When Should URLs Be Used?

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by Annie Hill (APA Style Blog)

APA now recommends including homepage URLs for journal or publisher websites but complete URLs for material that may be harder to locate. This can be confusing to readers who want to know when, exactly, to resort to homepage URLs and when to plunk the whole string into a reference. I was trying to think of a way to clarify this guidance for users when I realized that there is more to the story.

We know that long URLs take up space and can contain irrelevant strings of session identifiers that may be clickable but are of no use to the reader. We know that a shortened or homepage URL is sometimes intuitive; there’s no need to direct readers to a specific link at the New York Times, for example, when they can use a search box (and your source may well be behind a subscription wall by the time a URL is entered).

So when is a full URL necessary? Surely it should be included in its entirety when it will help the reader locate the source. A direct link to archived material may be easier to use than a link to a homepage when a site’s organization is complex or when an article has been posted ahead of print publication and may not yet be indexed.

But URLs are ephemeral in nature; they may be broken or lead nowhere once a reader attempts to use them. That’s another reason to cite home page URLs when a site can be searched; home page URLs are more stable.

Furthermore, sites themselves may be updated frequently, making URLs useless as archival referents—and some types of citations may be as ephemeral as their URLs. A tweet, for example, may not qualify as a lasting retrievable source, but despite my conviction that she’s a kindred spirit, I know that Tina Fey is not personally corresponding with me when she updates her Twitter account.

The question might really be: Why do we include URLs at all?

As Anne noted in her post last week, the Modern Language Association, whose style guide is used most often for work in the humanities, recently made a controversial decision to omit URLs from references, and another prominent style guide, Chicago, reminds us that a URL points only to a possible location of a source rather than to its identity. Authors, dates, titles, and publisher information like DOIs are still the real identifiers of a source.

It occurs to me, though, that URLs do serve a purpose. Citations themselves constitute an archive—they are evidence of how we categorize and search for material in the early twenty-first century. This may be a matter not just of history but of historiography.

It’s true that I may do better to paste author, date, and title information into a search box than I would to rely on the information in a URL. What a URL does tell me is where someone found the source at a particular period in time, and that may be reason enough to include it.