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Media Credibility: A Review of the Literature and Measure Validation

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Introduction

The flow, variety, and contradictory and conflicting nature of mass media in the first decade of the twenty-first century has become a challenge for individuals when deciding which medium and information may be useful to him/her. One of the most important criteria that govern people in this process is their perception of the credibility or believability of the medium or information. As a result, the recipient's judgment about the credibility of the source, message, or media is an important component of the success of the communication process, which is to influence knowledge, attitudes, behavior, learning, and persuasion (Wathan & Burkell, 2002). Schweiger (2000) suggests that credibility becomes an important guide for content selection at a time of information overload, adding that "credibility can be one criterion influencing the journalistic and commercial success of a medium" (p. 38). No doubt exists that mistrust of the media or the source or the message undermines the efforts of the sender and may even lead to effects opposite than those intended.

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Credibility not only concerns the receiver but also the sender or the communicator at different levels. Growing research, polls, and journalistic articles investigating the credibility of the media is proof of the importance of this issue. Moreover, a great deal of attention has been paid to the perception of news credibility based on the assumption that receivers are more concerned about the accuracy and credibility of news than any other types of communication content (Sundar, 1999).

The decrease in the credibility of mass media in recent years is a concern for professionals and researchers who are apprehensive about its ethics. This decrease has been evident since 1985 when a survey conducted by the American Society for Newspaper Editors (ASNE) indicated a high level of public dissatisfaction with the coverage of mass media in different fields (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). In addition, media credibility has received renewed attention in recent years by researchers and organizations measuring public opinion. For example, a poll by Princeton Survey Research Associates conducted on July 1998, and a recent Gallop poll suggest that confidence in the media, especially print, has declined in the 1990s more than in the mid 1980s, and that the majority of Americans distrust news media reporting (Nicholson, 1998; Newport et al., 1998), raising the concerns that “the old style gatekeeper breed of journalist could be poised to follow the slide rule and buggy whip into oblivion” (Newport et al., 1998).

The study of factors affecting news credibility for the public is of great importance, considering the strong competition among mass media and the nature of the events that characterize the present time. For example, in addition to the rise of news options such as cable TV and the Internet which drive consumers to choose information sources based on credibility is the perception that the news media is moving towards entertainment and is highly influenced by competitive pressure to achieve higher ratings and profits (Nicholson, 1998). Moreover, new communication technology has facilitated the manipulation of the news more than ever before. Overall, the combination of competition, the current environment, and new technology have helped to create an accelerated news coverage process in which not enough time exists to verify the accuracy of information. Thus, in light of these influences, the new way of doing news coverage is lacking in ethical reliability and has led to a decrease in the credibility of mass media in the perception of the public and to a distortion of reported reality. However, on the other hand, it is important to note that the nature of mass media in the current decade makes the act of concealing or obscuring the truth from the public more difficult.

The study of the credibility of mass media also is important, especially at a time when political struggles and wars are on the increase worldwide. These circumstances have influenced a change in the style of media coverage on the one hand, and have affected the public's perception of credibility on the other. Moreover, the study of

the credibility of traditional mass media in relation to the credibility of modern mass media like the internet constitutes an important turning point in mass media studies.

This literature review attempts to provide some insight into how to measure media credibility and how to define its dimensions. As well, the review investigates the research methods employed in the study of new media and then determines whether they are relevant for analyzing new technology. I begin by providing a brief description of historical evolution of the concept of credibility to gain a comprehensive overview, and then I discuss the dimensions and measures of media credibility. This is followed by a description of the relation between Media use and Media credibility. Next, I examine the factors that influence the credibility of traditional media and the modern Internet. I also distinguish between newspapers, television, and the Internet in terms of their perceived credibility. Finally, to conclude, I summarize my own perspective on the methodology for investigating and measuring media credibility.

The Evolution of the Study of Credibility: Individuals to Media

Primarily, the study of credibility dates back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, to their development of the art of rhetoric and persuasion. “Since Aristotle suggested that ethos plays a role in the persuasion,” early studies in credibility started to concentrate on the characteristics of the source, for example, how a communicator created fluent and persuasive messages (Lee, 1978, p. 282). In these studies, the source usually was an individual delivering a speech in

front of a live audience, although it also can be defined as group or organization. The communicator's credibility influences the message he/she presents to the extent that people are more likely to change their opinions about issues when the communication can be attributed to a high credibility source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

