Information Literacy in the Postgraduate Politics and International Relations Classroom

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Abstract

As ChatGPT and other generative AI tools have swept into the world of higher education, more attention than usual is being paid to the way in which students behave in relation to information. One claim is that some students are not using AI-generated material with acceptable levels of care and ethical attention. This article does not test this accusation. Rather, it explores the notion on which this argument rests, namely that experienced students know how to respond appropriately to *any* piece of information, AI-based or not. In this article we assess this assumption through a study of the information behaviours of a cohort of students who ought to be amongst the most sophisticated in terms of their relationship with information: taught postgraduate students (from two universities) studying Politics and International Relations.

Keywords: Information literacy, ChatGPT, postgraduate studies, 'seven pillars model'

Introduction

To be able to react astutely and critically to an information environment which has changed out of all recognition in the last few decades is a necessary attribute for any twenty-first century student. Moreover, to be a student of Politics and International Relations, a discipline that exposes students to a particularly dazzling array of information, data, opinions, prattle and deliberate lies, there is simply no more important skill (Harden and Harden 2020). In the UK context, this position is – to some extent – reflected in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) statement that, to graduate with an honours degree in Politics and International Relations, students should, *inter alia*, be able to 'evaluate the accuracy and reliability of sources, and use that knowledge to appropriately discuss and apply evidence' (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2023: 16). The arrival of AI

tools such as ChatGPT that allow the generation of human-like texts in response to prompts has only added the importance of these critical information skills (Woods 2024).

However, despite similar statements being published in countries across the globe by organisations like the QAA – for example, Austrian public universities are set quality standards by the AQ, the (in English) Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ 2024) – it remains uncertain whether the manner in which the discipline is taught has adapted sufficiently to meet this particular challenge. Information literacy is the term most commonly used to describe the process by which individuals are encouraged to possess the skills and disposition necessary to treat all information in a suitably critical manner, but can we be confident that students of Politics/International Relations (IR) *are* graduating with sufficient information literacy to reach the QAA's, AQ's, or any other equivalent national body's benchmark? As it stands, though research points to excellent work taking place in pockets – particularly in the US (e.g. Cook and Walsh 2012; Shannon and Shannon 2016; Harden and Harden 2020) – there is scant evidence to suggest that information literacy is a significant part of the Politics/IR curriculum in many higher education institutions. For example, in a recent worldwide survey of Politics/IR faculty, only a minority of respondents stated that any explicit information literacy education occurred at all as part of the curriculum and, that which did exist, tended to be of a superficial nature (Atkinson and Thornton 2022). This situation, generally, was not because faculty failed to recognise the need to equip their students to face these information challenges. Rather, it was simply that 'their priorities ultimately lie elsewhere' (Thornton and Atkinson 2022: 603).

That is not to say, however, that students are generally leaving undergraduate education without having acquired sufficiently sophisticated levels of information literacy. As

McGuinness notes, many academics seem to assume that 'students will somehow absorb and develop the requisite knowledge and skills through the very process of preparing a piece of written work coursework, and by applying the advice of their supervisors' (2006: 577). And this assumption may possess some validity.

This article will test this assumption through analysis of the information literacy demonstrated by a group of students who have already graduated but have returned to the world of higher education. In short, we will investigate the learning attitudes and behaviours of students involved in taught postgraduate (PGT) study in two Politics/IR departments. From an information literacy perspective, this group of students is particularly interesting because the majority of them – according to the various information literacy-related benchmark statements made by bodies such as the QAA – should, by virtue of successfully completing their undergraduate degree, already possess the skills necessary to treat information in a suitably sophisticated and critical manner. It is time to find out whether this is the case.

There is an additional bonus to this area of analysis. Research into the learning attitudes and behaviours of students at the PGT level – which, in the discipline of Politics/IR, typically involves participation on a master's degree – is greatly overshadowed by a focus on undergraduate study (Henderson et al. 2016: 235-6). This has certainly been the case regarding published studies of information literacy education within the Politics/IR students classroom, where examination of undergraduate needs and behaviours – particularly of those students in their first year – have overwhelmingly dominated (e.g. Stevens and Campbell 2008; Shannon and Shannon 2016). That the number of undergraduates far exceeds that of PGT students is one obvious reason for this considerable imbalance, but –

until recently at least – a further factor has been a widespread assumption that PGT students face fewer challenges than undergraduates, largely because they 'are perceived to have considerable experience of academic practices' (Liu and Pullinger 2021: 101). However, the expansion the numbers of PGT students has prompted some reflection, which in turn has led to a growing awareness that PGT students are not the homogenous group, nor automatically as academically savvy, as they are sometimes assumed to be. It is only right, as Anders insists (2021: 156), that the information literacy needs of students other than those studying at undergraduate level are considered in their own right.

