CREDIBILITY

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Credibility is one of the oldest communication concepts. It is also one of intense recent interest. Both communication scholars and professional communicators have tried to understand why people find some communications to be more credible than others. Credibility has been studied by students of both interpersonal communication and mass communication and it has been of interest by those examining online and new media. Most people intuitively sense that they can judge some communications to be more credible than others.

The concept originated with the ancient Greeks and it has been the focus of continuing study ever since. The development of mass communication in the 20th century intensified interest in credibility—especially in its mediated forms. Recent developments in new technology and online media have generated a new outpouring of interest in how individuals judge online messages to be credible. The literature on credibility is plentiful, contradictory, and confused. It taps into core theories of rhetoric, persuasion, interpersonal communication, mass communication, and now interactive communication. The concept is based in fundamental differences in presupposition made by conflicting concepts of communication itself. The complexity has been intensified by the ambiguity of sources of information in online media. Thus, at the opening of the 21st century, credibility scholars appear to be shifting the theoretical center of the concept away from source credibility toward a new grounding in community, collaboration, and interactivity by active recipients assumed to be judging credibility within personal or communal contexts of motivation, goals, and projects.

The Concept

Credibility has been defined as believability, trust, perceived reliability, and dozens of other concepts and combinations of them (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Wilkinson, 1981; Greenberg & Roloff, 1974; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, & McCann, 2003; Shaw, 1976, 1973). Recent research has also focused on online "credibility markers" (Walther, Wang, & Loh, 2004; Wathen & Burkell, 2001), technological "cues" to signal recipient "heuristics" for judging credibility (Sundar, 2007) or collaborative "social endorsements" that signal credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). In the past, credibility has been defined in terms of the credulity of those trusting; the characteristics of those presenting—the individual, organization, or medium; the information or message offered; and the circumstances under which the message is being perceived. It also has been defined in terms of the recipient of the message, the characteristics of the social setting within which the communication takes place, and the underlying perceived dimensions of communication. The new, mediated interactive environments, particularly of online media, have led to an emphasis upon situated judgments of credibility (Metzger et al., 2003).

Beginning with Aristotle, communication scholars have explored the role of source credibility in persuasive messages. It was not until the mid-20th century, however, that communication

scholars began the scientific study of credibility—intrinsically tied to interpersonal and persuasion research. The development of online communication, open source technology, and other interactive media forms at the turn of the 21st century created yet another shift, this one toward active, collaborative judgments of credibility within the context of interactive readings of communication messages with ambiguous, or what Sundar calls "murky" message sourcing (Sundar, 2007; Sundar & Nass, 2001). The focus of this chapter moves from rhetorical, interpersonal, and persuasive communication to mass communication and to interactive mediated communication. It will examine the impact of the new interactive media technologies on the core ideas of credibility and how collaborative media use is shifting notions of credibility from source manipulation toward user actions to extend or withhold credibility for messages.

Late 20th century research was centered on studies of news report credibility and mass media. These studies produced conflicting findings (Whitney, 1985), driven by institutional interests within news organizations, by critics with a variety of political and social agendas (Dennis, 1986; Whitney, 1986), and by researchers representing a range of theoretical orientations (Delia, 1976; Salmon, 1986; Stamm & Dube, 1994). These approaches used polling data, discourse data, and case study data (Self, 1988a). On the other hand, more recent 21st century research has focused on the impact of technology, interactivity, and collaboration in face of messages that often mask information sources within multiple layers of organizational and technological structures (see especially Metzger et al., 2003; Sundar & Nass, 2000; Wathen & Burkell, 2001).

A great deal of work has yet to be done to sort out the meaning of the construct. As such, it offers an excellent case study of the relationships among pretheoretical assumption, theory building, methodological approach, and research programs. This review will begin with a brief historical overview of the origins, approaches, and related research.

Historical Development

The idea that some sources of information are more reliable than others is as old as discussions of rhetoric itself. Plato's famous description of the dialogue on rhetoric between Socrates and Phaedrus grapples with the issue. Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the rhetorical skills taught by various sophist teachers.

Socrates describes the skills advocated by the Sophists and used by their orators: "only the probabilities should be told either in accusation or defense, and that always in speaking, the orator should keep probability in view, and say good-bye to truth. And the observance of this principle throughout a speech furnishes the whole art" (Plato, 1952, p. 137). Socrates counters with his own view of true rhetoric: "the probability of which [the sophist] speaks was engendered in the minds of the many by the likeness of the truth,…he who knew the truth would always know best how to discover the resemblances of the truth" (p. 138). He objects to the notion that one should be driven by shaping the message to fit the predisposition of the audience, "unless a man estimates the various characters of his hearers and is able to divide all things into classes and to comprehend them under single ideas, he will never be a skillful rhetorician even within the limits of human power" (p. 138). The ontological assumption was that the better the speaker understood universal ideals of truth, the greater trust that individual would evoke in the audience, which would recognize the resemblances to truth offered by the speaker. According to Plato, credibility was engendered by the knowledge of truth.

If Plato delineated one pole of the concept of credibility of the source, Aristotle represented the other: "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1952, p. 595). He couched the concept of credibility within a group of characteristics he referred to as the *ethos* of the communicator—the communicator's

ability to inspire confidence and belief in what was being said. This group of characteristics was among three major modes of persuasion and was responsible for evoking trust among the hearers of a message.

> Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. (p. 595)

Three ideas behind source credibility are revealed in this debate. First, sources are credible because the audience perceives that the message is "rightness" or true. Second, sources are credible because they rightly know how to reveal themselves to particular audiences. And, third, sources are perceived to be credible because the character of the audience makes it credulous.

The concept of credibility reaches back to this great debate among the idealists and the realists over the nature of truth and rhetoric. Persuasion and credibility have been discussed in most of the theories of communication since Aristotle. These theories varied in how they deal with the issue but usually centered on source, message, or audience characteristics. The issue has been whether an audience's trust is won as a consequence of the knowledge of truth and, thus, the strength of the argument; the empirical observation of audience characteristics and the communicator's ability to match delivery and message to audience needs; or the situation of the audience members themselves—their credulity or persuasibility.

Early Empirical Research

Systematic *empirical* research in the modern sense came only in the 20th century. Initially, this research was centered in what Harold Lasswell referred to as *administrative research* in the mass media. This research was driven by concern about the power of propaganda (Lasswell, Lerner, & Speier, 1980) and by the need for the new broadcast media managers to demonstrate the power of their media. The desire to attract advertising dollars to radio from newspapers produced a series of studies through polling organizations, some inspired by Lasswell himself (c.f., Smith, 1969, especially pp. 42–89). The crucial ones included Roper, Gallup, National Opinion Research Center, and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan (Cantril, 1951). They attempted to determine which mass communication medium was "trusted" most for information and news.

The studies began in the 1930s and have continued since.[1] The assumption of this research was that the medium itself was seen to be the source and was trusted or not. Grounded in what has been called the hypodermic-needle model of communication (see Lemert, 1981, and chapter 5, this volume, for a discussion of the approach's shortcomings), the research assumed that media had high levels of credibility among audiences to change attitudes, and that the crucial issue was which of the media were attended to most by audiences. Over time, the reliance on a medium was shown to be a major predictor credibility (see, for example, Bucy, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2000, 2002; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987; Wanta & Hu, 1994).

Initially, researchers found that newspapers were the most trusted source of information for news. In the late 1930s, they found that radio had become the most trusted source. In the early 1950s, television assumed the role of most trusted source of information (Erskine, 1970–1971). These studies could not determine what caused one medium to be more trusted than another. For the most part, respondents were simply asked which source they trusted most on which issues. By the early part of the 21st century, online media had been found to be the most trusted source in some studies, although results were mixed and depended heavily upon how the study was conducted (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Johnson & Kaye, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2000, 2006; Sundar & Nass, 2001).

Source Credibility Studies

It was, however, the need to develop support for the war effort in the 1940s that produced the first truly paradigmatic study of research examining why audiences believe a message from one communicator and not another.

Psychologist Carl Hovland and associates worked for the War Department in World War II and continued their experimental research at Yale University after the war. They studied how to persuade soldiers through wartime messages. Hovland and colleagues developed a message-learning approach based on what Hovland (1951) called "a strong predilection for stimulus-response learning-theory formulations and…an attempt is made to see how far the general principles of behavior theory can be extended into this field.… Attitudes are viewed as internalized anticipatory approach or avoidance tendencies toward objects, persons, or symbols" (p. 427). He thus accepted the source-message-channel-receiver (SMCR) model of communication advocated by a number of theorists interested in attitude change research in the second half of the 20th century (Rogers, 1994).

Hovland and colleagues defined *credibility* as "trustworthiness" and "expertise" (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland &Weiss, 1951–1952), studying the credibility of mass communication messages by examining how individuals received such messages from "high credibility" sources. In order to measure the change in attitude evoked by a given message, Hovland controlled all variables but one in the communication chain from source to destination. This concept echoed Aristotle's argument that persuasion was based upon fitting the message to audience needs in the linear model of speaker-message-hearer.

Hovland and colleagues presented positive and negative messages from high credibility and low credibility sources to audiences and measured learning of information and changes in opinion. This study was followed up by measuring information retention by the same participants four months later. Hovland found that high credibility sources changed attitudes more than low credibility sources, but that information was learned about equally well from both source types. An unanticipated *sleeper effect* was found in the follow-up four months later (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1951–1952).

Hovland and colleagues drew a distinction among source credibility, message variables, and audience credulity in persuasion. They produced the first systematic knowledge about media credibility.

Variations on Three Themes

Following the work of Hovland and colleagues, a broad interest in the credibility of media sources of information developed. That research centered on the three possible reasons messages are credible: source characteristics (institutional media, individual speakers, organizations as sources), message characteristics, and audience characteristics and credulity.

Source Characteristics

Because credibility theories have applied value for mass media organizations (i.e., selling newspapers, increasing ratings), mass communication researchers have devoted inordinate attention to *media* credibility; speech or human communication researchers have also spent considerable time examining the impact of *source* credibility (i.e., speaker, organization). Interest in media or source characteristics is seen in studies such as Shaw (1967), who found that increased reliance upon news sent by telegraph brought a sharp decline in stories judged to be "biased" about presidential campaigns in the 1880s. Baxter and Bittner (1974) found that among high school and college students of the "television generation," television was more credible than other media, overriding previous findings of differences for sex and educational level. Brownlow (1992) found that baby-faced female speakers induced more agreement with their position when trust was questioned and mature-faced female speakers induced more attitude change when expertise was questioned.