Research on source credibility dates back to 1936 to studies of newspaper reporting accuracy by Michell V. Charnley, and to studies of the influence of source credibility on persuasion and attitude change by the Yale group (Carl Hovland and colleagues) (Metzger et al., 2003; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). In these early studies, attention was focused on defining the concept of credibility and how it is measured. Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University developed several measurement scales using the factor analytic approach and the semantic differential scale. They identified two primary dimensions of source credibility from the perspective of receivers: expertise and trustworthiness. In addition, they also were able to distinguish a number of secondary dimensions such as dynamism, competence, composure, sociability, character, extroversion, and liking for and similarity to the source (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 297-299). In an extension of the earlier work of Hovland and his colleagues, Berlo, Lemert and Mertz (1969) investigated the criteria used by receivers in their evaluation of message sources and found three dimensions to source credibility—safety, qualification, and dynamism (Berlo et al., 1969). Moreover, as later research would show the dimensions of organizational credibility are similar to the dimensions identified

earlier regarding the individual as the source of credibility, especially in two primary dimensions: expertise and trustworthiness (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 299).

With the development and complexity of the means of communication and transmission of information by machine technology, the research of source credibility shifted from individuals to organizations and institutions. This makes the study of source credibility more difficult and intricate due to the confusion about the nature of a source. For example, some confusion exists between the individual source who presents the message and the medium (television, newspaper, etc.) source that transmits the message. Consequently, the criteria people use to judge the credibility of the news on television differs from the criteria they use to judge the credibility of newspapers, since it depends on the receiver's perspective on the medium and the levels of analysis. For example, the nature of television—e.g., individual newscasters who present the news—tends to influence viewers' judgments, whereas, newspapers may be perceived as an organization rather than a group of individuals. Even Hovland and his colleagues confused sources in their studies of credibility: in some cases sources were identified as individual writers (the authors) and in others periodical publications (the media channels) (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). This confusion may account for the inconsistencies of the research findings concerning the credibility of television and newspapers and suggests that two kinds of

criteria are needed to investigate these different media (Newhagen & Nass, 1989, p. 279).

In an attempt to clarify this confusion, Schweiger (2000) identified six different levels of references for credibility attributions: (1) “the presenter” who is the first person to engage a recipient (e.g., an anchor, commentator, or author of a comment in a magazine, newspaper, or on the web); (2) the news report of the actions or statements of certain actors or authors of messages; (3) the editorial units: the complete program or a single news item or articles in the print media or on the web; (4) the media products— the actual television or radio network (e.g., BBC, ITV, CBS), newspaper, magazine, or website; (5) the subsystem of a media type (e.g., public TV system, tabloid, etc.); and (6) the whole media type—television, radio, newspaper, or Internet. This last level of reference causes most confusion, since it seems unreasonable to evaluate the credibility of television, for example, in general (pp. 39-41).

The research of credibility not only is concerned with the source but also with the credibility of the message, since it is an important component in the persuasive process, in the formation of attitudes and change. Moreover, source and message credibility are interrelated, since each influences the credibility of the other. Message credibility is a product of various sources, and message and receiver characteristics are bound together. In their literature review, Metzger et al. (2003) identified the dimensions of message credibility on the

basis of message structure, message content, language intensity, message discrepancy, and message delivery.

Media Credibility

As a rule, throughout the history of mass communication, the impact of a new media on older one has raised concerns about the survival of the older. According to “displacement theory,” the new medium will replace the old (Bucy, 2003, p. 250). For example, in the 1930s when radio became available to the public, newspaper organizations were fearful about losing their readers. Similarly, during the 1960s and 1970s when television became widespread, it became a significant competitor for newspapers, attracting a large audience for news and information; and today, it has become the major source for news worldwide (Abel & Wirth, 1977; Metzger et al., 2003). Although some studies conclude that a part or complete complementarity exists between the media, competition among various mass media has resulted in many complaints from the public, for example, complaints about errors in facts and grammar, lack of respect and knowledge about the needs of society, biased coverage, an unnecessary amount of bad news, and the coverage of exciting stories to increase sales (Ibema & Powell, 2001, p. 41). As a result, researchers and concerned organizations have investigated public attitudes toward various news media and the perception of their credibility.

Media credibility is concerned primarily with the medium as a whole, not the individual presenter. In 1959, the Roper organization

began to identify the positions of the various mass media in terms of their credibility among readers, viewers, and listeners by asking this question: "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe – the one radio or television or magazines or newspapers?" (Gaziano & McGrath, 1985, p. 3). In the 1959 survey, Roper found that newspapers outstripped television in their believability, but by 1961, television had surpassed newspapers and has been conceived consistently as the most credible of all media (Gaziano & McGrath, 1985, p. 3).

