



Empirical study

Who said that? Investigating the Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption with Norwegian undergraduate readers

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated to what extent encountering a textual claim that contradicts one's prior beliefs may increase readers' memory for the source of the information, such as the author or publication. A sample of 71 Norwegian economics and administration undergraduates were presented with texts on cell phones and potential health risks that either concluded that cell phones involve serious health risks or that they are perfectly safe. Results showed that readers' memory for source feature information increased when the conclusion of the text contradicted the belief that cell phone use poses serious health risks but not when it contradicted the belief that cell phone use does not involve such risks. This is partly consistent with the Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption recently proposed by de Pereyra, Britt, Braasch, and Rouet (2014), suggesting that when readers judge content information to be implausible in light of their prior beliefs on the topic, they may be more likely to seek support from available information about the source to make sense of the content.

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1. Introduction

Reading literacy researchers interested in how students deal with textual information concerning controversial issues have revealed that even at secondary and undergraduate levels, students more often than not disregard source information and pay attention only to the content of the texts (Bråten, Strømsø, & Andreassen, *in press*; Britt & Aglinskias, 2002; Gerjets, Kammerer, & Werner, 2011; Maggioni & Fox, 2009; Stadtler & Bromme, 2007; Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996; von der Mühlen, Richter, Schmid, Schmidt, & Berthold, *in press*; Wineburg, 1991). This is especially problematic in the 21st century reading context, where the abundance of easily accessible information of dubious quality requires that readers more than ever are capable of critically evaluating the sources they encounter (Alexander & the Disciplined Reading and Learning Research Laboratory, 2012; Brand-Gruwel & Stadtler, 2011; Bråten, Stadtler, & Salmerón, *in press*; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013; Stadtler, Bromme, & Rouet, 2014). Accordingly, the importance of focusing on source features (e.g., the author, publication, and date and type of publication) during reading is highlighted in several current conceptualizations of reading literacy, including the new literacy framework of Leu et al. (2013) and the documents model framework of Britt and colleagues (Britt, Rouet, & Braasch,

2013). Essentially, the assumption underlying these conceptualizations is that by attending to source feature information in addition to content, readers will be able to form source-source and source-content links that allow them to compare sources and judge the trustworthiness of the content in light of the characteristics of the sources (see also, Bråten & Strømsø, 2012). In this way, taking source information into consideration will also help readers assign proper weight and position to a particular message when trying to construct a mental representation of a controversial issue.

Consistent with theoretical assumptions, recent empirical work has shown that readers' attention to and memory for source information relate to their text-based learning and comprehension (Anmarkrud, Bråten, & Strømsø, 2014; Barzilai & Eshet-Alkalai, 2015; Barzilai, Tzadok, & Eshet-Alkalai, 2015; Bråten, Strømsø, & Britt, 2009; Goldman, Braasch, Wiley, Graesser, & Brodowinska, 2012; Strømsø, Bråten, & Britt, 2010; Wiley et al., 2009), with recent intervention work (Braasch, Bråten, Strømsø, Anmarkrud, & Ferguson, 2013; Macedo-Rouet, Braasch, Britt, & Rouet, 2013; Mason, Junyent, & Tornatora, 2014; Stadtler, Scharrer, Macedo-Rouet, Rouet, & Bromme, 2016; Walraven, Brand-Gruwel, & Boshuizen, 2013; Wiley et al., 2009), in particular, strengthening the idea that readers' consideration of source feature information actually promotes learning and comprehension of textual information.

Rather than launching yet another investigation of how sourcing activity can be increased through systematic intervention, however, the current study focused on how characteristics of the reader and the text might interact to facilitate or constrain students' memory for source information. Specifically, we built on the

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Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption of [de Pereyra, Britt, Braasch, and Rouet \(2014\)](#) and examined whether a discrepancy between readers' preexisting beliefs about the topic of the text and the message conveyed by the text would increase readers' attention to source information during reading, as indicated by their source memory performance. In addition, with most prior work examining students' attention to source information when reading multiple texts (e.g., [Anmarkrud et al., 2014](#); [Britt & Aglinskas, 2002](#); [Bråten et al., 2009](#); [Goldman et al., 2012](#); [Stahl et al., 1996](#); [Strømsø et al., 2010](#); [von der Mühlen et al., in press](#); [Wiley et al., 2009](#); [Wineburg, 1991](#)), this is one of the very few studies targeting sourcing when students read single rather than multiple texts (see, however, [Braasch, Rouet, Vibert, & Britt, 2012](#); [Bråten, Strømsø, et al., in press](#); [de Pereyra et al., 2014](#); [Steffens, Britt, Braasch, Strømsø, & Bråten, 2014](#)). Before specifying the rationale and the hypothesis for the current empirical work, we also briefly discuss the particular theoretical assumptions underlying our study as well as the most relevant prior work building on those assumptions.