Information literacy

Information literacy is a contested, and sometimes contradictory, concept (Hicks and Lloyd 2021). To add to the confusion, there are many other similar 'literacies' out there which are sometimes treated as sub-sets of information literacy but often not, according to the preference of individual scholars (SCONUL 2011; Koltay 2021). These alternative literacies include media literacy, digital literacy, and – recently – 'ChatGPT literacy' (Lee and Park 2024). However, this is not the place to engage in the lively debate about the nature and extent of information literacy itself. Rather, to provide clarity and context for this study of PGT student information behaviours, it needs simply to be pointed out that the definition that informs this research is primarily that provided by the influential 'Seven Pillars of Information Literacy' introduced by SCONUL (the Society of College, National and University Libraries) in 1999, and revised in 2011. This model – which is focused on higher education, hence its particular applicability to this article – suggests that information literate people 'will demonstrate an awareness of how they gather, use, manage, synthesise and create

information and data in an ethical manner and will have the information skills to do so effectively' (SCONUL 2011).

SCONUL's model further assumes that the process of developing information literacy is 'a continuing, holistic process with often simultaneous activities or processes which can be encompassed within the Seven Pillars of Information Literacy' (SCONUL 2011). The eponymous 'seven pillars' are named after seven verbs – identify; scope; plan; gather; evaluate; manage; present – and are distinguished by a series of statements relating to both a set of information-related skills/competencies and an accompanying set of information-related attitudes/understandings. As this division indicates, the 'seven pillars' model is based on the idea that information literacy is a combination of both abilities (i.e. skills that can be 'ticked off') and – at a deeper level – new ways to perceive the world. Within each pillar 'an individual can develop from "novice" to "expert" as they progress through their learning life'; though – informed by a belief that the process of becoming information literate is not necessarily a simple, linear one – it is also claimed that 'it is possible to move down a pillar as well as progress up it' (SCONUL 2011). Thus, according to this model, PGT students, having progressed further through their learning life, will likely demonstrate higher levels of information literacy than most undergraduates; but this assumption is not a given and, as such – we argue – should be tested.

To start the process of casting light on information literacy at the PGT level, we began our analysis by designing a survey to explore the information attitudes and behaviours of four classes of PGT students who attended two different universities, one in Austria and one in the UK. The PGT-focused survey was administered at the outset of the second semester of each student's programme of study, first in the academic year 2021–22, and again in 2022–

23. Thus it might appear that this research – the bulk of which was conducted at a time before ChatGPT was released in November 2022 – is already out of date as it was the sudden arrival of this particular generative AI tool that led to the recent bout of soul-searching about where students find the information with which to populate their academic work in particular, and about the nature of education in general. For example, Eke (2023: 2) suggests:

> ChatGPT is a definition of disruptive technology. It is here and it is about to disrupt both the ontology and epistemology of academia, science and teaching. That means that academia is about to reconsider what constitutes knowledge and how it can be acquired.

Moreover, these new generative AI tools certainly do present many problems from an explicitly information literacy perspective, not least, as Woods (2024) explains, that they tend to present information in a manner that allows 'no way of finding where the information [originally] comes from'. It is also clearly the case that these AI systems provide tempting means with which to cheat and plagiarise (James and Filgo 2023). As a result of this challenge, certain assessments – such as traditional essays – that have long been at the centre of the academic pedagogy are now under serious threat of extinction (Herbold et al. 2023). In comparison, some the earlier 'threats' that are mentioned in the survey, such as those posed by the likes of Wikipedia, seem very small beer.

However, in reality, this recent disruption simply re-enforces the significance of this research. As Lee and Park (2024) highlight, most of the information skills and aptitudes to necessary to use ChatGPT successfully are much the same as those identified in SCONUL's seven pillars model, in particular the ability and awareness to critically evaluate all sources (including

ChatGPT), the competence to communicate and apply any such information proficiently and thoughtfully, and – maybe the most important factor of all in this brave new world bursting with extra temptations – the wisdom to act with ethical consideration. Students needed to develop sufficient levels of information literacy in the days of Google to thrive fully in an academic setting and, indeed, to understand the political world around them. This need is multiplied in the coming era of ChatGPT. That makes it all the more important than ever that we have some understanding of the levels of information literacy students arrive with when entering in the Politics/IR classroom, including at PGT level. We have to make sure that we do not assume more expertise in such matters than they actually possess.

