

Review of *Verified: How to Think Straight, Get Duped Less, and Make Better Decisions about What to Believe Online*

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ABSTRACT: Review of the book *Verified: How to Think Straight, Get Duped Less, and Make Better Decisions about What to Believe Online*, by M. Caulfield & S. Wineburg.

Keywords: information literacy, SIFT, lateral reading, generative artificial intelligence, liberalism



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To say that Caulfield and Wineburg's *Verified* is a major new publication in information literacy (IL) almost feels like an understatement. The book—a new how-to manual of practical online information literacy practices—arrives from the University of Chicago Press in a smart edition filled with colour screenshots and it is blurred by figures like Maria Ressa, Guy Kawasaki, and Francis Fukuyama. Caulfield and Wineburg's intention for *Verified* was for it to be like Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (Caulfield, 2023), a discipline-agnostic text that instructors could use as a supplement to their primary course text to add some hard IL skills to a class. The book is a natural extension of Caulfield's previous work popularizing lateral reading as part of the SIFT method of IL instruction and Wineburg's work with the Stanford History Education Group (now the Digital Inquiry Group).

As a practical text for aspiring student researchers and for the public, *Verified* mostly succeeds. It includes chapters on topics such as lateral reading and SIFT, on leveraging Google search and Wikipedia to fact check sources, on peer review and academic publishing, on the dangers of video manipulation and advertorial content, and on the role of emotion in information seeking. Caulfield and Wineburg move across this wide swathe of subjects with a lightness of touch and tone that is clearly meant to appeal to an undergraduate audience. This is why we see chapter titles like “Google: The Bestie You Thought You Knew” and “Wikipedia: Not What Your Middle School Teacher Told You.”

Caulfield and Wineburg's central thesis does not arrive explicitly until the book's short conclusion where they outline their idea of “critical ignoring.” Critical ignoring essentially amounts to conserving one's finite attention—what they term “the brain's high-octane fuel” (p. 212)—online when confronted with an overabundance of information and using one's attention sparingly to quickly assess and often disregard dubious sources before having invested too much energy in debunking those sources' specific claims. Say Caulfield and Wineburg (2023), “[t]hinking critically demands sustained, focused attention. However, thinking critically about low-quality sources is a colossal waste of time” (p. 212). As a result, many of the techniques that Caulfield and Wineburg recommend in the book frequently comprise first stopping oneself from immediately smashing a reshare or post button, then not allowing oneself to get bogged down in rigorously assessing specific webpage content or the details of a complex, scientific paper, and to instead leverage the digitally networked media environment to “use the web to check the web” (p. 5). The faith that Caulfield and Wineburg place in the network itself reveals certain submerged social epistemological commitments that, curiously, they never make entirely clear. Repeatedly throughout the book, the authors appeal to the value of “seeing what others say” (p. 12) or taking in a “list of search results [as] a gestalt” (p. 96), but never do they outline precisely why thorny online information problems can be best solved by repeatedly leveraging social epistemology. Caulfield and Wineburg's implicit answer seems to be simply that taking into account what others' have said and thought about a person or source is the most efficient way to conserve attention online, but the book would have benefited from being situated more fully in a social epistemological lineage.

Stepping back from *Verified*'s practical use cases, one finds more in the book's actually articulated theoretical framing with which to take issue. Caulfield and Wineburg, in the book's introduction, attempt a kind of bipartisan aisle crossing gesture that, simply put, contemporary political reality does not bear out: “Whatever your politics or values, we hope you agree that

when reading online, you should take at least minimal action to evaluate the sources and claims that flash across your screen” (p. 6). This is liberal quietism at its most blinkered and sanguine, signaled, of course, by “we hope.” As a phenomenon like QAnon has illustrated in its followers’ wholesale appropriation of IL discourses like “research for yourself” and “go to the source” (Hartman-Caverly, 2019; Hannah, 2021; Blechinger, 2021), what exactly one may think it *means* to sufficiently evaluate a source is very much entangled in one’s “politics or values,” so much so that I wonder if we can meaningfully talk about the former in a way so surgically removed from the latter as Caulfield and Wineburg attempt to do. Ironically, Guy Kawasaki’s front matter blurb illustrates the patent shortcomings of this line of liberal thinking most markedly. Kawasaki writes, “*Verified* is the book and mindset that society needs right now. This is, of course, assuming that you want society to survive.” The liberal bromide that comes through most clearly in this quote is the tacit belief that everyone wants society—in its present instantiation—to survive, which is not a given in contemporary politics, whether we are speaking in terms of postliberals (Pabst, 2021) or accelerationists (Noys, 2014) of the left or right persuasion.

One other shortcoming of *Verified* has less to do with the authors’ framing of the book, and more to do with the (admittedly unenviable) technological moment into which they chose to release it. Wisely, Caulfield and Wineburg append a postscript to the text—entitled “Large Language Models, ChatGPT, and the Future of Verification”—where they attempt to extend the IL techniques that they have spent the preceding 214 pages elaborating to the age of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Thankfully, Caulfield and Wineburg avoid falling prey to GenAI hype in this short section, and they even straightforwardly state that “[large language models] don’t have underlying understandings” (p. 217), which is a clear-eyed, non-anthropomorphizing assessment of the technology that many other thinkers and commentators would do well to approximate amidst this current GenAI hype cycle that yearns relentlessly for artificial general intelligence.

Caulfield and Wineburg’s GenAI postscript ultimately underwhelms, however, because, in it, they do not fully contend with how large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT may pose challenges to information evaluation heuristics and techniques like SIFT and lateral reading. To my mind, the power of Caulfield’s lateral reading technique is that, when one uses it, one is leveraging contextual information about a discrete source—this is the abovementioned network faith that Caulfield and Wineburg double down on in *Verified*—to inform one’s judgment of it, therefore saving one’s valuable attention. As I have written elsewhere, however, a potential problem arises if we consider that “[ChatGPT] strings words together, synthesizing sentences through a calculation of linguistic probabilities based on many sources, on demand, for the user that prompts it” (Blechinger, 2023, pp. 166–167). As such, attempting to laterally read GenAI output will likely be very different than using Wikipedia to ascertain that the American College of Pediatricians may not be as legitimate as its own website leads one to believe, as the authors do in *Verified*’s chapter 4. LLMs have ingested enormous amounts of the internet, including all of Wikipedia (Gertner, 2023), and huge amounts of copyrighted material (Reisner, 2023) in their textual corpuses, and, having been trained on those corpuses, they generate strings of textual tokens when prompted. While Caulfield and Wineburg are right to note that this means that “[o]ne of the last expensive surface features [of a source]—style—is about to get the basic spell-check treatment” (p. 218), I believe that this only hints at a more profound issue that LLMs pose to IL instruction: the complete liquidation of authorship and attribution. Mills (2023) has posited,

in a comment on the MLA's page on how to cite GenAI, that we should cite "Unknown human authors statistically remixed by ChatGPT" in a reference's author element for GenAI textual output. What does a citation like this even accomplish, though, except the signaling—completely in line with a liberal politics of "acknowledgment"—that we are concerned about the liquidation and statistical remixing of authorship, but intend to do as little materially about it as possible beyond the recognition of it as an issue?

All of this is to say that it remains to be seen whether techniques like lateral reading will be able to rise to the challenge of GenAI output in the future, and, consequently, it also remains to be seen whether *Verified* may have arrived at the exact moment when the internet that it so thoroughly documents and analyzes may, itself, be passing into history.

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