



Reasons to believe: Influence of credibility on motivations for using social networks



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ABSTRACT

One question that has troubled credibility researchers is why do people rely on media that they do not deem credible? This question has also arisen with the coming of social media, which is increasingly relied on for news and information despite its low credibility ratings. This study compares perceptions of credibility of political information found on Facebook, blogs, and Twitter to credibility of information found on traditional media and it investigates if credibility ratings influence motives for using social media for political information. This study found that all traditional media except Fox News were rated more credible than social media sites, which suggests that sources that strive to present news that is fair and unbiased are judged more credible. But traditional news sources are only rated as moderately credible, which indicates that they are not measuring up to the standards of journalistic integrity. Credibility of social media consistently influenced motivations for using them, suggesting that gratifications obtained from these sources may be strong enough that users are willing to trade credibility for need satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

In their study of the media's role in the 1996 presidential election, political scientists Dautrich and Hartley (1999) found that media use was such a strongly ingrained habit that consumers would stick with a medium even though they did not trust the political information they were receiving. The researchers questioned why users would turn to media they do not trust.

A decade later other researchers asked that same question about the Internet (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008), and in today's digital world the same question can be applied to social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Social media are heavily used sources of news and information, especially political information, yet like traditional media such as newspapers and broadcast television news, social media are not considered very credible (Johnson & Kaye, 2014; Kaye & Johnson, 2014). Further, traditional media and their online counterparts are similarly rated in terms of credibility, albeit fairly low (Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 2002; Johnson & Kaye, 2010b; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008).

This study, then, compares perceptions of credibility of political information found on social media (blogs, Facebook,¹ Twitter) to that found on traditional media, and investigates whether credibility influences motives for using social media for political information, after controlling for political and demographic measures as well as credibility of traditional media sources (broadcast television news, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, and newspapers).

This line of examination follows earlier studies (Johnson & Kaye, 2010a; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008) that found a connection between credibility and motivations. Specifically, users who access the Web for information, particularly political information, are more likely to judge online information as higher in credibility than users who connect to satisfy entertainment needs. A similar relationship was found for credibility and motivations for using traditional sources. Thus, perhaps perceptions of credibility are linked to motivations for using social media in such a way that motivations temper credibility so that even if it is low, it does not keep people away but rather draws them to social media.

¹ The survey asked about social network sites like Facebook, Google + and Tumblr and treated Twitter as a separate measure. To simplify the discussion throughout the paper, Facebook will be used as the representative term instead of writing out Facebook/Google+/Tumblr. Facebook is used by 71% of online adults in the U.S., almost three times more than any other SNS (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

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2. Literature review

2.1. Media credibility

Credibility is not inherent in a medium (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969) but is a user-based perception that includes believability, accuracy, and fairness (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). Perceptions of credibility are critical for obtaining and retaining an audience. When perceptions of credibility slip, audience members may migrate to another medium that they perceive as more trustworthy.

Scholars who have employed information-processing models to explain how credibility is determined have noted a link between credibility and motivations (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Metzger, 2007; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Sundar, 2008). There are generally two types of information processing: central and peripheral. Seeking expert sources and verifying information through comparison is a central processing technique, whereas judging credibility based on such cues as a website's appearance, how much a source is liked, or how much information accords with personal viewpoints, is peripheral processing. Whether central or peripheral processing is used depends on a user's Internet experience, cognitive ability to evaluate media and media messages, and the desire to receive accurate and credible information (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Metzger, 2007; Metzger et al., 2010; Sundar, 2008). Because social media are used primarily for entertainment and social reasons (Kaye, 2010b), users tend to judge credibility using peripheral cues, which are personal and emotional. For example, social media users are likely to view political information as highly credible if it comes from a trusted friend or accords with their ideology (Metzger et al., 2010).

2.2. Social media/social network sites

The term 'social media' is often used loosely as "a catchall" to describe any type of user-generated content (UGC). According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, UGC needs to meet three primary requirements for consideration as social media: "(1) UGC that is published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected-group of people; (2) UGC needs to show a certain amount of creative effort, (3) and it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices" (see Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Facebook, Twitter, and blogs meet all three standards of social media.

While Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are all social media, they differ on several key aspects. Facebook and Twitter are both further classified as social network sites, a type of social media that are "Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211).

Yet, not all social network sites are the same. Twitter, for example, is very different from Facebook. For example, social connections on Facebook are bidirectional: Users have to accept a friend request to see their network activity and engage in conversations. Twitter does not require the same reciprocation – users can follow who ever they want to follow. Facebook connections are typically among real-life friends, while the majority of connections on Twitter are among strangers who do not need to reveal their true identity. Facebook users can restrict visibility to friends while Twitter posts are public. As a result of these distinctions, Facebook users are more socially connected than those on Twitter (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012). Twitter and Facebook users differ considerably on

personality traits, demographic characteristics such as race, gender, and education (Hargittai, 2007; Hughes et al., 2012), and exhibit different patterns of narcissism (Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013).

Blogs, in contrast, are not social network sites, per se. Blogs stand out from Facebook and Twitter because conversation occurs between the blog's host and fellow blog users who might be friends, acquaintances or strangers. Blogs are both conversational and informational, but are not used primarily for social purposes. Earlier diary style blogs such as Livejournal were the precursor to today's SNS, but they evolved in a different direction and became more issue oriented and less personal. Although blog users express their opinions, on the major blogs of today there is very little exchange of photos or conversation about personal matters as on Facebook, instead most blogs tackle political and social issues. Even though Twitter is called a "microblog," it is not as robust as a typical blog and its 140-character restriction per post limits in-depth conversation. Blogs, then, are a social medium, but they are not used primarily for social networking, as are Facebook and Twitter (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

2.3. Blog credibility

Whether blogs are considered a credible source depends on who is being asked. *Internet users* in general rate blogs as either moderate (Banning & Sweetser, 2007) or low in credibility (Meyers, Marchionni, & Thorson, 2010; Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010). Online users may dismiss blogs because they do not adhere to traditional news standards such as fairness, balance and objectivity (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 2007) and because many blogs have an off-putting and uncivil tone (Borah, 2013).

Blog users, however, have a favorable perception of blogs and judge them as more credible than traditional news sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2007, 2009; Johnson, Kaye, Richard, & Wong, 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Kim, 2012). Blogs, including political blogs, are seen as independent voices, in contrast to the traditional media, which are derided for allowing corporate interests to control content (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Consequently, blogs are thought to provide perspectives that traditional media ignore. Blogs thrive on in-depth discussion (Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2004, 2011), albeit often biased, but the lack of objectivity is considered a strength, not a weakness. Blog users, especially those who visit political blogs, are drawn to the ones that best represent their political beliefs (Johnson, Richard, & Zhang, 2009; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010) and thus, they rate them high in credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2013; Kim, 2012).

2.4. Facebook credibility

Almost three quarters of online adults use social network sites like Facebook (Duggan & Smith, 2013), yet they are not considered a very credible source of information (Johnson & Kaye, 2014; Kaye & Johnson, 2014). Further, SNS are judged significantly less credible than news sites, candidate Web sites, political blogs and YouTube (Kaye & Johnson, 2014).

There are several reasons why Facebook may not be judged as very credible. First, while Facebook is an outlet for political information and a forum for political discussion, it is used primarily used to make social connections, and social sites in general are perceived as less credible than informational ones (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Second, source reputation is a key determinant of credibility (Metzger, 2007; Sundar, 2008), yet source information is often missing or difficult to determine when direct links to the sources are not provided (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011). Third, Facebook lacks gatekeepers, such as editors,

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