Reading Reddit

Emily O. Gravett, *James Madison University*

Blog Series: Changing Scholarship
March 10, 2025
Tags: metacognition | Changing Scholarship | information literacy | Reddit | online sources | lateral reading | digital literacy

I received feedback on the manuscript of my textbook, *Studying Religion and Disability*. The two peer reviews were generally supportive and also offered important suggestions that will make the book better. I was grateful for their careful engagement. Reviewer 1 was also clearly aghast at my use of online sources, noting their "concern" with, in particular, my citing Reddit posts as evidence—as I do when I, for example, describe and quote how a disabled Sikh reached out in this online forum for support related to various difficulties with his disability. It made Reviewer 1 "a little nervous as a professor, who is always trying to get students to use credible scholarly sources."

I certainly understand the purposes behind "blind" (a bit of an odd word in this context) peer review—although it's also a problematic practice—but boy do I wish I could have had the chance to talk to Reviewer 1. I would have loved to talk pedagogy. A blog post, where I talk to myself (ha!), will sadly have to do.

This reviewer's sentiment is one that other professors may share and, since it's a textbook—which is intended to appeal to and be assigned by other professors—it was an important reservation to disclose. It may also reflect deep-seated differences among academics, which my book, or this blog post, won't easily be able to resolve. But I want to say a few words about my use of *gasp* materials from the world wide web, including Reddit.

First, I think it's important to note that there are whole academic fields/areas of specialty that focus on various forms of communication and media. At my university, we offer a course on "Feminist Blogging" out of our School of Communication Studies, for example, and "Digital Storytelling" out of our Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication program. These aren't only topics that "they" teach "over there" in those "other" disciplines. At every SBL and AAR annual conference, there are sessions devoted to Religion, Media, and Culture and the Bible and Popular Culture. I'm personally sad to have missed the session on "From Tweets to Tiktoks: Reimagining Religious Influence through Women's Social Media Use" in 2024.

Especially now, I think it's no longer fair to assume that legitimate information can only be found in OUP monographs or the *JAAR* (as much as I love both), that it cannot be found on the internet, or that online sources are inherently inferior or suspect. (To be a bit facetious, I read the *New York Times* exclusively online these days!) Educators are missing out if they aren't looking in a wide variety of places for interesting ideas, primary sources, important debates, and provocative controversies to use in their classroom. Many of us incorporate blog posts, tweets (er, I mean posts on "X"), YouTube videos, and more into our classes, to encourage students to interact with "lived religion" and to motivate them to learn (motivation that we know depends on students perceiving value in our course content and being able to make connections between what they learn in school and the rest of their lives). The other day, I showed this tweet about "Islamophobia" in class. I don't care who this guy is. His scholarly credentials—or lack thereof—don't matter to me. What mattered is that this post, in popular and pithy form, conveyed an important, and common, critique about the concept that I wanted students to consider. It was an easy launching point for a rich in-class discussion.

But fine, some of us don't want to "give in" to these baser impulses or pressures; some of us don't want to be "edutainers." I have more serious concerns with this approach to teaching. Some religious traditions (mainly Christianity, which has whole universities and university presses, like Baylor, backing it in the U.S.) have yielded a lot of scholarship—in areas like disability, and more generally too. But some haven't, at least in the English that I and my students all read. This is but one example of the Christian bias in the field I actually spend time describing in the textbook. I don't think that I should be prevented from writing about other religions if/because they don't have (enough, any) "scholarly" sources. This would simply reproduce inequities that have for so long plagued the field. Certainly, scholars have much to contribute to knowledge production, but they do not have a corner on it, nor are their contributions... infallible. I note, for instance, the widespread replication crisis, journal retractions, shifts in paradigms, expert "blindspots" (another funny word here), or simply routine scholarly debates and disagreements.

Relatedly, and crucially for my particular topic, not all people with disabilities can or do attain advanced degrees (in large part because higher education was built to exclude them), become scholars, and produce the sort of work that would appear in peer-reviewed journals or books published by reputable presses. Yet, I would strongly argue, these people still have important things to express about disability, including, of course, their own. I don't believe we should be in the business of elitist gatekeeping—a common critique of the professorial ivory tower,

actually, and one I think we would do well to avoid, especially in this political climate.

Better would be to teach students what certain sources of knowledge might be able to tell us and what they might not. Better would be to practice fact-checking and lateral reading. Better would be to make students aware that and how knowledge is produced, authenticated, and circulated (which I borrow from David Chidester's *Empire of Religion*). Better would be to discuss that slash / in Foucault's "power/knowledge" and how these two concepts are inextricably intertwined. Better would be to teach students about the biases that every person holds (including them, including *us*) and how to leverage their own meta-cognition to become aware of and adjust for those biases. Better is not to avoid, censor, or condescend, but to expose, as widely as possible, and to teach students how to navigate. This is what they will have to do for the rest of their lives, after all.

The other day, I had students in my Race and Religion class read three sub-Reddit threads on caste, Hinduism, and India. (In response to this task, one student laughed and said, "I love this class.") I also asked the group, with Reviewer 1 in mind, why reading Reddit might be a good idea. Students said it allows us access to real people, giving their unfiltered opinions, on topics that might not make it into scholarly sources. (Of course this also led us to talk about how some stuff written on Reddit—or, uh, elsewhere—can be exaggerated or even made up.) It can show us a range of perspectives, opinions, and experiences, which is a core principle of studying religion that I am constantly trying to convey.

All sources are limited, biased, or irrelevant in some ways or in some contexts (even scholarship). If a point I want to demonstrate is that disabled people of a specific religion sometimes turn to and cry out for community in online forums, a polished chapter in an edited collection by a person with a PhD writing about the phenomenon—if I can even find such a thing—isn't, in my opinion, as good of evidence as an actual post by a real disabled person in the throes of that experience. If I have to go online to find it, so be it.

https://wabash.center/2025/03/reading-reddit/