

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343330258>

Journalism Credibility in the Digital Age – Examining Shifts in Paradigms

Article in *SSRN Electronic Journal* · January 2020

DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3641943

CITATIONS

12

READS

529

3 authors, including:



Evan Rowe

University of Colorado Boulder

7 PUBLICATIONS 30 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Health Promotion [View project](#)



Are Late Night TV Shows Polarizing Society? Examining the Ambivalence of New Version of Political Partisanship in the United States [View project](#)

Journalism Credibility in the digital age – Examining shifts in paradigms

By

Joseph Kerunga

Tangaza University College
Kenya

Evan Rowe

University of Colorado – Boulder
USA

Gregory Gondwe

University of Colorado – Boulder
USA

Abstract

This paper set out to explore the dominant measures of media credibility that have stood as a hallmark since the 1930s. By investigating their origins, the paper appends an old, and yet overlooked measure - “the local context”, to the already existing ones: source, message, medium, and web credibility. The paper highlights historical antecedents that support the claim and the argument that credibility, and especially in the digital age requires an extended understanding that includes the context or environment. By so doing, we would be able to explain why people choose to believe in inaccurate or false information. Predominantly, the paper interrogates why individuals in echo-chambers believe that a particular source, message, medium, or web is credible regardless of the content of the message.

Keywords: media credibility, source, medium, message, web, local context

Introduction

The neoliberal media that has emerged in the wake of advanced technologies is often accused of mediocracy, sensationalism, and political activism. Its journalists are alleged to indulge in adversarial and muckraking practices, therefore, undermining the credibility of the mainstream media. Existing media regulatory systems, which once posed as hallmarks for promoting professional journalism in the US, and the world at large, have become ‘watchdogs in chains’ (Stummer and Rioba, 2001) – only capable of ‘barking’ with no action. The mainstream

media that were at one time the playground for credible news, are now rooms of suspicion and platforms for people in echo-chambers. As a result, the public audience has shifted their trust from professional journalism to non-professional journalism practices, such as Late-Night TV shows whose genres tend to resonate with their needs (Gondwe, 2017). This has led to a shift in the role of the media and its impact on society today (Osong & Egbe, 2020; Gondwe, Bago, & Chipanjilo, 2020). This paper, therefore, explores credibility and trust in the digital age, while arguing for the inclusion of ‘local context’ as an important measure in addition to source, message, medium, and web credibility measures. Further, the entry explores what this means for the future of the field of journalism.

Media credibility – Historical Developments

Media credibility is as old as the media itself. However, as a theoretical concept, credibility only became prominent in the 1930s when the newspaper industry became concerned that increasing numbers of people were turning to the radio for news. The concerns were exacerbated in the 1950s when television became the audience’s choice. Such events chronicled a series of studies ranging from the examination of the relative market position of the various news media in relation to their credibility in the eyes of the Public (Metzger, et. al. 2003) to issues of what media the audience trusted most. For example, a study conducted by the Roper Organization (2007) provided appalling evidence to many scholars when they found out that newspaper credibility was slowly declining despite their in-depth coverage of issues and the assumed existing perceptions of television as ‘a vast wasteland of lowbrow entertainment’. These findings led to further research by various scholars that sought to examine why television would be more preferred than newspapers (Kioussis, 2001; Newhagen & Nass, 1989; Abel &

Wirth, 1977). The irony is that newspapers were considered as advantageous when it come to media credibility because of their in-depth coverage and time to check facts, as well as the ability for news audiences to read and digest stories at their own pace.

Several findings ranging from technological features to structural differences were arrived at. With less regard to the literacy levels, most studies (?) that hinged on technological advancements as the criterion for media credibility were able to demonstrate that people who preferred television over newspapers and radio felt that live reports of breaking news in a visual way gave a great sense of credence and authority to televisions)— after all, at that time, seeing was believing. Complicating matters further, it seemed that unlike newspapers, where credibility was judged at an institutional level, people evaluated the credibility of television news by their newscaster. This implied that the same media station could have variations in credibility based on who is saying what, and at what particular time. This explains why some countries, such as those in Africa, would use older people (seniors) to present news. The fact is that most cultures perceive the older generation as authentic and wise, therefore what they say is always/or for the most part perceived as credible.