1.1. Theoretical assumptions and prior research

The Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption ([de Pereyra et al., 2014](#)) can be considered an extension of the Discrepancy-Induced Source Comprehension assumption of [Braasch et al. \(2012\)](#). In a seminal paper, [Braasch et al. \(2012\)](#) launched the idea that readers' attention to source information (i.e., to "who said what") might increase when different sources provide discrepant accounts of a situation. Specifically, these authors proposed that when different sources make conflicting claims about a controversial situation or issue, one mechanism for resolving the resulting break in situational coherence ([Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994](#)) and constructing an integrated mental representation may be to link discrepant content information to the respective sources. Referring to this assumption as the Discrepancy-Induced Source Comprehension or D-ISC assumption, [Braasch et al. \(2012\)](#) provided preliminary evidence in two experiments where students read brief news reports containing two claims that were either conflicting or consistent. In accordance with the D-ISC assumption, online and offline data, respectively, indicated that conflicting claims promoted deeper processing of and better memory for the sources of the claims, as compared to consistent claims. Of note is that in the [Braasch et al. \(2012\)](#) study, the conflicting claims and their respective sources were embedded in a single text (i.e., a brief news report). However, the D-ISC assumption has also received empirical support in reading contexts where conflicting claims about the same issue are presented in multiple distinct texts ([Kammerer & Gerjets, 2014](#); [Kammerer, Kalbfell, & Gerjets, 2016](#); [Salmerón, Macedo-Rouet, & Rouet, in press](#); [Stadtler, Scharrer, Skodzik, & Bromme, 2014](#); [Strømsø & Bråten, 2014](#); [Strømsø, Bråten, Britt, & Ferguson, 2013](#)).

For example, [Kammerer and Gerjets \(2014\)](#) found that conflicts between the claims of an institutional web page and several other, partly commercial, web pages on a controversial fitness-related issue made readers allocate more attention to the source of the institutional web page during reading and include more source citations in their written summaries. In the same vein, [Stadtler et al. \(2014\)](#) found that when the existence of conflicting claims across multiple texts on a controversial health issue was explicitly signaled through rhetorical means, students included more source citations when generating essay responses on the issue from memory. In contrast, [Steffens et al. \(2014\)](#), who had undergraduates read single texts on controversial health issues that contained inconsistencies or consistencies between claims and arguments, did not find that source information was recalled any better when such within-text inconsistencies were presented. In keeping with [Stadtler, Scharrer, Brummernhenrich, and Bromme \(2013\)](#), one reason for this may be that students are less likely to attend to and remember

conflicting views and inconsistencies when they are included in single texts compared to across texts. Moreover, readers may have encountered difficulties using the source when trying to resolve the coherence breaks because the sources of the single texts designed by [Steffens et al. \(2014\)](#) were all experts (i.e., medical doctors) and, as such, less helpful in comprehending the inconsistencies (e.g., by attributing claim – evidence inconsistencies to lack of competence or bias).

Recently, [de Pereyra et al. \(2014\)](#) proposed the Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption, which is an extension of the D-ISC assumption to situations involving discrepancies between readers' prior knowledge and textual information. In such situations, textual information may be considered less plausible, with plausibility defined as a "judgment on the relative potential truthfulness of incoming information compared to our existing mental representations" ([Lombardi, Sinatra, & Nussbaum, 2013, p. 50](#)). Presumably, plausibility judgments may be automatically made during reading ([Isberner & Richter, 2013](#); [Richter, Schroeder, & Wöhrmann, 2009](#)); yet, in some instances, readers may also intentionally control their plausibility judgments and critically (re)consider claims at odds with their preexisting mental representations ([Chinn & Brewer, 2001](#); [Lombardi et al., 2013](#); [Maier & Richter, 2014](#)). In any case, source feature information may be assumed to function as facilitative additional cues when readers try to make sense of claims judged to be less plausible because they are discrepant with their prior knowledge ([de Pereyra et al., 2014](#)). Accordingly, [Lombardi, Seyranian, and Sinatra \(2014\)](#) theorized that when plausibility is judged to be low, readers may rely on source features to make sense of the message instead of effortfully processing the content information.

Of note is that the Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption differs from the D-ISC assumption in that the former concerns discrepancies between textual claims and the latter concerns discrepancies between textual claims and readers' prior mental representations. Thus, while the sources of the conflict reside within the text(s) in the first case, one of those sources is the reader in the latter. In both cases, however, it can be assumed that the discrepancies create a break in the situational coherence that is necessary for understanding ([Graesser et al., 1994](#)), with an increased attention to source information being one potential mechanism for restoring such breaks. Moreover, in both cases, readers may try to resolve the resulting breaks in coherence by integrating or reconciling discrepant views (viz., within-text discrepancies and text-reader discrepancies), or by preferring one particular view (cf., [Stadtler & Bromme, 2014](#)). Thus, in some instances, source information may help readers understand conflicts and reconcile the different views; in others, it may help them take (or retain) a particular stance on the issue.

In testing the Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption, [de Pereyra et al. \(2014\)](#) conducted two experiments where university students read brief news stories that contained implausible or plausible information in light of readers' prior world knowledge, with this information conveyed by sources embedded within the stories (e.g., in one story, astronauts conveyed the implausible information that a space station was equipped with a bowling alley and a Jacuzzi). However, contrary to their expectations, neither experiment showed any effect of the plausibility manipulation on participants' memory for the sources. In accordance with [de Pereyra et al. \(2014\)](#), we suggest that this lack of effects might be due to the fact that readers did not really need any support from source information to make sense of the implausible claims but, given their simple and obvious discrepancy with common world knowledge, could reject them right away based on the content information alone. Further research on the Plausibility-Induced Source Focusing assumption should therefore use more complex text materials than the short news-like pieces used by [de Pereyra et al. \(2014\)](#), presumably making it harder to base one's evaluation of a

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