Over the years, the Roper organization's 1959 question about relative media credibility has inspired academic communication researchers and other organizations to study the issue of media credibility and the attitudes of the public toward the media, especially public distrust towards the print media. However, even though the Roper question has been used and replicated by most credibility research and surveys, it also has been criticized for not distinguishing between the national/network and local news, and the local media versus the national media (Abel & Wirth, 1977; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986).

According to Greenberg and Roloff (as cited in Gantz, 1981), the Roper question biased responses toward television, since it did not provide a cognitive reference point for respondents to utilize when selecting which medium's report they would be most likely to believe.

To address this shortcoming, Carter and Greenberg (1965) investigated credibility (in the absence of comparisons and conflicting reports) by asking people to express their opinion about the reliability of a medium by choosing a percentage of believability on a scale that ranged from 0-100 percent. Also, Gantz points out that Roper's credibility question confined the characteristics of media credibility to the special case of conflicting reports rather than to investigating the more general case of consistent reports (Gantz, 1981). However, after some modifications to the Roper question, or changes to the setting of research, the findings of later research (based on these changes) showed similar results to Roper's.

In 1985, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) sponsored the largest comprehensive research survey on credibility. This research was conducted in two phases—a qualitative study in the form of focus group discussion, and a national survey of American adults aged 18 and above. In the same year, three other comprehensive surveys of the public's perception of credibility were conducted by the Los Angeles Times, the Gannett Center, and the Times Mirror (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986).

The ASNE results indicated a high level of public dissatisfaction with the coverage of mass media in different fields. According to Gaziano and McGrath (1985), the ASNE study highlighted twelve aspects of the media credibility problem: believability of media when news reports conflict; geographic scope of topics; reliability of reporting and ability to understand the news; fairness and accuracy;

personal experience; opinion and bias; news presentation issues; invasion of privacy; treatment of ordinary people, coverage of specific demographic groups; the kinds of people most represented in the media and how they are represented; the media as an institution; and the people who distrust the media the most. All of the 1985 survey results tend to be similar and consistent (Gaziano, 1988).

Dimensions and Measures of Media Credibility

Although a number of researchers have studied the dimensions of media credibility, no agreed upon definition exists for the concept. Different measures and statistical procedures have been applied to its investigation, resulting in a number of credibility dimensions that vary from one study to another according to how the concept of credibility has been operationalized. Meyer (1988) points out that “[a]ccording to Webster’s New Collegiate dictionary to be credible is to offer ‘reasonable grounds for being believed’” (p. 567). Moreover, the most consistent dimension defining media credibility is the believability or trust a person places in the information he or she gets from another person or source (Singletary, 1976, p. 316). Studies of credibility using factor analysis produce different factors and dimensions for credibility, and as is the norm in most academic research on the issue, credibility often is measured as a multidimensional construct (Bucy, 2003). For example, Singletary’s (1976) study of 271 university students uses factor analysis to determine the factors comprising an audience’s perception of the credibility of a favorable news source.

His findings showed 16 factors relating to the perception of credibility, suggesting that media credibility is “a highly complex and somewhat undifferentiated system of factors” (p. 318). Gaziano and McGrath (1986), also using factor analysis, were able to identify twelve dimensions of newspaper and television news credibility: fairness, (un)bias, telling the whole story, accuracy, respecting people’s privacy, watching out for people’s interests, concern about the community’s well being, separating fact and opinion, trust, concern about the public interest, factualness, and having well-trained reporters.

Meyer (1988) argues that “credibility” is a multidimensional concept that should not be based on a single measurement. He defines two dimensions of credibility: believability and community affiliation. “Believability” is defined by five characteristics—fairness, bias, completeness, accuracy, and trustworthiness—whereas “community affiliation” is defined by a concern for the community’s well being, a watchfulness for community interests, patriotism, and a general concern for the public interest. Myer’s focus is on community affiliation, arguing that “[a medium] can be believed but still be alienated if it advocates positions strongly opposed by a majority in its community or undertakes investigations or editorial positions that run counter to the perceived economic or social interests of the community (p. 567). In addition, in 1969, Jacobson (as cited in Lee, 1978) found four factors of media credibility: authenticity, objectivity, dynamism, and respect.

Taking into account the recommendations of the previous literature on credibility, Lee (1987) segmented the concept of “news” according to its nature. He found that the dimensions of media credibility varied and overlapped according to different conceptualizations of the news. For example, four significant credibility factors were associated with newspaper (national & international) news: trustworthiness, intimacy, expertness, and availability. Three significant factors were identified in television (national & international) news: bias, intimacy, and dynamism. Four significant factors were associated with newspaper (local & state) news: trustworthiness, dynamism, intimacy, and bias. Three significant factors were identified for television (local & state) news: trustworthiness-authenticity, immediacy-intimacy, and dynamism-expertness.