Another important finding is rooted in the theory of selective exposure and the idea that people tend to see and hear information that is favorable or congenial to their predispositions. In other words, this is some form of cognitive dissonance in the sense that when people's cognitions conflict with their beliefs, they get to incline themselves to some selectively exposed content so as to reduce their dissonance. This implies that the credibility of certain information is rooted in the obstinate resistance to information that they believe is comfortable to them, and the fear to explore new avenues. This argument reflects what Gondwe (2018) had asserted in his cross-national experimental study on news trust and believability in Zambia and Tanzania. Scholars

that emphasize structural features as the explanatory variables for why individuals prefer television to newspapers used the above arguments to substantiate their cause.

Accordingly, most of them argue that because broadcast journalists were previously precluded from the political editorializing rule of stating an editorial position; most of their reporting seemed to align with their audiences. On the other hand, newspapers were free to make their political leanings, which was a sign of an independent press, yet a danger to the audience that felt criticized. In other words, reporting became a double-edged sword in the sense that what the audience seemed to like did not align with the government press, and vice versa. In their study, for example, Stamm and Dube (1994) provide evidence to support the claim that if people did not hear what they wanted from the news, they perceive it as less credible. Similarly, Gondwe (2018) was also able to provide the same evidence in a recent study conducted in Zambia and Tanzania respectively. In both cases, the authors were able to show that a press with stringent rules seemed to have less credibility among its audience if the audience did not seem to agree with their opinions.

Credibility and Social media

The two arguments provided above, though referring to the 1950s, seem to resonate with the current challenges of media credibility. At a glance, there is a belief that people have less credibility for information emanating from social media and the internet as a whole. However, against this backdrop is the question of whether this claim can be scientifically substantiated. This is because there is evidence indicating that social media consumption tendencies are extremely higher than the mainstream media (Radio, Newspaper, and Television – even when they have moved to multimedia production). Second, although contested, it is also evidenced that

online trust and credibility are still high, this time not based on the source of the medium or a journalist (newscaster) as it used to be, but on the credibility of a social media participant producing and/or distributing the content. By itself, media consumption is not a criterion for credibility. However, the changes in the media compel us not to understand consumption in isolation, but in concert with other confounding variables explaining the whole phenomenon. To some extent, this perspective begs for more measure scales for credibility in addition to source, message, media, and web credibility that Metzger et. al., (2003) had earlier proposed.

In one of their studies, Mutsvairo&Bebawi (2019), argue that credibility on social media platforms was more about trustworthiness and believability. In an event where the two did not exist, then the persuasiveness of bots in systematically posting automated attention-grabbing messages to promote a person, product, or ideology. How this works is that first, they attract the attention of the people, second, they court their messages with purported controversies acting as grounds for the truth, and then manipulating the audience to only see what they want them to see (Mutsvairo&Bebawi, 2019; Varol et. al., 2017). The only notoriety of social media is for broadcasting alarming information that stands as an expedient epicenter for far-reaching viral hoaxes. However, this in itself does not imply the lack of trust or believability. At most, the credibility of the news/information ends up dwindling.

Problematization of Media credibility – The need for ‘Local Context’

Although media credibility has been studied as an academic discourse, a number of gaps in the literature still stand out. Almost all studies take a Western-centered approach that studies the concept of credibility as an independent phenomenon from its audience. In other words, most

studies ignore the local contexts which are major confounders of why people would prefer one news source or message from the other. As Simons (2018) argues, “the problem is that most contemporary research has focused on the quagmire presented by sources that are not credible instead of acknowledging the latent problems affecting modern-day journalism and society”. This argument is evidenced by several studies, especially from countries outside the West that have taken the Western framed and applied in their context. In a recent study, for example, Gondwe and Muchangwe (2020) found that issue transfer and salience in Zambian elections were more rooted in the cultural contexts as opposed to common arithmetic that measured agenda -setting. What was prominent in this study was how culture confounded in what people trusted and believed. This was with less regard to the type of source, message, or media, but to the historical antecedents that inform how people commune in their societies.