The survey and results

As noted earlier, to start the process of assessing information literacy at the PGT level, we began by designing a survey to explore the information attitudes and behaviours of students based in two universities in different countries. This international dimension is expanded by the knowledge – gained though admissions data – that, while these students were pursuing a PGT degree in one of these two countries, their undergraduate education took place at universities throughout the world. As might be anticipated, most of the students at the Austrian university were originally from various central European countries, with many also from the Balkan peninsula. Most of those studying at the UK university were British nationals, with others from a broad array of countries including China, USA, and Zimbabwe. It is also worth noting that, though a clear majority of the students had previously studied Politics and/or IR at the undergraduate level, others came with experience of studying other disciplines such as History and Economics.

This survey – which invites a mix of quantitative and qualitative responses – is an adaptation of one that had been used for many years to explore information literacy awareness amongst first-year students at one higher education institution in the UK (Thornton 2019). A longitudinal analysis of this series of undergraduate-focused surveys – the first administered back in 2009 – suggested that, though students throughout the time period being examined demonstrated fairly widespread understanding of some of the basic features of information literacy, there were significant gaps. Furthermore, there was no indication that more recent cohorts of students were significantly more discerning users of information than their earlier counterparts (Thornton 2019: 106). For example, despite the near-decade temporal difference between the students surveyed, there was negligible difference recorded in the low proportion of students who showed evidence that they possessed a coherent strategy for assessing the reliability of information made available through websites (2019: 98).

Following the SCONUL model, we would anticipate that the responses of PGT students to a similar survey would suggest a generally more confident grasp of information literacy than demonstrated by most of those relatively fresh to the university experience. However, as the authors of the SCONUL model highlight, we cannot be wholly confident of this assumption as each individual's information literacy journey can include steps backwards as well as forward, and – in any case – is heavily dependent on 'the context of the broad information landscape' in which each individual operates (SCONUL 2011).

As noted earlier, this survey was administered at the outset of the second semester of each student's programme of study. Administering the survey at this point in a student's career allowed us to analyse how both the students' undergraduate studies and any first semester of instruction at PGT level had informed their awareness of information literacy. We

performed the survey by sending out a link, via email, which led the students to the survey. Taking the survey was voluntary and not associated with the assessment of student performance in any way. The take up rate was around 20% – in total, 47 respondents – which provided a sufficiently varied and balanced pool across all pertinent demographics. However, this small sample size did limit our ability to engage in sophisticated statistical inference. Despite this, we still believe that sufficient insights concerning the information literacy abilities of master's students have been garnered to make in-depth analysis of this data worthwhile.

In terms of demographic information, the vast majority of respondents were in their 20s at the time of the survey, with most being in their mid-20s. There was a fairly even split between those who wished to identify as either female (24) or male (22). We also asked our students what type of university they attended for their undergraduate studies, the options being 'research intensive', 'teaching focused' or a 'good mix of both', with the final group the pick of just over half the respondents. In the final one of these types of questions, we asked our students whether they had been engaged in full-time employment prior to their enrolment in a master's programme. The majority of our students – just over three-quarters – had not engaged in full-time employment before they began their degree.

We then moved on to ask the students questions that would reveal features of their information literacy. The first question of this type was a simple but fundamental one: 'Have you received any training to help improve your information literacy (i.e. the ability to effectively, critically and ethically find, collate and deploy information)?'. We found that a majority – 30 students, that is 63.8% of our respondents – claimed that they had not. These numbers fit into our previous understanding of the limited role played by information

literacy education in the Politics/IR undergraduate classroom (Thornton 2019; Thornton and Atkinson 2022). It also represents a strikingly similar response to the same question when asked of undergraduates in the final of the first-year focused information literacy surveys discussed earlier, the one that was administered back in 2017. Here, 63.6% could not recall any such training prior to their existing undergraduate studies (Thornton 2019: 95).

We asked a follow-up question to those PGT students who answered yes to the previous question, which was to describe the type of information literacy training they had received. Of the 17 respondents that answered this open-ended question, only two explicitly mentioned library workshops or courses. For example, one student wrote, 'During my bachelors education, we did several library workshops to help us learn how to effectively find and cite research sources'. Rather more, six respondents, mentioned general skills classes/workshops, for example: 'Completed through specific workshops that target improving critical reading/writing/thinking skills'. Three respondents highlighted the picking up of skills through the process of learning on traditional content modules: 'Writing papers and going into details help to think critically'. However, the most popular response – with eight students pointing to this form of training – was to identify research methods classes, for example: 'Courses such as Research Methods, Thesis Research could be considered as such'. To note, some students highlighted more than one form of training, hence the more than 17 responses recorded.