In addition, Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1969) found three dimensions to source credibility—safety, qualification, and dynamism. Supporting Hovland and his colleagues, Salwen (1987) substantiated that both expertise and trustworthiness are two essential components of the credibility of the source, although other factors such as thoroughness, objectivity, and clarity also may be involved.

Furthermore, Kioussis (2001) shows that five indicators comprise the media credibility index in credibility research: a medium’s factualness, the extent to which it is motivated by money, whether it invades people’s privacy, its concern for the community, and whether it can be trusted.

Media Use and Media credibility

As a rule, and according to media system dependency theory, a relationship exists

between reliance on a media for receiving news and information, and the believability of that media. In other words, those who have low-level dependence on a medium may perceive it as more biased and incredible than those who are highly dependent. Studies of mainstream media suggest that the more people rely on a media for news and information, the more they will judge that information as credible. Similarly, people judge their preferred news source as the most credible (Johnson & Kay, 2004). In their study of the relation between the type of media use and media credibility, Rimmer and Weaver (1987) point out that most media credibility research finds a positive correlation between media use and media credibility, although they speculate that the type of question employed to measure media use might change that relationship. Their aim was to investigate whether the relationship between media use and media credibility varies according to the type of media use question asked. After conducting a secondary analysis of the data of the ASNE 1985 media credibility study, they reported that the frequency of use measure is not generally correlated with television or newspaper credibility, although media choice measures are linked to higher credibility ratings.

However, other research on credibility which investigated this same relationship did not support it. Tuggle (1998) did not find any

significant difference in the bias and credibility ratings of newspapers and television from respondents who self-reported their frequency use for different news media. Although Kiousis (2001) found that newspaper readership was marginally tied to newspaper credibility, and that online use and online news credibility were marginally associated, he did not find any linkage between either local or national network television news viewing and perceived television news credibility. Undoubtedly, the relation between media use and media credibility is a mutual one but determining which precedes the other is a controversial matter. In their model of media agenda-setting, Wanta and Hu (1994) suggest that credibility leads to reliance, that is, individuals, at the beginning, form opinions regarding the believability and community affiliation of a news media. Impacted by these two major touchstones of perceived credibility, individuals develop a reliance on a news media over repeated exposures. When individuals perceive a news media as highly credible, they become more dependent on it for information. In this context, it is important to differentiate between the use of and reliance on a specific medium, as general use does not necessarily imply reliance. Although Wanta and Hu did not find a significant relation between use and credibility, they did find a relation between reliance on a particular medium and credibility.

Al-mokaty, Boyd, and VanTubergen (1994) suggest that the Saudi Arabians who received news and information about the Gulf war placed more trust in those sources they perceived as more credible

to them. In another study linking media skepticism and news media exposure, Tsfati and Cappella (2003) report that people who trust the mainstream news media tend to watch and read them, whereas people who are skeptical toward them use non-mainstream sources such as the Internet and other alternatives. In his study “Media Credibility: Experience or Image,” Schweiger (2000) confirmed that the relative credibility of a medium is related to its amount of usage.

To summarize, research on credibility has established that the frequency of use of a particular media channel correlates with its perceived credibility, although the question remains which precedes the other. Does the use of the medium occur first and then lead to credibility, or does one tend to use the medium after recognizing its credibility?

Factors Influencing Media Credibility

Some research suggests that the factors influencing media credibility can be attributed to the receivers, while other studies suggest credibility is attributable to the source, and still others suggest credibility is linked to the content and format of the message. Among the factors attributable to the receivers are demographics such as age, education, gender, political party identification, and socioeconomic status (SES). These factors have a relationship to the public’s perceptions of news media credibility and lead to different attitudes toward various media. Some studies of media credibility have found a relationship between age and education. Generally, older and more

educated people with a higher income are more likely to be highly critical of the media. In the ASNE study, Gaziano and McGrath (1985) identified four demographic groups. The first is the “sophisticated skeptics” group—those people who are knowledgeable and highly critical of newspapers and television. People who fit this category are better educated, have a high income and SES, and are more likely to be republican and conservative. They are identified in other research as the “elite public,” “active news seekers,” and “low credibility, high use.” The second group is the “less well informed and suspicious” who are more likely to be confused by how the media policies operate, especially with regard to separating fact from opinion. This category is less educated and has low income, low SES, and is less knowledgeable. They are identified in other research as the “critical, nonsupportive public” and “passive news seekers.” The third group is young people (ages 18-24) who are more inclined to watch television than read newspapers. The fourth segment is blacks who tend to have less confidence in the media, especially print (Gaziano & McGrath, 1985, 1987).