Source characteristic research attempts to identify which information sources were believed or which characteristics of these sources lead to greater believability. A more recent approach has been to develop *dimensions* of characteristics that were thought to be related to credibility. These studies used statistical techniques such as factor analysis or measurement techniques such as Q-Sort.[2] For example, McCroskey and colleagues (McCroskey, 1966; McCroskey & Jensen, 1975) employed three different instruments to measure credibility. One (McCroskey, 1966) employed a 42-item battery of statements with five-point answer sets in Likert-type format (*strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree*). The second employed 12 bipolar adjective semantic differential statements (McCroskey, 1966). Both revealed two dimensions of credibility: authoritativeness and character. The third used a 25 bipolar adjective semantic differential to measure source credibility (McCroskey & Jensen, 1975). They found the same two dimensions plus three more: sociability, composure, and extroversion. Sample items from each measure are presented in Table 28.1.

Table 28.1   Sample Credibility Scales

Sample Likert-Type Scale Items[a]

Authoritativeness Scales
I respect this speaker's opinion on the topic.
This speaker is not of very high intelligence.
I have little confidence in this speaker.
This speaker lacks information on the topic.
Character Scales
I deplore this speaker's background.
This speaker is basically honest.
This speaker is a reputable person.
The character of this speaker is good.

Semantic Differential Scale Adjective Pairs

Authoritativeness	Character
Reliable-Unreliable	Honest-Dishonest
Informed-Uninformed	Friendly-Unfriendly
Qualified-Unqualified	Pleasant-Unpleasant
Intelligent-Unintelligent	Unselfish-Selfish
Valuable-Worthless	Nice-Awful
Expert-Inexpert	Virtuous-Sinful

Note. [a]Responses: *strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree.*

One of the most frequently used operational definitions for *media source credibility* comes out of the long series of Roper studies of differences in credibility of the news media (Roper, 1985). Those studies asked simply: "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe—the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?" This question and others asked by Roper were aimed at discovering the *relative credibility* of different news media.

Carter and Greenberg (1965), skeptical of the Roper questions, believed them to be biased against newspapers. They altered the wording of two Roper questions and found that for general dependency, newspapers were indeed rated more credible. However, for belief when conflicting stories were reported, they found that even more of their respondents chose television over newspapers than had been reported by Roper.

Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1969) asked respondents to rate credibility across widely different types of sources. They identified three credibility factors or dimensions—safety, qualification, and dynamism. When media sources have been explored, similar results were obtained. Singletary (1976), for instance, generated 403 adjectives, which described credible mass media sources. He asked 181 students to rate how consistent the words were with their understanding of the term *credibility*. His analysis yielded 41 different dimensions for mass media credibility, which he collapsed into 16 credibility categories and conducted a detailed analysis of six: knowledgeability, attraction, trustworthiness, articulation, hostility, and stability. Lee (1978) reported different dimensions of credibility for television and newspapers reporting national and international or state and local news. Whereas television was consistently seen as more credible, levels of credibility varied along the 45 scales of bipolar adjectives for both newspapers and television, according to what types of stories were being reported. Factor analysis revealed different dimensions of credibility for each condition. Only the dimension, *intimacy,* surfaced for all conditions.

Another set of measures came out of the 1985 American Society of Newspaper Editors' study of credibility. Gaziano and McGrath (1986), asked 875 respondents to rate 16 bipolar semantic differential items. Their results yielded three factors, one of which was generated from 12 of the items that grouped together and that they labeled "credibility." The other two factors were labeled "social concerns" and "patriotic." The 12 credibility items were: *is fair or unfair; is biased or unbiased; tells the whole story or doesn't tell the whole story; is accurate or inaccurate; invades or respects people's privacy; does or does not watch after readers'/viewers' interests; is or is not concerned about the community's well-being; does or does not separate fact and opinion; can or cannot be trusted; is concerned about the public interest or is concerned about making profits; is factual or opinionated; has well-trained or poorly trained reporters.* The other four were: *cares or does not care what audience thinks; sensationalizes or does not sensationalize; is moral or immoral; is patriotic or unpatriotic.*) Respondent ratings for each of the 12 credibility factor items were then used to create an "index" of credibility.

Several attempts to validate or modify the Gaziano and McGrath scale were attempted. For example, Meyer (1988) produced two dimensions from the Gaziano-McGrath scales—one narrowly defined as *credibility* (believability), the other more broadly drawn to represent *affiliation with the community.* A further validation attempt was made by West (1994), who found the Meyer credibility scale to "validly and reliably measure credibility per se" (p. 164). He reported that the community affiliation scale was insufficiently reliable and that the Gaziano-McGrath scale appeared to measure more than one underlying credibility dimension.

Wanzenried and Powell (1993) employed the Leathers Personal Credibility Scale (Leathers, 1992), which posits three dimensions of credibility (competence, trustworthiness, and dynamism). Each dimension containing four sets of bipolar adjectives was used to measure the cred-

ibility of presidential candidates (see also Wanzenried, Smith-Howell, & Powell, 1992; Powell & Wanzenried, 1992).

These studies have attempted to elaborate on the basic concept of source characteristics associated with credibility. Instead of positing one or two characteristics, they attempted to identify underlying dimensions of perceived character that would promote confidence in these sources.

