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2015

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Citation for published version (APA):

Sundin, O. (2015). *Outsourcing trust to the information infrastructure : a socio-material perspective*. Abstract from European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL2015), Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia.

Total number of authors:

1

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Outsourcing trust to the information infrastructure: a socio-material perspective

Invited talk at *European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL2015)* 19-23 October 2015, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia

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Media literacy research and Information literacy research have both called our attention to the difficulties students have with the critical evaluation of information. However, the practice of searching for information online, typically equated with the use of search engines, is nowadays often taken for granted – by students, teachers and even by researchers. In this presentation, it will be argued that today's culture of search demands a critical understanding of the co-dependence of searching and evaluation of information. In recent years, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has evolved as a concept bringing together two distinct, yet overlapping research traditions. In this presentation, examples will be given of and discussed how these two research traditions, media literacy and information literacy, can complement each other to make possible richer understandings and conceptualisations of literacies for contemporary media and information landscape.

The Scandinavian languages have different version of the word “källkritik” [Swedish] to refer to how you assess and evaluate specific sources of information and in German the practice is referred to as “Quellenkritik” (Hjørland, 2008). As a concept, it has developed particularly within the academic discipline of history. In English, a direct translation is “source criticism”, but that wording does not have the same established meaning as in the Scandinavian languages or in German (Hjørland, 2008). Since the development of digital information tools has the practice of source criticism attracted a renewed interest. With the spread of the Internet, a growing responsibility for students to search and assess the relevance and trustworthiness of online information has been called for (e.g. Sundin & Francke, 2009). Students are not just supposed to read literature provided by teachers and librarians, they are nowadays also asked to find information on their own and to build their own arguments. As a consequence, there exists an abundance of guidelines, recommendations and checklists for how to assess information available online. These instructions have often been criticised for among other things, not considering critical aspects (e.g. Meola, 2004).

The presentation takes its cue from research on the role and function of information searching in compulsory school settings. The preliminary results from a focus group study with 39 compulsory schools teachers in six focus groups are discussed. The teachers stated that their students do not in general question the relevance ranking of search engines; what is at top of Google is what is read. At the same time, the result makes also visible the difficulties the teachers have in conceptualising searching as an object of teaching, beyond pure functional skills. A socio-material perspective provides

tools for analysing how students, and in fact teachers, as a consequence outsource relevance assessment and assessment of trust to the information infrastructure. Source criticism of individual web pages is assigned an obvious role by the teachers, but searching is rarely seen from a critical perspective. However, the information infrastructure that search engines contribute to, mediate not just access to information, but it co-produces what there is to know in the first place. The presentation concludes that source criticism need to be supplemented with search criticism and the two practices should in fact be seen as impossible to separate from each other.

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Keywords: Media and Information Literacy, Source Criticism, Searching, Trust