Another survey (Ibelema & Powell, 2001) conducted on 400 Alabama residents found that, in addition to the demographic variables mentioned above, past experience with the media also affects the conception of its credibility. Although African-Americans always have rated the news media as biased and unfair because of their misrepresentation, in this survey, they rated the media higher than whites due to their favorable conception of its role in the civil

rights movement.¹ Also, this past experience affect influences elderly people's responses to the credibility of the media. Opposite to what was expected, elderly Alabamians found the national media less trustworthy than did young people (Ibelema & Powell, 2001).

When investigating media credibility, other factors such as the type of issue raised and its degree of controversiality also should be considered. In his review of the literature, Gunther (1988) concluded that perceived media credibility correlated to the issue in terms of personal opinions on the topic, issue importance, issue controversiality, and partisanship on an issue. He found that source credibility judgments are influenced by an individual's attitude about an issue, and the level of her/his involvement with it. His study showed a curvilinear relationship between the extremity of attitude toward an issue and trust in media's coverage of it. That is, the level of trust in the media decreased as perceived issue importance (involvement) went up from a moderate to a high level. The importance of the credibility of the news media increases in times of crises and disasters, and also according to the level of issue importance. Major and Atwood (1997) found a positive relationship between the level of issue importance (earthquake event) and the credibility of the news content. Also their hypothesis—that respondents' confidence in news information will decline if the

¹ The public's favorable response to the recent news coverage of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina (and its associated outrage towards the sluggish, irresponsible Federal Government response) may be another example of a tragic situation that increases media credibility.

predicted disaster (earthquake event) did not happen—was supported for newspaper information, but not for television or radio information.

In another study of receivers' association to the content of the source's message, Stamm and Dube (1994) investigated the relationship between trust in television news and newspaper coverage, and the four characteristics of attitude (intensity, closure, involvement, and direction). They found significant relationships for all four characteristics and a positive relationship between high levels of media trust and high levels of involvement.

The type of issue—controversial or agreed upon—also influences perceived credibility. Both proponents and opponents of an issue can view media coverage of it as unfairly biased and hostile to the position and the political views they advocate. Vallone, Ross, and Lapper (1985) argue that both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans rated television coverage of the Beirut massacre as being biased against their side. Thus, those who hold a position on either side of an issue tend to judge the source as less trustworthy when they perceive it as opposing their own view. Perceived credibility is a complex process not only in relation to the message or the source, but also in terms of how the receiver perceives the media in terms of their own bias. In another study examining readers' perceptions of media bias, D'Alessio (2003) summarizes the perception of bias towards the media through two mechanisms. The first is *subjective*: different people may look at identical content and reach opposing or different judgments, and are more likely to label the media as biased, regardless

of actual content. The second is *relativistic*: according to social judgment theory, people process issue statements relative to their own positions. That is, the individual adopts the position which fits with his or her own, which falls within the "latitude of acceptance," while rejecting positions with which they do not agree, which fall within the "latitude of rejection," depending on the topic and its relevance to her/him (p. 283). D'Alessio (2003) concludes that the perception of media bias is positively related to the perception of the media being biased generally, and negatively related to accuracy perceptions. Each of these perceptions has the potential to impact users' perception of the credibility of their news sources.

As is shown by the literature on credibility, various factors influence and mediate the perception of source or message or overall media credibility, all of them predicting the credibility of the other. In attempting to distinguish the effects of source from the message in preceptions about news believability, Austin and Dung (1994), conducting an experimental study with college students, found that the assessment of the "apparent reality" of news stories was more influential on judgments of believability than was source credibility. They confirmed that an individual can believe that a highly reputable source can produce an unbelievable story. That is, when message content is judged to accurately reflect social reality, it does not matter to the receiver what is the source of the information. Supporting this finding, Slater and Rouner (1996) found that the evaluation of the quality of the message such as "aesthetic quality" has direct affects

and predicts the source credibility assessments, and impacts on changes in belief. They also found that the participants used the message quality evaluation not for judging objectivity or bias, but for source expertise. Even the style of writing of the message was found to affect opinions about source credibility. Chartprasert (1993) suggests that readers perceived the authors of a bureaucratic writing style as higher in expertise than those of a simpler style, but not for trustworthiness. This study supports the hypothesis that the components of credibility vary according to communication situation and topic.

It is clear that the format of the message and its content are essential factors in the perception of credibility of the source and the medium. To further explore the factors affecting perceived credibility, Andsager (1990) investigated the role of the gender of the source in his study of college students' judgments of the credibility of male and female syndicated political columnists. He concluded that the gender of a writer does not influence a reader's perception of credibility, since readers overall seem to pay more attention to the message itself than to the sender. However, his findings indicate that the gender of the columnist and the reader were highly correlated with regard to the stereotypic factor, although these stereotypes did not affect perceived credibility.

