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# Some like it lots: The influence of interactivity and reliance on credibility

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## ABSTRACT

This study has four primary purposes: to investigate the level of interactivity with 15 sources of political information, determine the degree of reliance on each of the sources, assess perceptions of credibility, and compare the strength of interactivity to the strength of reliance on judgments of credibility. This study includes sources that have received little attention in the credibility literature such as social network sites, Twitter, and mobile device applications. Respondents interact with and rely on the sources moderately. Credibility ratings range from moderate to highly credible. Reliance predicts credibility of 14 of 15 sources as compared to interactivity that predicts credibility of just 9 of 15 sources. Interactivity with sources that are inherently collaborative (e.g. Twitter, social media, talk radio) more strongly predicts credibility than interactivity with sources that are more source-to-user based (e.g. CNN, political websites).

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## 1. Introduction

Interactivity is the hallmark of the Internet. It has transformed news delivery. Information consumers are no longer passive receivers but are also active providers of news. Interactive technology greatly expands the communication feedback loop from handwritten letters of support or complaint to an editor to the establishment of online conversation communities that include consumer-created websites and blogs (van Dijk, 1999). The interactive world is abuzz with trillions of bits of information gushing from digital devices and blurring the distinction between partisan and non-partisan sources and between news and opinion, making it difficult to discern credible information from questionable statements.

Early Internet studies tied interactivity to perceptions of credibility (e.g. Fogg et al., 2001, 2003), but interactivity was later set apart from credibility. With the recent arrival of highly interactive social media, scholars are once again discussing the relationship between interactivity and credibility (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Sundar, 2008).

This study furthers knowledge by exploring the effect of interactivity (a user-based measure of communication mediated by

digital technology), on credibility (the degree to which users trust and believe online information). It also compares the influence of interactivity to the influence of reliance (importance of a medium to a user) on perceptions of credibility. This study examines 15 sources of informational, including traditional media, social media, nontraditional partisan sources and traditional partisan sources. The study also covers new ground by including mobile news apps. The findings are based on 1267 responses to a survey that was linked on Mechanical Turk (MTurk), Amazon's crowdsourcing site.

The 15 sources of political information examined in this study are categorized as follows:

**Traditional media:** newspapers, news magazines, broadcast television news, CNN, MSNBC, and news radio, and their online counterparts.

**Social media:** social network sites, Twitter, YouTube, mobile news apps.

**Nontraditional partisan sources:** political websites, political blogs, and candidate blogs.

**Traditional partisan sources:** Fox News and talk radio.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Credibility and systematic and heuristic information processing

Assessments of media credibility are made through both

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systematic and heuristic information processing (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Metzger, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013, 2015; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Sundar, 2008). Systematic information processing is the deliberate or rational act of verifying information, such as by contacting experts or comparing several sources, whereas heuristic processing is based on attitudinal or emotional cues such as feelings about a medium's appearance, how much a source is valued, or whether information accords with personal viewpoints. Whether judgments of credibility are made systematically or heuristically depends on experience with a medium, cognitive ability to evaluate media and media messages, and whether users are seeking factual information or opinion (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). For example, when looking for accurate information online, such as about a medical condition, systematic processing dominates the assessment of credibility, whereas heuristics guide attitudinal or emotional assessments, such as how much credence to put in a blog post that critiques an art show. While some scholars criticize heuristics as surface determinants of credibility, others have noted that heuristic processing eases the cognitive burden of assessing credibility of large amounts of information, such as found on the Internet (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