The future of the media credibility

There is much to learn from the past when predicting the future of media credibility. At the same time, there is also much to leave out and embrace it as a thing for the past if really, we want to move on. First, we have to acknowledge that changes in technology are imminent and have a strong effect on media credibility and journalism as a whole. As a result, the power of citizen journalists, and even isolated individuals in the creation and dissemination of information cannot be underestimated. There is no doubt that some individuals have become more powerful and credible than the media itself. Whether it could be argued that the numbers of their consumers/followers do not translate to believability and trust is still a bone of contention. Second, the discourse on media credibility should expand its scope by incorporating the context and variables that make individuals believe in a particular message, source, media, or even web.

In this case, the context has to be among the variables that have to be considered. This approach would help explain some reasons why individuals would choose to believe in a particular media, source, individual, message, or web even when they know that the message is not accurate – a common thing that we see in echo-chambers.

Overall, the discourse should aim at moving towards a clear understanding of the factors that shape the individual perception of media credibility by reorganizing the links between the existing literature and the new media environment. This is because technology has always been part of us and accepting its presence allows us to see the power and effects it has on media credibility and journalism as a whole.

Bibliography

- Abel, J. D., & Wirth, M. O. (1977). Newspaper vs. TV credibility for local news. *Journalism quarterly*, 54(2), 371-375.
- Asongu, S. A., & Odhiambo, N. M. (2019). Governance and social media in African countries: An empirical investigation. *Telecommunications Policy*, 43(5), 411-425.
- Gondwe, G. (2020). Agenda-Setting Theory in African Contexts: A Jekyll and Hyde in the Zambian Presidential Elections. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 7(5), 93-100.
- Gondwe, G., Bago, B., & Chipanjilo, B. (2020), 'Stretch and Split' Journalism: A New Phrase in African Journalism Practices (June 4, 2020). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3619518> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3619518>
- Gondwe, G. (2017). Are Late Night TV Shows Polarizing Society? Examining the Ambivalence of New Version of Political Partisanship in the United States. *Global Media Journal*, 15.
- Gondwe, G. (2018). News Believability & Trustworthiness on African Online Networks: An Experimental Design. *International Communication Research Journal*, 53(2), 51-74.
- Gondwe, G. (2018). When party policies do not matter: Examination, the ambivalence of voting behaviors in the Zambian presidential elections. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 12(1), 10-21.
- Gondwe, G. (2014). Reclaiming Media Credibility: Examining the Efficacy of Virtue Ethics in the Zambian Media---A Case Study of the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) and the POST Newspaper.
- Kiousis, S. (2001). Public trust or mistrust? Perceptions of media credibility in the information age. *Mass communication & society*, 4(4), 381-403.

- Mutsvairo, B., &Bebawi, S. (2019). Journalism Educators, Regulatory Realities, and Pedagogical Predicaments of the “Fake News” Era: A Comparative Perspective on the Middle East and Africa. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 74(2), 143-157.
- Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., Eyal, K., Lemus, D. R., & McCann, R. M. (2003). Credibility for the 21st century: Integrating perspectives on source, message, and media credibility in the contemporary media environment. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 27(1), 293-335.
- Newhagen, J., & Nass, C. (1989). Differential criteria for evaluating credibility of newspapers and TV news. *Journalism quarterly*, 66(2), 277-284.
- Osong, U. O., & Egbe, R. N. (2020). Social media and its credibility as a source of news. *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 17(1), 136-144.
- Simons, J. (1999, July 30). FTC enforcer aggressively targets online fraud. *Wall Street Journal*, p. A20.
- Stamm, K., & Dube, R. (1994). The relationship of attitudinal components to trust in media. *Communication Research*, 21(1), 105-123.
- Sturmer, M., & Rioba, A. (2000). Watchdog in Chains: Media Regulations in Tanzania from their Colonial Beginnings to the Era of Democratization. *Neue Medien Und Offentlichkeiten. Politik Und Tele-Kommunikation in Afrika, Asien Und Lateinamerika*, 1, 241-279.