Bias towards the media also can be attributed to a journalist's cultural background and the perception of the community in which they work, especially in regard to social issues. In addition, bias also

may be attributable to the preception that the media institution is governed by the same principals as private corporations—money and self-interest (Alexandra, 1996). The characteristics of the medium also play a role in supporting its credibility. As will be shown below, people are more inclined to believe what they see (“seeing is believing”) rather than what they read. Slattery and Tiedge (1992) point to the role of the visual dimension of television news in the perception of its credibility. Moreover, the role of a newscaster’s voice has been investigated (Burgoon, 1978) as a predictor of credibility judgment. Also, when a receiver knows that a news story was supplied—usually in the form of a video news release (VNR)—by the government, a business, or any entity other than the news institution itself, his/her perception of news credibility is affected (Tuggle, 1998).

Newspaper vs. Television Credibility

As mentioned above, most of the research on media credibility has concluded that the perceived credibility of television versus newspapers differs. Most results indicate that television news is perceived to be more credible than newspaper news. For example, the Roper organization and the ASNE study, as well as other academic research, found an increasing dependence on, and higher credibility ratings for, television news than newspapers (Gaziano & McGrath, 1985; Abel & Wirth, 1977; Ibelema & Powell, 2001). These findings may be attributed to the visual nature of television, to the perception

that “seeing is believing.” In addition, television employs production techniques² to enhance the personal image of broadcasters, for example, the characteristics of trust, warmth, and confidence (Newhagen & Nass, 1989, p. 279). Also, television credibility did not decline, compared to the decrease in newspaper credibility, when a predicted disaster (earthquake event) did not occur (Major & Atwood, 1997). Moreover, Collins (1983) points out that the BBC’s audience research reports indicate that television news was perceived by a majority of respondents as trustworthy. He suggests that:

the aesthetic, or style, of naturalism that governs information programmes earns assent to the programmes’ messages. The accumulation of still and moving images in television news, for example, are rhetorical devices that, on the basis of seeing is believing, the camera cannot lie, sustain and authenticate the verbal narrative that alone gives these images coherence (p. 214).

In their study of local versus national and international news content, Abel and Wirth (1977) treated newspapers and television as competing sources. They found that television is perceived to be a more credible, truthful, and important source of local news than newspapers. Other studies have found no significant difference between the credibility ratings of local TV news and network TV news, although the combined ratings of credibility for Cable/ Local/ Network Television news were higher than the combined ratings for

² See Monaco, J. (2000). *How to read a film: the world of movies media, and multimedia: language, history, theory*. New York: Oxford University Press. Even the way images are edited together can affect the way they are read by viewers and how the credibility of their message is received.

Local and National newspapers, and the respondents perceived cable television news as the most credible news source (Ibelema & Powell, 2001). According to Lee (1978), when confronted with conflicting reports of the same news story (presented on television and in newspapers), 76 percent of participating students (out of a total of 401) believed TV news, and 24 percent believed newspaper news. Also, most of the sample believed TV news more than newspaper news in regard to local news coverage (Lee, 1978).

Contrary to most studies of credibility that have found that television is perceived to be more credible than newspapers, other studies have reported the opposite trend that newspapers have not only retained their credibility but exceed the credibility of television news. For example, Flanagan and Metzger (2000) report that newspapers rated significantly higher in credibility than the other media in their study. They attribute this finding to the overlapping of television news programs with entertainment, and to the digital technology which makes potential deception and manipulation of events much easier. Also, their sample included highly educated people who usually were biased in favour of the print media. Kiouisis (2001) also found that newspapers were perceived to be more credible than television news. Newhagen and Nass (1989) attribute the discrepancy in newspaper and television credibility to the use of different levels and standards of analysis when assessing their credibility. They argue that the comparison between newspapers and television should be based on

two independent sets of criteria, one for newspapers as institutions and one for television as individuals.

Online News Credibility

The advent of the Internet as a mass communications medium, and its growing role as an important source for news and information, has raised the issue of its credibility, especially with regard to its special characteristics such as the absence of editorial policies for most websites, and inexperienced website administrators who may be more likely to produce online information that is inaccurate, biased, or misleading. In light of these problems, news information obtained via the Internet may be dubious and difficult to evaluate (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, p. 517). Moreover, anyone can produce and publish information on the Internet without spending the incredibly huge amounts of money needed to run a newspaper or television station. No fixed rules govern the production and publication of information on the Internet, and everyone can establish a website and freely design its content. As a result, it has become more difficult to rate the credibility of a source, or the author of a message, because of the increasingly huge number of communicators (Schweiger, 2000, p. 44).