Message Characteristics

Interest in message characteristics is seen in studies such as Anderson and Clevenger (1963), who suggested in their review of experimental research from 1921 to 1961 that message impact is related to source credibility. McCroskey (1969), in a series of experiments empirically testing the relationship of evidence and source credibility to persuasiveness in public speaking situations, found that the credibility of evidence (high or low) used in a message alone did not persuade. When source credibility (high or low) was added as an intervening variable, however, persuasion occurred, but only when a source was *not* highly credible. Thus, we know that message credibility is important and more so when a source is not seen as highly credible. In a media credibility study, Slattery and Tiedge (1992) examined the effects on credibility of labeling staged video in television news stories and found that "labeling news video as staged is not in itself enough to bring about a change in the evaluation of news story credibility…[and] raise[s] the possibility that repeated use of labels identifying video as a dramatization or re-creation may raise questions about…authenticity" (p. 284).

Graber (1987) and Robinson (1987) conducted studies of the way respondents processed messages about presidential candidates in the 1984 election. Graber studied cues or spin in television pictures and Robinson examined cues or spin based on television's words or "what the journalists said about the candidates [sic] qualities as a leader." (p. 147). Graber found that television had more impact when character traits rather than issues were illustrated with pictures. Robinson found that televised words had little impact on public opinion regarding political candidates (in this case, presidential).

One of the more promising lines of message research has been studies of *familiarity*. Boehm (1994) examined the effect on perceived validity of repeating statements several times to increase familiarity. He concluded that familiarity is the basis of judged validity. Further evidence about familiarity was found by Begg, Anas, and Farinacci (1992) who cued respondents about whether a source's messages were truthful. In a series of experiments, respondents heard statements from familiar sources and unfamiliar sources. In the early phases of the experiments, they were told which sources would be lying. The respondents then rated statements as either true or false in later experiments. Begg et al., found that familiarity increased the credibility of even false statements, even when respondents remembered that the statements were being made by a source that was lying.[3]

More recently, Fico, Richardson, and Edwards (2004) have studied the effects of balanced and imbalanced story structure on perceived story bias and news organization credibility. They found that participants perceived imbalanced stories as biased and evaluated newspapers apparently responsible for balanced stories as more credible. Imbalanced story structure directly led to negative evaluation of the credibility of the newspaper publishing the imbalanced story. Similarly, Maier (2005), in a study of 4,800 news sources, found that newspaper credibility, as perceived by news sources, significantly declined in relation to frequency and severity of errors and affected source willingness to cooperate with the press. Subjective errors were considered to be the most egregious.

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Audience Characteristics

Interest in audience characteristics is seen in studies such as Becker, Cobbey, and Sobowale (1978), Greenberg (1966), and Lewis (1981). These studies attempted to trace the relationship between audience demographics and perceived media credibility. Others (Westley & Severin, 1964) attempted to develop an ideal type of audience likely to assign high credibility to a newspaper based upon demographic characteristics. Al-Makaty, Boyd, and Van Tubergen (1994) used Q-Methodology to discover types of Saudi men who found different media credible during the Gulf War. Wanta and Hu (1994) attempted to link uses and gratifications research (see chapter 10, this volume) with agenda setting (see chapter 7, this volume) to examine "how people use the news media, rather than how media affect people" (p. 91). To accomplish this, Wanta and Hu tested Meyer's (1988) credibility scales (believability and community affiliation) as predictors of media reliance, exposure, and, ultimately, agenda setting effects. The objective was to find out if audience perceptions of credibility predict media agenda setting effects. They found that credibility (defined as believability and community affiliation) leads to reliance on a medium and reliance leads to exposure. Exposure, in its turn, leads to agenda setting effects. In something of a surprise, they also found that perceived affiliation of the media also produces a statistically significant path coefficient with agenda-setting effects.

Applied Research

Credibility research represents one of those unusual areas of scholarly research that also has attracted a great deal of attention among communication industry owners and managers. Perhaps the reason for this interest has been the changing relationship of the mass media and their publics. In the 1960s, the role and place of news media came under scrutiny, along with a popular reexamination of many social institutions.

Lionel Trilling (1965) attributed this skepticism toward public institutions to a broad displacement of the "public" outside its social institutions. He suggested that it began with intellectuals in the 1930s and had a major impact among college students and the broader public in the 1960s, leading to a redefinition of communication's role in society—to give journalists an independent and authentic voice distinct from that of their organizations (Learner, 1992; Wolfe, 1972).

The skepticism of media grew during the Vietnam War era. A series of high profile reports blamed media coverage in part for social problems of the time. The Kerner Commission Report (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968), for example, concluded that the way the media handled coverage of the 1967 Detroit riots might have contributed to the violence.

In 1971, the Nixon administration applied for and received a temporary restraining order blocking publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, claiming that national security would be endangered. Final clearance for publication was eventually granted by the U.S. Supreme Court. The prolonged series of revelations associated with Watergate, and subsequent Congressional hearings into illegal actions by Nixon Administration officials, were accompanied by bitter disputes about whether the revelations were damaging to the government. Increased investigative journalism led to a counter-attack on media reports by officials in both political parties.[4] A series of media scandals were revealed during the 1970s including the finding by *The Washington Post* that one of its reporters, Janet Cooke, had fabricated information for a drug story that won a Pulitzer Prize (National News Council, 1981). In the 1980s, well-organized attempts by the Reagan administration to manipulate the press also called into question the media's role in reporting public affairs (Hertsgaard, 1988).

