

Question the Answers



Above:
Alan November guides 5th to 8th graders in search engine strategies.

Try this simple test. Search on Google for “Are dogs better than cats?” while a friend or family member searches “Are cats better than dogs?” Then compare the results; odds are that none of the first page of your results will be the same.

“Google’s goal is to figure out what you want, not to give you the best information in the world,” warned digital expert Alan November when he visited Saint George’s classrooms and spoke to parents on April 19. “No librarian would do that, but Google is out to make you happy so you’ll spend more time searching and see more of its ads.”

Search engines such as Google use information from our profiles on Facebook and Netflix, and our friends’ profiles, to find what it thinks we want. As November noted, “that means your own worldview shapes the answers you get on Google, and over time your worldview gets smaller and smaller. I worry about a society where everyone thinks they are right and our media reinforces this.”

At this point, November asked the quiet parents in his audience, “Are you okay?” “Not anymore,” was one person’s reply.

So what’s the solution? “We need parents and teachers working with students to help them use the Internet wisely. If you only get one point of view, you won’t do the best job – no matter what that job may be.”

To that end, November, who worked at Digital Equipment Corp. when it created Alta Vista, the first search engine, offered some tips for asking the right questions to frame the best searches: use nouns, put quotes around names or phrases, use country “codes” to get more than just local information, and always look for the primary source.

When speaking to a group of fifth and sixth graders, he made it a game. “It’s like being Sherlock Holmes,” he said. “There are so many versions of the truth out there that you need to learn fact-checking strategies. It’s being smarter than Google to track down the primary sources.”



The other major challenge, and advantage, of the Internet is having all of the answers at your fingertips. November introduced his audiences to WolframAlpha.com, the first “knowledge engine”. The website and phone app can find information that doesn’t yet exist. For example, type in “flights overhead” and it gives you the flight numbers and airlines of every plane in the air right now above where you are located. Or ask it the answer to a math problem, and it not only gives the solution but all the steps required to reach it (for a small fee).

“Students can create new knowledge, and they can cheat on their math homework. This is the end of civilization as we know it!” he noted to chuckles from his listeners. But when answers become “cheap”, as WolframAlpha co-creator Stephen Wolfram says, the most powerful people will be the ones who ask the most interesting questions.

November tried this out by showing students a WolframAlpha-created chart of when different names appear in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. “The students, who hadn’t read Macbeth, asked great questions,” he said. “Did you know that a Harvard study showed higher test scores if the questions come before the answers? It’s like warming up if you are a runner.”

“So if you are going to teach your children one thing,” he concluded, “I think Stephen Wolfram was right. Teach your children to ask the most interesting questions. Because they are going to have tools at their fingertips to get the answers.”

– John Carter, SGS Communications

On the Web
See Alan’s favorite links at
www.sgs.org/magazine