The Internet's unlimited freedom for uncensored production and distribution of information has sometimes lead to its immoral or irresponsible use (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, p. 516). For example, recently, from time to time after some horrendous attack, some "terrorist" groups have been publishing anonymous, unverifiable reports to the Internet. Since a gatekeeper filter does not exist to

determine what will and will not be published to the Internet, and since the capabilities of computers and the complexities of networks make the manipulation of images and information easier, a clear distinction between truth and fiction becomes more difficult to establish. All of these particular characteristics of the Internet not only have lead to a decline in the public's perception of its credibility, but also to a decline in traditional journalists' perception of its credibility (Ruggiero, 2004).

As a source for news, the Internet has become a matter of fact, and now each network news organization or newspaper has its own online counterpart. According to studies by the Pew Research Center and Online News Association, many Internet users evaluate online news as credible, or more credible, than their traditional news media counterparts (Bucy, 2003).

In addition, several studies have investigated the perceived credibility of the Internet through a comparison of traditional media versus new media, although their results were inconsistent and conflicting. For example, Johnson and Kaye (1998) conducted an online survey of politically interested Web users to examine their perception of the credibility of the information of online sources compared to their traditional counterparts. These users expressed the opinion that online political issue-oriented sites were more credible than either online newspapers or magazines, and that online newspapers and candidate literature were more credible than their traditional counterparts. However, interestingly, the study found that

Internet users generally judged online sources as only “somewhat credible.” Extending their earlier research—after controlling for demographic and political factors through a survey posted on the web during the two weeks before and two weeks after the 1996 presidential election— Johnson and Kaye (2000) investigated the degree to which reliance on traditional and online sources predicts the credibility of online newspapers, television news, newsmagazines, candidate literature, and political issue-oriented sites. Findings from the study sample (N=308) indicated that the most relied upon sources are deemed the most credible. That is, reliance on the web and traditional media for political information significantly predicts higher levels of credibility for all the online media sources, and reliance on traditional media tended to be a stronger predictor of credibility of its online counterpart than reliance on the web in general.

In an investigation of the similarities and differences of users’ perceptions of the credibility of traditional news media versus the credibility of online news, Abdulla et al. (2002) found that the newspaper credibility factor analysis focused on balance, honesty, and currency; while the television news credibility factor analysis emphasized fairness and currency; and the online news credibility factor analysis centered on three primary dimensions—trustworthiness, timeliness, and bias. The authors argue that the dimension of bias which can be attributed to the online news reflects the concern of Internet users towards the characteristics that make verification of information more difficult than the traditional media.

In a related study, Sundar (1999) investigated receivers' criteria for the perception of print and online news. He conducted a pretest using an "open-ended questionnaire" to encourage respondents to participate in selecting a measure to evaluate news stories. He found four central dimensions in receivers' perceptions of print and online news: credibility, liking, quality, and representativeness. Schweiger (2000) also investigated how users and non-users of the Internet rate its credibility. Conducting a survey of 540 respondents in Germany, he found that web users and non-users rate the credibility of the Internet remarkably similar to television and newspapers, although newspapers and television in Germany were rated above the web.

Flanagine and Metzger (2000) investigated perceptions of Internet information credibility compared to other media. They concluded that the Internet was as credible as television, radio, and magazines, although newspapers were rated significantly higher in credibility than the other media. They also found that the credibility of different types of information sought out by audiences varied by medium—news and entertainment information were perceived to be significantly more credible than commercial information. Respondents reported that they verify Internet information only "rarely" to "occasionally," although this finding also varied according to the type of information that was needed. A positive relationship exists between the amount of experience in using the internet, how an individual perceives the credibility of information, and the degree of verification of information via the Internet. Kiouisis (2001) confirmed previous

findings, when he found that newspapers were rated the highest credibility, followed by online news and television news. He also found that news credibility perceptions were influenced by media use and interpersonal discussions of the news. Overall, Kiouisis's (2001) findings suggest that people generally are skeptical of the news across all three media channels.

In a different vein, and believing that, in general, the various media support rather than displace each other, Bucy (2003) conducted experiments to investigate the perceptions of on-air and online network news credibility after exposure to online news, broadcast news, and a combination of the two (telewebbing conditions). The purpose of this study was to determine whether enhanced benefits or "synergy effects" result from an exposure to a combined on-air and online news condition (to "cross-media use") that is different from the exposure to either medium in isolation. Results found that subjects exposed to the telewebbing condition rated TV and Net news credibility higher than subjects exposed only to Net news. Moreover, the perception of credibility was enhanced when the media channel's credibility was consistent with the credibility of news source being evaluated.