These polarizing trends continued with bitter partisan wrangling over the impeachment of Bill Clinton following the Monica Lewinski scandal. The role of the media in covering the scan-

dal became a focal point for partisans on all sides (Busby, 2001). This was followed by a series of media scandals, starting with the revelation that *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair had plagiarized and fabricated elements of his stories. Then came the Iraq War and charges that the press had failed to serve its watchdog role in the lead up to the war or that it had shown disloyalty during time of war, depending upon partisan perspective (Katovsky & Carlson, 2003).

Media Credibility

A series of popular books and articles in news magazines about the credibility of the news media appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Goldstein, 1985). Goldstein's book described the effects of political power struggles and a clash of ideas about the role communication should play in society, and described a "news credibility problem" for the mass media. This literature cited public opinion polls (Tillson, 1984), changing circulation and audience patterns, libel judgments (Hunsaker, 1979; Libel Defense Resource Center, 1985), and reader complaints (Griffith, 1983; Henry, 1983; Sanoff, 1981) in their arguments.

The publications created a debate among journalists in the late 1970s and led to a series of credibility studies, this time centered on the credibility of the news media *themselves*. The five most important of these studies were sponsored by The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE; 1985), the Associated Press Managing Editors Association (APNE; 1985), the Gannett Center for Media Studies (Whitney, 1985), The Times-Mirror Company (Times-Mirror, 1986, 1987a, 1987b), and the *Los Angeles Times* media poll (Lewis, n.d.). Several other organizations also published studies about this time (i.e., APME, 1984; American Press Institute [API], 1984).

Gaziano and McGrath (1986), who handled the ASNE study, employed focus groups and polling techniques. The Times-Mirror Company and Gallup conducted focus group studies, following up with polling data. The Times-Mirror completed a series of survey studies. The Gannett Center did an extensive reanalysis of historical credibility studies, including polling data. The *Los Angeles Times* conducted a national poll. The Associated Press managing editors examined discourse data among editors.

Gaziano (1988) summarized the findings from all these studies. She said they generally agreed that: media bias is a public concern; there are frequent complaints about bad news, overdramatization, and sensationalism; media favoritism is an issue; media are out of touch with average citizens and treat ordinary people unfavorably; the public supports coverage of government and public officials; media have higher confidence ratings than other social institutions; and media critics are both the best and least educated, the most and least knowledgeable, the highest and lowest income, and the most and least heavy users of media. She said that journalists are overwhelmingly believed, that people like getting news, and that they think the watchdog role is important.

On the other hand, the studies found that three-fourths of adults have some problem with the media's credibility in general; one-sixth express frustrations with reporter treatment of victims, issues, or social institutions; and media sources, newspapers and television have similar credibility ratings.

In a separate study for ASNE in 1991, researcher Robert O. Wyatt observed that findings revealed a new right—"the right not to be offended" (Wyatt, Neft, & Badger, 1991, p. 21). This finding was consistent with Rodney Smolla's study of the growth in numbers of libel suits. He argued that people now believe that whatever offends them personally should be restricted or prohibited; they believe they have a legal right to protect themselves from offense (Smolla, 1986).

The Times-Mirror study, carried out by the Gallup Organization, suggested that, if credibility is defined as believability, then there is no credibility crisis for the nation's news media, that the

public appreciates the press more than it approves of its performance, and that critics are more critical than supporters are supportive.

Shortcomings of Applied Studies

These studies have not been without criticism. Journalists pointed out contradictory findings in polling data even before these studies were undertaken (Greenberg & Roloff, 1974; McCombs & Washington, 1983; Tillson, 1984; Whitney, 1984). Others pointed out "contradictory findings" in the studies themselves ("Inconsistency of Surveys," 1985; Meyer, 1985; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987). The chairman of the APME credibility committee argued that credibility is best understood as a measure of whether the public believes *in* the press rather than whether it *believes* the press (Southerland, 1985).

Academic researchers have challenged data interpretations and questioned the methods employed. Meyer (1985), for example, challenged the interpretation of the data. He argued that it could be interpreted as demonstrating *high* levels of credibility (see also Rimmer & Weaver, 1987). Meyer (1988) also challenged the scaling technique in the ASNE study. He demonstrated a response set pattern generated by the structure of positive and negative scales, generating different factors (dimensions of credibility) by simply altering the positive/negative structure.

This raises fundamental conceptual questions about credibility research. The professionally sponsored research depended on hypotheses based upon the limited effects model. The studies assumed that source or message characteristics could be revealed through polling techniques. These studies asked respondents to rate media credibility and specific media characteristics. The ASNE study factor analyzed scaled responses to operationalizations of source (news media) characteristics.

In short, credibility dimensions had not yet proved stable when the scales measuring them were expanded or altered. Furthermore, evidence points to mediating constructs at work within audiences (e.g., constructions, involvement, familiarity, and cognitive processing).

Measurement was also a problem. The ASNE study used 16 statement scales, 12 of which clustered on a *credibility* dimension. Their factor loadings were used to create a credibility score. Research has shown that expanding or changing the scales alters the numbers and types of factors. A study of credibility literature and professionally sponsored studies identified more than 100 such scalable items (Self, 1988a). The introduction of any additional items would likely alter the ASNE credibility index. Mediating constructs also remained a problem. This study implies that cognitive schema or templates change individual responses in unpredictable ways, depending upon how the questions concerning credibility are asked and the degree (intensity and direction) of involvement in the issue.