The next question asked about the types of information students had used when preparing to write essays or other assignments in the previous twelve months. The question also asked about *how* these sources were accessed: that is, did the source arrive in printed format via a physical library; in digital form through the university's own digital catalogue and/or

information discovery tool; or through a general search engine such as Google or Google Scholar. Students were asked to identify all various named sources of information that applied.

In retrospect, this question would have worked better had we asked two distinct questions, one about the different sources used and another about where the information was gathered. Nevertheless, the responses still provide useful clues about the types of information PGT students prefer to use for their assessments, and where they find them.

The types of source most commonly acknowledged were books (which 50% of the students accessed in physical form, typically via a library; 76.1% accessed in digital through university search engine; 76.1% accessed through a general search engine such as Google); journal articles (in the same categories: 10.9%; 69.6%; 76.1%); and what we term 'official data', that is information published by governments, parliaments, the UN, the EU and similar sources (15.2%; 34.8%; 65.2%). Newspaper articles were also used by many, again far more in digital format rather than printed (4.3%; 37%; 58.7%). It is particularly significant that academic journals – often, at least in the traditional double-blind peer-reviewed version of this type of resource, regarded as the 'gold standard' in terms of information quality (Lantz et al. 2016: 261) – were so popular. The equivalent response in the 2017 survey of first year students showed, as would be expected, significantly less use of journal articles (Thornton 2019: 96). 50% of the PGT students highlighted use of general website sources, that is information gathered online that did not fall into other categories. This is a type of information is generally regarded as being of less reliable quality compared to most others (Lantz 2016). Periodicals such as *The Economist*, think tank/NGO/pressure group data, and archival sources were also identified, but by fewer than half of those who responded.

It is also worth highlighting that, for all forms of information, the most popular – or joint most popular – method of access was through a commercial internet search engine such as Google or Google Scholar rather than through material made available – either physically or digitally – via the students' own university library service. From an information literacy perspective, this is significant because library material has been curated in some manner, so a student can be fairly confident that information gathered in this way is likely to be reliable. With search engines such as Google, there are far fewer filters. There are, of course, plenty of excellent, authoritative nuggets of material made available in this manner, but to find them in the murky slops of what could be termed 'information bilge' is often more difficult.

It is also notable that the ubiquity of Google is such that universities are sometimes forced to define their own systems for locating information through comparison with its powerful commercial cousin. For example, Edinburgh Napier University refers to the system that it – and many other universities – use, LibrarySearch, in these terms: 'like Google for academic material, searching across everything on the shelves in our libraries and hundreds of subscription databases' (Edinburgh Napier University 2023).

As noted, general websites are regarded as one of the more challenging repositories for locating trustworthy information. To explore this area further, we asked the students what criteria, if any, they would use to assess whether a recently discovered website contained information reliable enough to use confidently? 42 replied to this open question, and the responses can be broken down into these categories:

