Ideological lens matters: Credibility heuristics, pre-existing attitudes, and reactions to messages on ideological websites

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has become the primary location for ideological groups to recruit members, manage their public image, and organize a diverse membership. To accomplish their goals, these organizations strive to appear credible to target audiences. Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders' (2010) theory of online credibility assessment explains that Internet users rely on peripheral cues to determine whether website information is credible or not. We conducted two studies to test this theory in an online ideological environment. In addition, we investigated how website viewers' pre-existing attitudes regarding the ideological topic affects how they perceive the messages presented on these websites. Results of this research found that this theory partially extends to ideological settings. However, participants did not attribute credibility to ideological topics on a uniform basis. Participants' pre-existing attitudes regarding the topic and the position advocated for by the website sponsor played a critical role in what type of credibility cues were most salient.

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Most organizations desire to be perceived favorably by the public. This desire requires them to craft their public messages carefully so as to strike a balance between appealing to potential members while avoiding unwanted criticism. This balance is particularly important for ideological groups that take firm positions on social issues. Unlike previous generations of ideological organizations that were typically limited to regional influence due to financial, logistical, and organizational constraints, many modern groups have expanded their reach and influence through the use of online media in order to quickly and cost effectively locate, organize, and coordinate a geographically diverse membership (Connelly et al., 2015; McCann, 2010). The increased presence of ideological groups online and the potential impact of persuasive ideological messages on Internet users necessitates an extensive exploration into what these groups do and how they influence those exposed to their messages.

Although many facets of website construction influence how Internet users react to online messages, previous research has demonstrated that minor, seemingly minor alterations in website content and features can significantly influence how users perceive and respond to the content presented (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders' (2010) identified important cues that Internet users attend to in order to make decisions regarding the credibility of the website sponsor. The present study seeks to test the impact of several of the cues presented in their theory on users' perceptions of source credibility and to evaluate whether the cues identified in their theory can impact other related outcomes, such as users' ultimate attitudes toward the website sponsor and likelihood of derogating the message in an ideological online setting. Further, we test whether additional moderating factors—cue congruence and users' pre-existing attitudes—influence how these cues are perceived and interpreted.

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Much of what is known regarding perceived credibility, attitudes toward a website sponsor, and message derogation has been discovered through investigations in commercial, news, health, or similarly mainstream environments (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Hong, 2006; Johnson & Fahmy, 2008; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). This extant research has provided valuable understanding regarding these variables, but because ideological websites intentionally seek to address more deeply-held beliefs and values that are tied to users' core identity, website features that influence these variables may operate differently on ideological websites.

Ideological websites are somewhat unique in that they often do not exist as a commercial enterprise. Thus, the success of an ideological website is not measured monetarily, but rather, in the influence it exerts on viewers' beliefs, values, and actions (Connelly et al., 2015; Dunbar et al., 2014). Because there is a need to better understand perceptions of online credibility in ideological groups and the role of pre-existing attitudes in those perceptions, we conducted two studies to test aspects of Metzger and colleagues' (2010) theory of social and heuristic approaches to online credibility evaluation in an online ideological setting. In conducting these studies, we sought to understand (1) how website viewers' perceptions of website credibility, attitudes toward the group, and likelihood of derogating the message are influenced by credibility cues that can trigger heuristic processing of persuasive messages and (2) how the reactions to these cues interact with viewers' pre-existing stance on the ideological topic.

1. Ideological groups

Ideological groups are those that adhere to strongly-held beliefs or values, often rooted in the past, that are viewed as inherently good or right by the group and that act as a mental model or guiding framework for the interpretation of events, information, and the world in general (Dunbar et al., 2014; Van Dijk, 2006). Ideological groups often are formed because of a social issue or adopt a position on an issue. These groups identify imperfections in the existing society and present a vision of an idealized future that could be achieved through adherence to their messages (Schweitzer, 1944). Members of these groups often develop strong relationships with others who share their views and distance themselves from those who oppose their positions (Nahirny, 1962). Green (1988) found that "evaluative reactions to parties and ideological groups are largely bipolar in nature" (p. 76), meaning that people tend to view issues and groups in terms of "for" or "against." Therefore, for ideological groups, the dissemination of their message through media outlets in order to recruit likeminded others to their cause and refute the messages of those who oppose them is vitally important.