The Challenge of Interaction

Two challenges have shifted credibility research in recent years: one theoretical and one technological. The theoretical challenge has focused on the active perceptions (or cognitive mediations) and involvement (or familiarity) of recipients of communication messages. This represents a long line of thought that echoes back at least to the congruence (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1954) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) theories of the 1950s and that has moved forward through structural and systems theories, critical theory, semiotic and language theories, discourse analysis, poststructuralism, and other theories that have destabilized the idea that the recipients of messages are passive and manipulated through strong effects. Credibility, in this context, involves a variety of cognitive mediations posited by approaches such as the *construc-*

tivism advocated by Delia and associates (Delia, 1976), the *social judgment-involvement approach* (Salmon, 1986), and the *cognitive processing approach* advocated by Stocking and Gross (1989).

Delia (1976) argued that a constructivist viewpoint sees credibility as consisting of "situational constructs." Salmon (1986) pointed out that the social judgment-involvement approach deals with highly involving attitudes regarded as components of self-concept or ego. Stocking and Gross (1989) argued that because journalists themselves see some sources as more credible than others, they engage in categorization processes that create cognitive biases. These category "filters" bias the cognitive processes by which stories are selected and facts reported.

As early as 1965, Sargent reported essential differences in how personal news sources (i.e., other people) were perceived compared to impersonal news sources. When she presented news stories variously attributed to individuals and organizations, she found significant differences in credibility evaluations by respondents rating story credibility for individuals and organizations. Newhagen and Nass (1989) argued that research requiring cross-media comparisons means that respondents employ different levels of analysis—that people compare judgments about the credibility of individuals to judgments about the credibility of organizations. They found evidence supporting this view in the 1985 American Society of Newspaper Editors' study. This research calls into question the validity of much of the cross-media comparative research.

Albert C. Gunther (1988, 1992), following on the work of social judgment theorists (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965), conceived that credibility was *relational*. He argued that "involvement" helps explain "a connection between an individual's personal involvement with issues or groups and distrust of media" (Gunther, 1992, p. 150; see also Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Salmon, 1986). Gunther suggested that "a person's involvement in situations, issues, or groups will show the greatest explanatory power" (p. 152). He offered four propositions underlying this approach:

- Media credibility is a receiver assessment, not a source characteristic.
- Audience demographics, proposed as predictors of trust in media, have little theoretical basis and little empirical support.
- Situational factors often outweigh a more general skeptical disposition as predictors of credibility judgments.
- Group involvement will stimulate biased processing, affecting evaluations of messages and sources.

Stamm and Dube (1994) joined Gunther in his critique of studies that define credibility as "a trait possessed by a source or a message; as inherent to the source or message.… The receiver's relationship to the content of the source's message must also be taken into account as something that makes a difference in credibility attributed to a source" (p. 105). They explored "other components" of attitude and their relationship to credibility.[5]

This interest in credibility as a judgment of a recipient also reflects the influence of postmodern critiques of linearity, and structural and poststructural observations about the emergent, situated quality of meaning structures and their impact on credibility (Babcock & Whitehouse, 2005; Proctor, Papasolomou-Doukakis & Proctor, 2001).

Most recently, this shift has been manifest in new approaches to credibility. Flanagin & Metzger (2008) argue that credibility is based in "group and social engagement" that provides endorsements to bestow credibility upon online sources. They suggest that "endorsed credibility in the digital media environment compensates for the relative anonymity of tools like the web…. The means of sharing these assessments can take many forms resulting in several variants of credibility, most notably *conferred, tabulated, reputed,* and *emergent* credibility" (p. 7). They add

that digital media "have in many ways shifted the burden of information evaluation from professional gatekeepers to individual information consumers" (p. 9).

More evidence of the invested quality of credibility evaluations is found in a study by Choi, Watt, and Lynch, 2006, who examined cross-media credibility perception of news coverage of the Iraq War. In a survey of 481 online users, they found opponents of the war perceived the Internet as less aligned with a progovernment position and as more credible than did neutrals or supporters of the war. "For the minority partisan group, the diversity of information and views on the war was the main reason for the perception of high credibility of the Internet as a news channel," they wrote. "…As suggested in this study, whenever a salient issue creates a highly partisan split between supporters and opponents, news credibility is both a subjective perception by audiences and a function of their cognitive processing mechanisms, rather than simply an innate quality of news stories or sources themselves" (p. 223).

This concept of endorsed credibility shares some assumptions with more technological approaches to establishing credibility, called trust metrics, within computer networks developed by information systems theorists (e.g., Ziegler & Lausen, 2005). These propagation models "compute quantitative *estimates* of how much trust an agent *a* should accord to its peer *b*, taking into account trust ratings from other persons on the network" (p. 338).

A further step in the direction of an active recipient theory is implied in the work of Shaym Sundar (2008a), who describes the impact of digital "affordances" or technological innovations that offer new opportunities for interactions with digital media. He argues that these affordances cue "heuristics," or mental shortcuts, by which recipients judge the relative credibility of sources available on the Internet. He suggests (Sundar, 2008b) that this process shifts "agency" in creating credibility by empowering the individual self to become the source in the communication process. "When the system allows the self to serve as the source of messages, the communication becomes truly interpersonal," he says (p. 10). He points out that the self, as the active agent in navigating among possible messages, is empowered to generate the pattern that defines the communication message. The self chooses from among the affordances those cues that are meaningful, or heuristic, for its own purposes. He adds, "…the ability to imbue sourcing to users is an artifact of recent technological developments in the area of customization. In particular, it is a direct consequence of interactivity afforded by the interface" (p. 13).