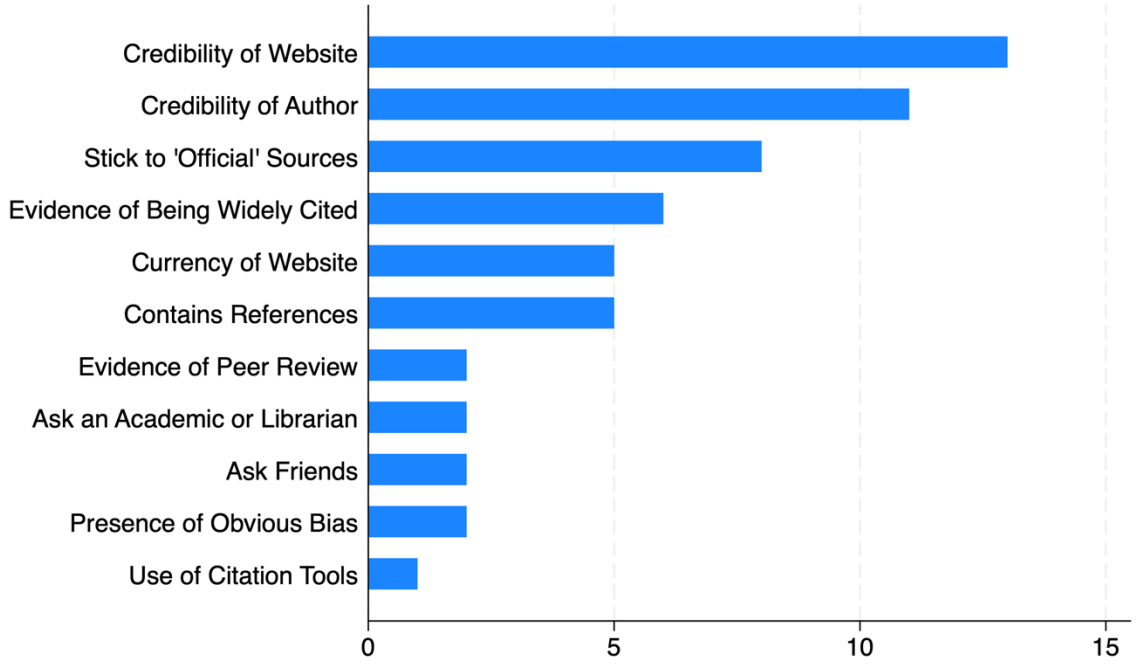

Figure 2: Frequency of responses to question asking about how students assess information found on websites.

Thus there was evidence amongst some students of the development of a careful website evaluation strategy similar to that influentially recommended by Kapoun at the end of the twentieth century (1998). Indeed, one student did produce a list that read: 'Authoritativeness; Objectivity; Currency; Accuracy; Reputation; Evidence-based'. However, this was the single most sophisticated response, with most respondents naming just one or two forms of critical evaluation, for example '1 - official website, 2- used by other researchers before', 'check whether it was a secure website', 'I'd probably ask my professors'. . The responses suggested that we cannot simply assume that PGT students do possess the necessary critical attributes necessary to select websites with confidence. As before, the responses to this question on the PGT-focused survey were not strikingly different to those made by first year undergraduates who answered a similar question in 2017 (Thornton 2019: 99).

To explore the issue of source evaluation in more depth, we asked the PGT students to imagine that they had been asked to find information on a database for a project entitled 'A Comparison of Two Authoritarian Regimes', and then asked what strategies they would use 'to ensure an effective search'.

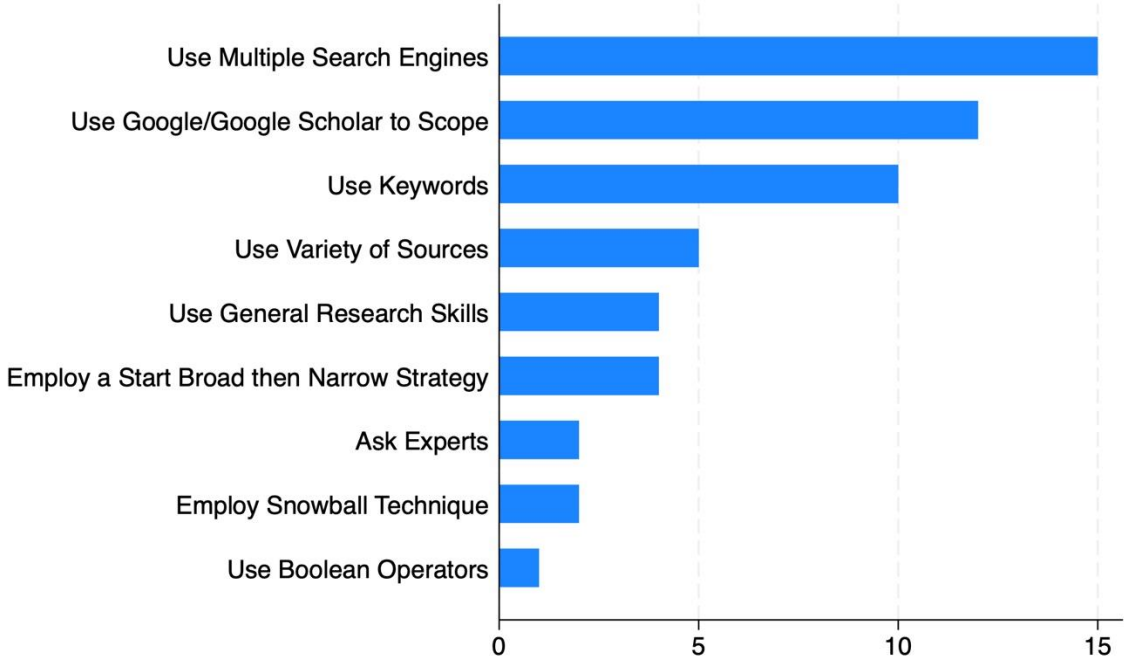

Figure 3: Strategies that students use to search for information

The findings reflected earlier results, namely to suggest that, although some PGT students possessed relatively advanced search strategies, many did not. Thus, one or two students would write responses of considerable sophistication, for example:

> I would determine what authoritarian regimes I wanted to observe. [I would then] conduct background research i.e. a general google search […] to see what is out there. I would then have a comprehensive section searching for contextualization on what it means to be an authoritarian regime. Then [I would] research the regimes I am looking for, ensuring to employ triangulation and have a well-balanced intake of sources that are credible.

