Is the Internet lying to us?

November 25 2010, By Ileiren Poon

Geoffrey Rockwell

(PhysOrg.com) -- University of Alberta scholars talk about the relativity of truth on the World Wide Web.

Truth and lies on the Internet are all a matter of context according to some of the University of Alberta's foremost scholars in humanities computing and information science.

Geoffrey Rockwell, a professor of philosophy and humanities computing and the director of the Canadian Institute for Research in Computing and the Arts, was the keynote speaker and mediator of a panel discussion hosted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Panelists Ofer Arazy from the Department of Accounting and

Management Information Systems in the Alberta School of Business; Susan Brown, a professor in the Department of English & Film Studies and lead researcher on the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory project; Peter Baskerville, from the departments of history and classics, humanities computing, and co-leader of West and North, Canadian Century Research Infrastructure; and Lisa Given, a professor in the School of Library and Information Studies and the Department of Humanities Computing, each brought a different focus to the discussion of 'truth' in this digital age.

"It seems that what is true and false is often negotiated in a community or a microcommunity. Has the Internet changed how we negotiate truths?" Rockwell asked. "I'm interested in a slightly different phenomenon where you have communities forming that basically reinforce each other's truths and are not listening—and this is probably something that's always happened—to other voices, and are not actually asking the questions that we ask of information."

Ofer said that two things are happening simultaneously and exist on a large scale.

"Some people argue that over the Internet you see a variety and diversity of ideas, and that's what drives innovation, that's what drives the wisdom of the crowd—the quality of Wikipedia for example," he said. "But, on the other hand, if you look at some of the smaller communities where people of the same opinions come together to reinforce one another, they're not open to other opinions."

Given, who has been asked to assess the quality of evidence, including documents submitted by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, in Canada's courts, said that people need to be trained to sort the garbage from the useful information.

"People will often get into circular arguments where they can start to use self citation, or selective citation, in particular ways in order to sell their particular argument, often without a lot of critical thought. Along comes an outsider to look at these trappings of credibility as it were, and sometimes it'll be a mix of information overload, sometimes just a lack of knowledge about how to now assess credibility," she said. "There are certain ways that information can be manipulated and used to play on that normal notion of, 'Oh my gosh, there's a lot out there and how will I weed my way through it?'"

When Rockwell asked whether the Internet can be made to tell more compelling, more comprehensive and useable truths, the panellists all agreed that context was key.

"Context is all, in many ways," said Brown. "The same text can, out of context, be a piece of hate speech, and, within context, be a historicized document that works against hate speech. I think we do need to move, as a scholarly community, away from the notion that truth as it operates in something like Wikipedia is not sufficient. I think in the humanities, in particular, we've moved beyond the idea of singular truth or objective truth, to an understanding of truth as situated and negotiated by communities."

"The big thing is, the Internet can provide more useable, richer and more nuanced context," agreed Baskerville. "The key word is context and the real danger on the Internet is lack thereof. So, anything that builds that and maintains that is good.

"Number two, we have to keep it open. There's this tension with commercialization and I think that has to be really looked at closely because it's a creeping, eroding and sinister kind of thing from the point of view of open scholarship."