Approaches such as these have established limits to the perceived influence of traditional message sources. For example, Druckman (2001) has argued that "contrary to many portrayals, elites face systematic constraints to using frames to influence and manipulate public opinion" (p. 1042). He conducted an experiment that found that "framing effects may occur, not because elites seek to manipulate citizens, but rather because citizens delegate to credible elites for guidance. In so doing, they choose which frames to follow in a systematic and sensible way" (p. 1052). He adds "that both framing and media priming work largely through deliberative processes where people seek guidance from sources they believe to be credible" (p. 1053). Similarly, Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that

> trust plays a central role in regulating media effects…trust and knowledge appear to moderate agenda setting in much the same way that they moderate priming. This reinforces the notion that agenda setting results partly from a choice by some individuals to make inferences of national problem importance based upon the content of news media coverage. (p. 306)

What has given these theoretical observations about an active recipient some urgency for credibility research has been the arrival of the Internet. A number of online credibility researchers have pointed out that meaning in the online environment emerges from the active construc-

tion of source patterns by online users. Online sources often are layered, collaborative, and communal (Metzger et al., 2002). At best they are "murky" and often they are anonymous (Sundar, 2008a). In such an environment, resorting to an Aristotelian notion of source ethos seems less useful than examining the "heuristics," collaborations, and "project motivations" driving the recipient to select the pattern of sources and source cues best suited to his or her purposes.

One area of interest to online researchers has been the impact that reliance on media has had on online credibility. Johnson and Kaye (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004) have conducted a series of studies of this issue. In 1998, they found that among Internet users, online sources were judged more credible than traditional sources. In 2000, they found that reliance on both traditional and online media was the strongest predictor of the credibility of online sources. In 2002, they reported that a greater percentage of respondents judged online media credible in 2000 than in the 1996 presidential campaign. The also found that reliance on traditional media was the best predictor of online credibility. In 2004, they found that among blog users, blogs were judged to be highly credible—more credible than traditional media sources—although respondents rated them higher for depth of information than they did for fairness. The data showed that when users found media in general and online sources in particular, useful—that is, they relied upon them—they also judged them to be credible.

Spiro Kiousis (2001) reported that in data from a cross-sectional study of residents of Austin, Texas, "a marginal association was noted between media use and public perceptions of credibility across all 3 media channels" (newspaper, television, and online news) (p. 381) (see, also, Rimmer & Weaver, 1987). He suggested that "…people may orient themselves to media content that is analogous across media channels, triggering parallel opinions of credibility" (pp. 397–398). "Survey participants seemed to perceive all of the media channels in the same direction, indicating that people probably have an overall perception of news credibility that only slightly fluctuates across media," he wrote (p. 396).

Bucy (2003) also reported a usage effect. In an experimental study of undergraduate students in the weeks immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks, he found that

> when adults were placed in the telewebbing condition with exposure to both TV and Net news, evaluations of Net news credibility jumped to their highest levels….For students, telewebbing caused perceptions of TV and Net news credibility to increase in relation to the control group, but dip slightly or show no difference compared to other forms of media exposure….similar to the association of media reliance with high credibility evaluations revealed by surveys, audiences seem to regard media they have just used more favorably than media to which they are not exposed. (pp. 257–258)

Another area of concern for online credibility researchers has been identifying technological markers that serve as cues for credibility among users. As indicated above, Sundar (2008b) has suggested that such markers cue heuristic judgments by online users. Walther et al. (2004) factor analyzed results of an intercept survey of 111 individuals who were given Web page mockups and asked to complete a questionnaire about health care information. Using elaboration likelihood theory, they found that domain site cues interact with advertising cues: "…credibility perceptions may not be invariant or stable, but rather are sensitive to topic and context," they wrote (p. 2). Similarly, Wathen and Burkell (2001) have suggested that users pass through three levels to judge credibility: the first deals with surface characteristics of a site (with questions such as: Does this site look professional?); the second deals with the message (source expertise, competence, and credentials); the third deals with the user's cognitive state (Does it match previous knowledge? How badly do I need the information?). They suggest that layering by the recipient renders a judgment about credibility.

Pollach (2005) uses content, linguistic, and discourse analysis to examine "About Us" sections of corporate websites for cues to credibility. She suggests that companies enhance their web sites by permitting "users to make choices about the content they want to be exposed to...." (p. 299). "With high-involvement audiences...the quality of the information matters and they will hardly be convinced by self-congratulatory statements with little information value," she writes (p. 298).

Greer (2003) examined source credibility and advertising cues in a study of college students. She found that "the evaluation of the story credibility was more closely tied to source cues rather than the advertising cues because participants paid so little attention to the ads" (p. 24). However, she added that "Participants who said they were heavy Internet users rated the story as more credible than light Internet users" (p. 25).

Rains (2007) examined the impact of anonymity on perceptions of source credibility online. Drawing from adaptive structuration theory in a study of computer mediated meetings in which participants were permitted to provide anonymous comments, he found that "The anonymous confederate reportedly was less trustworthy, less persuasive, and had less goodwill toward the group," although "anonymity did not differentially affect members' satisfaction with either decisions or perceptions of decision quality" (p. 117).