However, more common were responses such as ‘use google search engine just typing key words’. There were also those who wrote ‘I don’t know’ and ‘unsure’. Another student wrote, somewhat randomly, ‘it is so exhausting to go to the Library and find something hardcopy’. As before, the main lesson here is that we cannot assume that all PGT students have high levels of information literacy. In addition, the near absence of features such as phrase searches and Boolean operators – particularly when compared to the survey responses from first year undergraduates from previous decades (Thornton 2019: 98) – further suggests the continuing dominance of Google. It appears to have quietly fashioned default information search processes across much of the world.

To further investigate students’ information behaviours in respect to websites, we asked for the name of one website used regularly for academic work, with a brief explanation why it was trusted. The following were the only responses to appear more than once.

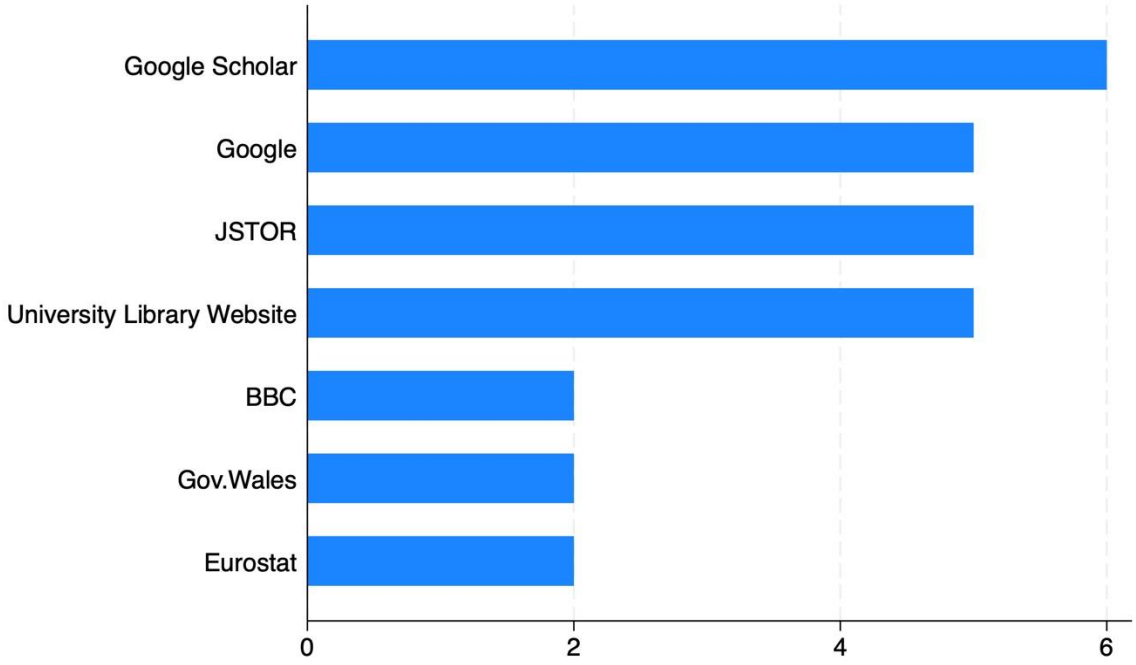

Figure 4: Websites used by students for their academic work

These findings are interesting in a number of ways. Most strikingly, it is noticeable that most of the responses for a request to name a 'website' actually prompted the name of something else, such as – in the cases of Google and Google Scholar – an internet search engine, or – in the case of JSTOR – a digital library/archive of journal articles, books and some primary sources. The selection of JSTOR is itself particularly noteworthy. Responses suggest that recommendation by and/or perceived emulation of academic staff has a role to play in its popularity, along with ease of accessibility: 'JSTOR b[e]c[ause] there are many scientific articles that are also used by our profs' and 'jstor.org [because] it is a famous research website, that is full of research articles…', 'I use JSTOR as it is a large and well-stocked database and I am granted direct access through my university's proxy'. Google Scholar seems to be popular for similar reasons, for example: 'Scholar. The reason is because most successful scholars and scientists use the website to share their articles and works', 'Google Scholar since it's reliable and has a lot of content'; 'Google Scholar. It is widely

recommended by most of my professors'. This final quote highlights the most striking finding here, namely that the professionals who seem to hold most sway regarding students' use of a particular resource are not information specialists/librarians, but academic staff. This is an understandable tactic. It makes sense for students to emulate perceived the academic skills and habits of those who have succeeded in academia – and, in addition, are the people who tend to mark their work. However, often these skills and habits were developed in a very different information environment, and it is fair to say that faculty awareness of current information literacy practice is patchy at best (Thornton and Atkinson 2022). There is little evidence to suggest that the emulation of 'my professors' is a technique that necessarily guarantees the best information behaviours.

