Is the Internet Destroying Scholarship? April 5, 2016.

A. Michael Noll
Columns · 2016
Original: http://quello.msu.edu/is-the-internet-destroying-scholarship-by-michael-noll/
Archived copy, Internet Archive snapshot 2016-07-29

Is the Internet Destroying Scholarship? by Michael Noll

by William Dutton

April 5th, 2016

Is the Internet Destroying Scholarship? by Michael Noll

Is the Internet Destroying Scholarship?

A. Michael Noll

April 4, 2016

© 2016 AMN

Has the Internet created a batch of scholars who simply cruise the Internet for references and citations for their research and mostly ignore old-fashioned libraries and archives? Is the past before the Internet, and everything online, now forgotten and forever lost? Is the Internet destroying scholarship?

A student paper included what it claimed was a picture of me. It was not – it was a picture shown on Google images that was incorrectly implied to be me. Actually it was a photo that I had taken of my boss at Bell Labs in the 1960s. “Cut and paste” is used by many students, and some scholars – and is not good scholarship.

Today it is too easy and tempting just to search Google for a few key words – and then credit whatever turns up in the top five listings. But that means that only material accessible over the Internet is indexed and listed. Anything before about 1990 is mostly not Internet available – and thus not indexed. It is as if the past before 1990 never existed.

A few years ago, I was in the basement of a library looking for an old book. I found it, and also other old books on similar topics that I did not know existed. This is the serendipitous nature of looking though the stacks of paper books. It also applies to looking through journals for a particular paper, and then discovering others of interest.

A scholar was writing a paper on a topic and though knowing of a previously published paper on an almost identical topic deliberately ignored it, claiming that the “new” paper would be better. Another scholar published a recent paper that failed to mention my published papers on virtually

the same topic. The scholar did not know of my papers – they were published before 1990. However, a Google key-word search listed one of my early papers, along with its abstract. I guess these are example of avoidance of the past.

But is it ignorance and avoidance of the past, or simply just sloppy scholarship in general? But some archives at great libraries are still busy with scholars accessing, examining, and studying papers and books from the past. Paper lasts for centuries. Will digital bits last much longer than a few decades as digital media become obsolete, like the floppy disks of the 1970s?

It seems that as I get older, scholarship seems to decline more. Is this just because the past was "those good old days" or is good scholarship in decline? Are universities holding their students – and faculty – to the highest standards? Or are these the days of "mass" everything – even mass scholarship done in a hurry to please the mass academic audience? Is thorough research just too much time and effort?

A. Michael Noll

Tags: books, digital scholarship, Internet, paper, scholarship

One thought on "Is the Internet Destroying Scholarship? by Michael Noll"

Aleksandr Yankelevich says: April 5, 2016 at 9:58 pm Regarding the last paragraph, I am of the opinion that it could be both, nostalgia for the past and scholarly decline. Some "Facebook scholarship" very recently informed me that A's presently take up the highest percentage of the 5 letter grades awarded in major public universities. I did not bother looking for source material there. Then again, for my own research, it so happens that I am meeting with a university librarian less than 12 hours from the time that I am writing this to obtain help in sorting through historic data (admittedly, I am interested in data past the 1990s in this case). Perhaps the major factor driving a perception of scholarly decline is the fact that the Internet makes so much more of the last few decades accessible than was possible prior to the existence of the Internet, that even an honest scholar does not have the time to go back much further. Moreover, the Internet makes bad scholarship significantly more accessible. Thus, this could well be a matter of Internet driven perception. Reply

Regarding the last paragraph, I am of the opinion that it could be both, nostalgia for the past and scholarly decline. Some "Facebook scholarship" very recently informed me that A's presently take up the highest percentage of the 5 letter grades awarded in major public universities. I did not bother looking for source material there. Then again, for my own research, it so happens that I am meeting with a university librarian less than 12 hours from the time that I am writing this to obtain help in sorting through historic data (admittedly, I am interested in data past the 1990s in this case). Perhaps the major factor driving a perception of scholarly decline is the fact that the Internet makes so much more of the last few decades accessible than was possible prior to the existence of the Internet, that even an honest scholar does not have the time to go back much further. Moreover, the

Internet makes bad scholarship significantly more accessible. Thus, this could well be a matter of Internet driven perception.

Leave a Reply

Archival reading copy rendered from the Internet Archive snapshot of the page above, for the A. Michael Noll collection at bre.art, with the author's permission. Text is the author's; this layout is not the original publication's.