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) created a model of media bias in which firms slant their reports toward the prior beliefs of their customers in order to build a reputation for quality. They suggest that bias "arises as a natural consequence of a firm's desire to build a reputation for accuracy and in spite of the fact that eliminating bias could make all agents in the economy better off" (p. 310). They found that the model predicts that bias will be less severe when consumers receive independent evidence on the true state of the world and that competition between independently owned news outlets can reduce bias.

These studies of source cues in the online environment find that recipients are actively involved in weighing online credibility cues against other cues, against communal assessments, and against the usefulness of communications for individual purposes and projects.

Further Study

This critique points to the significant potential for new research regarding mass media credibility. Credibility remains an undertheorized concept. Many researchers have made assumptions about powerful effects and measured the impact of source characteristics, medium characteristics, and message characteristics assumed to manipulate recipient response. This was evident in the linear assumptions about stimulus and response in the original Hovland studies. It continued to drive more complex dimensional analyses of the many late 20th century studies. However, those studies also revealed wide differences of opinion between journalists and the public about the news media's role and the task of the news report, and the perceived task of the news report was shown to predict which medium people choose for news (Self, 1988c).

Social judgment-involvement theory, constructivism, and cognitive processing theories all suggest that audiences make judgments about media credibility based on schemas or templates from prior experience with the issues and events reported. The literature suggests that journalists, too, make judgments on the basis of such schema (Stocking & Gross, 1989). Issue involvement and partisanship have been shown to influence credibility judgments (Arpan & Raney, 2003; Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006; Gunther & Chia, 2001). The literature suggests that public ideas about the task of the news report may itself be changing (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Atkin, 1982; Clark 1979). When concepts of the task of the news report change, they change what the news media are thought to do for their readers. Successful news organizations, however, are slower to adopt new ideas about the task of news than are their customers (Schudson, 1978).

Theories of the social construction of reality exemplified by Tuchman (1978) indicate that professional training and professional associations routinize (provide schema for) the journalist's thinking and behaviors just as surely as social involvement provides templates for ego involvement and cognitive processing by readers or viewers. Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) reported a high degree of professionalism among contemporary journalists when compared to the degree of professionalism in the past.

At the opening of the 21st century new research into the "murky" sourcing on the Internet has reinvigorated observations about how active communities and individuals searching online sites seem to be in structuring credibility when sources are anonymous or so heavily layered that they mask the origins of messages. In such circumstances, recipients choose the cues that are meaningful within the context of their own activities.

This suggests that research into the role of communities, context, and individual goals in information seeking need significantly more study. Such research can help clarify the nature of recipient activity in imputing credibility and can help develop a more stable definition of credibility itself.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed how changing concepts of communication change theories and research about a fundamental construct—credibility. The Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle laid out the fundamental questions. They suggested that credibility might emanate from a confident knowledge of the truth or grow from a communicator's ability to read the needs of the audience.

Modern communication researchers began the systematic empirical study of the issue using a strong-effects model. They have examined source and media characteristics, message characteristics and the familiarity of the message, and audience demographics and credulity.

As the research has proceeded, it has become clear that credibility is an exceedingly complex construct. Researchers have identified many dimensions of source characteristics. They have found that not only manipulating messages changes their credibility, but repeating those messages or offering them to involved recipients alters the messages' believability. They discovered that the audience hearing or viewing a message is active in shaping meaning based upon communal or individual needs and experience.

The interest of politicians and media managers in credibility has driven large-scale media industry studies of credibility. Research suggests that media credibility research needs to take into account the involvement of media users if it is to make sense of public perceptions of media credibility.

The development of the Internet and other interactive media forms has shifted the focus of credibility research. Layered, anonymous, and "murky" sourcing has encouraged research on social and collaborative endorsement cues, technological markers and heuristic strategies to signal credible information. Individual purposes, projects, and motivation have been shown to influence evaluations of credibility. Cultural and textual theories have yet to be brought to bear on the problem. Much needs to be done to create a coherent theoretical foundation and stable definition for this familiar and yet strangely illusive concept called credibility. It should provide many more opportunities for fruitful study.

Notes

1. For a linear overview of the nature of these early findings about credibility, see Erskine (1970–1971).
2. Factor analysis is a *statistical technique* that seeks to identify dimensions or factors of scales that "group together" in "semantic space" whereby scale items or statements are created by a researcher and then

given to respondents and then analyzed for their dimensionality. Q-Methodology (e.g., Q-Sort) is a *measurement technique* that takes a large number of potential scale items and asks respondents to sort them into piles (usually 11). The items are then analyzed and a scale is created using items from all or most groups. For more information on each, see Kerlinger (1986). Factor analysis has been conducted in media studies of source credibility. See, for example, Salwen (1987, 1992) and Mosier and Ahlgren (1981).

3. For more on this line of research, see Bacon (1979), Begg, Armour, and Kerr (1985), and Pratkanis, Greenwald, Leippe, and Baumgardner (1988).
4. For more on the relational approach, see Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) on perceptions of media bias among partisans on Mideast issues, or Perloff (1989) on the "Third Person Effect." Chaffee (1982) has also argued that credibility is situational or relational.
5. For a sampling of this argument, see Sigal (1973), Porter (1976), and Demac (1988).

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