This theme resurfaced when reviewing the responses to a question that mirrored the previous one, in that we asked students to name a website that they would never use in their academic work, and to provide a brief explanation why that was the case. Of the 39 responses, there were only two 'websites' that were identified by more than a single respondent. The *Daily Mail* was mentioned by two students, with one of them suggesting that the reason was 'excessive political bias and at times poor standard of journalism'. However, the overwhelming focus of student suspicion here was Wikipedia, identified by fully 25 students, that is 64.1% of all those who responded to the question.

That this particular free-content online encyclopedia is the subject of such rampant distrust is strange in some respects, as it is more reliable than some other sources and not without its merits (Selwyn and Gorard 2016). The open-edited nature of this resource is regularly mentioned as the main issue: 'Wikipedia for sure. Since we can edit it ourselves, it is not worthy of use'; 'Wikipedia: Anybody can access these databases and add info that is

inaccurate and perpetuates a false narrative'. However, it is also evident that many students do have a complex and sophisticated relationship with this much-maligned source of information, with many responses acknowledging use of Wikipedia as part of an initial scoping exercise: 'Wikipedia. Anyone can edit this, though it is a good starting point to find general ideas and sources. I would never cite it in academic work.' Returning to the theme of faculty playing a leading role in shaping student information behaviour, another student wrote, 'Wikipedia: I mean I think it is good to get an overview, but profs didn't want us to use it for papers'. This leitmotif is also present in one of the most candid of the responses to this question: 'Wikipedia, I always use it but never cite it. Not because I distrust it, mainly just because academics don't like it. I might find info on there and then attribute it to a book.' Selwyn and Gorard suggested some time ago that there is 'little point recommending against student use of Wikipedia, or attempted to prohibit altogether', it being better to direct efforts toward 'supporting students in becoming critical and proficient uses of Wikipedia as part of their information gathering and sense-making practices' (2016: 33). It may be that an update of this recommendation ought to be applied to the Wikipedia *de nos jours*, ChatGPT.

We also inquired about students' use of social media, asking to what extent social media sources were used for their academic work. Similar to general information gleaned from uncategorisable websites, social media 'are regarded as a challenging information resource that makes credibility evaluation a more complicated behavior' (Shabini and Keshavarz 2022: 413). 38 students responded to this question, of which 19 reported that they had not used social media sources in their work. Of the remaining 19 students, nine explicitly identified Twitter (the survey was conducted before the platform's recent rebranding to X); four identified Facebook; Instagram was acknowledged by two students; and YouTube was

identified as a social media source that they use by one student. However, in most cases (13), social media was not primarily used as vehicle for obtaining information about a topic but, rather, as the subject of student research or as means of gathering data for research purposes, e.g. 'Part of my research was to evaluate the social media postings of three […] candidates running for President (US)…' and 'Facebook, Instagram > shared the survey for my MA thesis'. Only five students suggested that they used social media as a means of gathering information, for example one student remarked: 'To gather actual information. TV, Newspapers. I use it to improve my understanding of current affairs' and 'Twitter. Always is my first station. Usually I follow [an] academic person and read what they have shared on their profile.' Thus, though not disagreeing with Shabini and Keshavarz's view that students in general would benefit from increased education to encourage 'critical thinking to evaluate social media information' (2022: 428), many of the PGT students who participated in this particular study did show evidence of relatively high-level information literacy in this area. Moreover, as would be anticipated, overall the PGT students did display evidence of a more critical and sophisticated appreciation of social media than did the first-year undergraduate students when surveyed back in 2017 (Thornton 2019).