Ideological groups range from those with pro-social motivations that provide invaluable contributions to society to those with extreme or dangerous goals. A majority of individuals living in the United States claim membership in some sort of ideological group, including those who promote religious, political, professional, or community-focused ideologies (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012; Van Dijk, 2006). Despite the large variety of ideological groups represented online, previous research has generally treated all ideological groups the same or presented limited classifications to describe a vibrant and diverse sector of society (Angie et al., 2011). More recent research has attempted to take a more nuanced view of online ideological groups by investigating credibility and persuasive features of ideological websites (Dunbar et al., 2014), interactivity of ideological group websites (Jensen et al., 2014), how conservative versus liberal ideologies of groups influence people's perceptions of credibility (Taylor et al., 2015), and how ideological groups construct and differentiate their identities online (Connelly

et al., 2015).

The relative ease and low cost of creating a website, extensive access to potential members and sympathizers, and low regulation and oversight of the Internet make it an ideal environment for these groups to thrive (McCann, 2010). Necessary to achieving their goals is the need to appear credible by the target audience (Scott, 2013). Because of this desire to appear legitimate publicly, some groups craft their websites carefully so as to highlight more acceptable aspects of the group and downplay or deny group features that could be considered unacceptable by observers. One way website sponsors can influence website visitors' perceptions of group credibility is by manipulating small, seemingly insignificant, website features (Metzger et al., 2010).

1.1. Source credibility

Perceived source credibility is typically understood as the believability or trustworthiness of information and/or its source (Fogg, 2003). Callister (2000) explained that with the advent of the Internet, and the information richness it provides, people had to adapt the way they determine source credibility to account for the direct access to virtually limitless information. In the pre-Internet environment of information leanness, people trusted that the information that reached them had been carefully evaluated by "experts" and therefore required limited personal appraisal in determining credibility. Modern society, facilitated by the Internet, is one of information richness where information can be distributed unfiltered to the final consumer. This unmitigated access to online information offers users both benefits and dangers, as each Internet user must devise methods for determining information credibility individually.

Ideally, Internet users would be able to critically evaluate each message presented to them and carefully weigh its strengths and weaknesses so as to determine its worth. Unfortunately, in reality, people are not willing or capable of expending such effort in every instance and only "rarely" or "occasionally" verify online information (Metzger, 2007). Instead, people often select only surface characteristics (e.g., website appearance, website layout) that represent the source's characteristics (e.g., currency, accuracy) when determining whether a website is credible or not (Walthen & Burkell, 2002). This initial assessment of peripheral cues influences how viewers interpret information—whether centrally or peripherally (Fransen & Fennis, 2014). In their grounded theory, Metzger et al. (2010) identified two basic facets of credibility evaluation in an online environment—social influence and cognitive heuristics—to be particularly important to Internet users as they attempt to determine which messages can be trusted and which cannot.

1.1.1. Social influence
Even in virtual environments, people are social creatures that utilize "social networks, both online and offline to help find, evaluate, and verify information on the Internet" (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 420). In short, if website visitors perceive that those in their social networks generally agree with the message presented on a website, they will be more likely to perceive the message to be credible. Metzger et al. (2010) identified four types of social influence heuristics that influence judgments about online message credibility: social information pooling, social confirmation of personal opinion (i.e., whether the website promotes views that are similar to the user's personal views), enthusiast endorsements, and resource sharing via interpersonal exchange (e.g., referrals from family members or trusted friends). As the present studies deal exclusively with online content intended for a large audience, and in an attempt to maintain experimental control, interpersonal exchanges with friends and family and targeted messages that