Several sub-categories of heuristics explain why different types of information might be judged differently. The reputation heuristic, for example, could explain why some individuals might judge sources that they recognize or perceive as authoritative, such as the *New York Times*, as highly credible (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). While news consumers are likely to rate sources they recognize as more credible than those they are less familiar with, familiarity itself does not lead to high credibility. For instance, though some liberals might watch Fox News, they still believe it is untrustworthy. The self-confirmation heuristic, the tendency to believe information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs and dismiss challenging information, could explain why traditional and nontraditional partisan sites might be judged as highly credible (Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Information that accords with personal beliefs is considered accurate (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005; Nimmo, 1990), and personally relevant (Donsbach, 1991; Lau, 1989), and therefore more credible than information that challenges beliefs. The endorsement heuristic boosts credibility because consumers are more likely to trust and believe sources that are recommended by friends, 'liked' on social media, or that are supported aggregated testimonials, reviews or ratings (Chaiken, 1987; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

## 2.2. Genre credibility

Early studies of online credibility focused on the Internet as a whole (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000b, 2002; Kioussis, 2001), rather than on its separate components (e.g., web, email, blogs). As new components were created, researchers recognized the importance of studying the credibility of each as its own genre, rather than as an indistinct part of the Internet (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2015; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2012). Internet components are different from one another in terms of interactivity, synchronicity, how information is retrieved, how they are used, and users' expectations, so each genre is judged differently and by different criteria (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2009).

## 2.3. Perceptions of credibility

Traditional media sources and their online counterparts rate

only moderately credible and scores have dropped considerably. In 2001, 58 percent of respondents judged most or all of online information reliable compared to 40 percent in 2011 (Center for the Digital Future, 2011).

There are several reasons for why credibility ratings of traditional news are in a free fall, but one factor is the increasing reliance on traditional and nontraditional partisan media like Fox News, and political party and candidate-hosted websites and blogs. These partisan sources are reputed to provide in-depth and multi-faceted discussions, run stories that are ignored or are unavailable on non-partisan media (Johnson & Kaye, 2006, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2004, 2011; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010), and give authors freedom to venture from flat, unexciting, formulated prose (Center for the Digital Future, 2011; Rainie & Horrigan, 2007), all of which increase credibility of partisan information at the expense of non-partisan, traditional sources. For example, partisan websites and blogs are judged as more credible than non-partisan online newspapers (Johnson & Kaye, 2010) and online broadcast television news (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2006, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2011).

Even social media rate low on credibility (Go, You, Jung, & Shim, 2016; Johnson & Kaye, 2014, 2015; Westerman et al., 2012). Social media might not be considered very credible because users struggle with how to judge diverse and unfamiliar sources of dubious origin and strangers who are "friends" only in the social media sense (Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

Based on previous credibility research, this study asks the following question:

**RQ1.** How credible do Internet users judge each of the 15 sources of political information?

## 2.4. Interactivity

While scholars agree about the importance of interactivity, they have difficulty agreeing on what interactivity means (e.g. Atkinson, 2008; Heeter, 1989; Kioussis, 2002; Rafaeli, 1988). Interactivity is commonly defined as a characteristic inherent in the technology itself or in the process of communicating (Kioussis, 2002). This definition is problematic, however, because it needs to be redefined as technology changes, and because it ignores that users interact with both technology and with other users (Bucy & Tao, 2007). Scholars, therefore, are redefining interactivity from an audience perspective (e.g. Bucy, 2004; McMillan & Hwang, 2002), which is advantageous because it focuses on uses of the technology, rather than the technology itself. For instance, users might perceive a communication environment as highly interactive even if it has only a few mechanisms for interacting. In other words, they perceive that a component affords more interactivity than it actually does (Bucy, 2004; Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). By focusing on an audience-based measure, researchers can explore how much users interact with a medium rather than simply how many interactive elements the medium possesses (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999).

## 2.5. Interactivity and digital content

Interactivity has had a major role in bridging the gap between political news consumers, legislators, and reporters. The old top-down approach where traditional media produced and delivered news to a passive audience has been supplemented with a bottom-up approach where digital technologies empower the audience as active participants in content creation, distribution, and consumption of information (Atkinson, 2008; Bowman & Willis, 2003). Moreover, users are encouraged to interact with or customize stories, contact reporters, and express their opinions about political

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