As the SCONUL model suggests, one of the most important elements of information literacy is the ability to critically analyse any information available. Many of the survey questions noted above have drawn responses that hint at students' capabilities in this department, but we also asked a question that tried to make explicit students' comprehension of this matter, which was by simply asking what each student understood by the phrase 'critical analysis'. 41 students responded to this question, and these responses fell into three main categories (with inevitable overlaps). The most popular of these type of responses (19) was to suggest that a critical analysis was one that involved, in some way, a particularly in-depth

examination of a topic. One representative response from this category put it this way: ‘critical analysis is a deep dive into a topic area. You look at the how, what, why, when of an issue and develop a structure to tackling a proposed question’. The second most popular response (17) included a more critical dimension, one which assesses the strengths and weaknesses of any statements or arguments made. This group included the response that, ‘To me, it [critical analysis] means that you should consider whether a claim that is made is sufficiently backed up by clear, appropriate and justifiable evidence’. The final group (made up of ten responses) included statements that went beyond this level of sophistication and made explicit the critical issues of trust and truth. This is an example of one of the most sophisticated responses in this category: ‘Criticizing the texts/sources of information one analyses. Not taking things at face value, because the lines between truth and fiction and facts and opinions are fine. Looking for syntactic ambiguities, opposing views and arguments, and not believing a source just because it’s renowned’.

These findings suggest that most of the PGT students who responded to the survey did possess a thoughtful appreciation of the meanings behind the phrase ‘critical analysis’. Nevertheless, only a minority put forward responses that suggested critical analysis involves for them much more than the ‘detailed evaluation’ of a topic; and – of those who did include a critical edge to their response – only ten provided evidence that suggested a commitment to challenge the perceived authority of a given piece of information. In the emerging age of AI, we will need more students able to demonstrate that kind of critical ambition.

Information literacy contains a prominent ethical dimension, another property likely to prove of increasing value in the future. Accordingly, we asked a question designed to elicit information about awareness of this issue, which was to enquire what each student

understood by the phrase ‘academic integrity’. The 37 responses fell into two main categories, though again there were overlaps. The first of these were a set of responses (21) that displayed an understanding of academic integrity as, primarily, the avoidance of plagiarism. Representative responses in this category included: ‘Means material that is free from any plagiarism’; ‘It is to avoid plagiarism sins/mistakes’. The other main type of response (16) emphasised the importance of honesty, truthfulness and behaving in an ethical manner. Examples of these types of responses included: ‘Expectation that students, lecturers and researchers act with honesty, fairness, respect and responsibility in their teaching and research’; ‘Academic integrity refers to the principle of honesty and ethical behaviour in academic pursuits, including research, writing and assessment. It encompasses a set of values and standards that guide individuals in maintaining the highest level of honesty and professionalism in their academic work’. This was amongst the most sophisticated of the responses.

Overall, the responses to this ethics-related question did suggest that most PGT students had some understanding of the concept of academic integrity, though – again – it was patchy, with many seeing it simply as a different way to say ‘the avoidance of plagiarism’, and others not offering any response at all. Indeed one student wrote ‘no explanation’. Responses to this particular question added to the picture created by the responses to the earlier prompts, namely that some of the PGT students who responded to the survey do possess high levels of information literacy across a range of skills/attitudes, but far from all. Thus, despite PGT students generally being in possession of a good undergraduate degree, we simply cannot assume they all arrive in their new classroom with sufficient understanding and training to smoothly and effectively locate, evaluate critically and use ethically the various information sources they need to complete academic tasks at this level.

Conclusion

This survey is useful as it provides a snapshot of the way in which certain features of information literacy are understood by a group of students who are rarely the centre of such pedagogic attention, namely PGT students studying Politics/IR. That the responses came from students studying in two different countries, and in many cases had been studying at the undergraduate level in universities far beyond the Austria and the UK, added further value of this research. But, of course, it is limited in many ways. As with all case studies, it is not possible to generalise – though there is no reason to suspect that the students at these two universities are markedly distinct from students in other Politics/IR departments. Also, the survey is not strictly a measure of actual information literacy as demonstrated through students' academic work, merely a record of student views about particular information-related matters that simply provide an approximate indication of levels of understanding/skill. This research is just a first step.

Nevertheless, for all its limitations, the main finding of this research is unambiguous: namely that, unless the students surveyed here were wholly unrepresentative of the wider population, we simply cannot assume that all – even most – PGT students can confidently manage, critically engage with, and use ethically *any* sources of information they might encounter. Where comparison with undergraduate students was possible, PGT students surveyed did generally suggest higher levels of information literacy, but not by an overwhelming degree, and in some aspects – including awareness of any previous information literacy training – there was barely any difference at all.

If this finding proves not to be a one-off, then this discovery has important implications for the ability (or not) of PGT students to deal with information in a sufficiently sophisticated

manner to do well in their academic studies, particularly in a discipline such as Politics and International Relations. This conclusion would be striking enough in a world in which generative AI tools were not liberally available. That we now do live in such an environment only makes this finding even more concerning. As the authors argued even before this new information revolution kicked off, the discipline really does need to wake up and start to take information literacy seriously.

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