let's make sure they don't always take PageRank at its word.

*This article originally appeared in* Wired.