Related research by Greer (2003) examined how users assess online information. He used source and advertising credibility as two peripheral cues that individuals might rely on to judge online information, hypothesizing that he/she might use advertising as a secondary cue in the absence of knowledge about a news source's

credibility. However, the results showed that the evaluation of story credibility was tied more closely to the source cues because participants paid little attention to the advertising.

Another measurement of Internet credibility has evolved through the study of online poll reporting and its perceived credibility. Online polls have proliferated in the past few years. Benefiting from the increased number of Internet users, many public opinion pollsters and news organizations have measured the attitudes of the public toward various political, social, economic, entertainment, and sports related issues. The results of these online public opinion polls have been reported by the traditional news media as news stories. However, some concerns have been raised about online polls concerning their representativeness of the general population, and their not being compatible with statistical sampling procedures, which causes them to lack validity for generalization (Tae Kim, Weaver & Willnat, 2000, p. 847). Kim and his colleagues (2000) employ three different methods-content analyses: a telephone survey, an experiment to investigate how news media report online polls, and a survey to investigate how people perceive traditional polls versus online polls. The findings from the content analysis indicate that from 1995 to 1998, the U.S. traditional news media increasingly has reported online polls and that respondents consider opinion polls found in the traditional news media more accurate than those found on the Internet. The experimental analysis did not show significant differences in poll

credibility and story believability between traditional and online versions.

Also, the study of the credibility of the Internet has included weblogs or blogs that emerged as a “new public communicative form” around 1998 and flourished after the events of 11 September, 2001 and the invasion of Iraq (Matheson, 2004, p. 34). “Weblogs” are defined as “diary-style Websites that generally offer observations and news listed chronologically on the site as well as commentary and recommended links” (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 622). Blogs have become a striking phenomenon, recently drawing the attention of mainstream media journalists, who hold some reservations, claiming that blogs do not adhere to professional journalistic norms such as editing and the news values or principals of traditional journalism (Johnson, 2005; Mintz, 2005). However, many journalists consider blogs to be a trustworthy source of information. They rely on them for new ideas and information, and some news organizations have created segments for blogs in their news programs (Johnson, 2005). Blog users are growing rapidly, and audience reliance on them as an alternative media for news is increasing. In the United States in 2004, blogs readers were estimated at 32 million, with about 11 million exposed to political news blogs during the presidential campaign (Mintz, 2005). It is believed that blog users are more likely to be heavy Internet users, and more active and politically interested (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 623). In their study about how credible Weblogs users view blogs as compared to traditional media and other

online sources, Johnson and Kay (2004) report that Weblog users judged blogs as highly credible and more credible than traditional sources, especially with regard to depth of information.

To conclude, various indicators exist to verify the credibility of online information, and different online components can be studied in terms of Internet credibility. Most research on online credibility is based on a comparison to traditional media and has applied the same credibility measures.

Conclusion

In tracing the evolution of credibility research, it has been shown that credibility is a complicated concept. No agreed upon definition has been established, and different measures and statistical procedures have been applied to investigate it. This uncertainty has resulted in a number of credibility dimensions, varying from study to study, according to the way in which the concept of credibility has been operationalized. However, most of the research on credibility has used the same measures for source or organizational credibility and applied them to media credibility. One of the most dominant means that has evolved for measuring media credibility is the 12-item credibility scale developed by Gaziano and McGrath (1986). At the same time, these measures have been applied to online information, notwithstanding the special characteristics of this new medium.

In its historical sense, the study of credibility is associated primarily with persuasion studies and attitude change, but this

research does not give a clear view to the issue of credibility as it relates to the development of the media.

From the previous research literature on credibility, the following can be concluded: it employed four communications methodological approaches, including audience research, content research, message structure research, and communicator research. The research tools of data collection on credibility include surveys: *field surveys* through face-to-face interviews with respondents (Stamm & Dube, 1994; Al-Makaty, Boyd, & Tubergen, 1994; Lee, 1978; Schweiger, 2000; Sundar, 1999; Sigletary, 1976; Flanagan & Metzger, 2000) *telephone surveys* (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Kioussis, 2001; Unther, 1988; Ibelema & Powell, 2001; Gantz, 1981; Wanta & Hu, 1994; Major & Atwood, 1997; Abdalla et. al., 2002; Newhagen & Nass, 1989; Schweiger, 2000; Kim, Weaver, & Willnat, 2000), *mail surveys*, *Internet surveys* (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) *phone and mail surveys* (Gaziano & McGrath, 1987), and *online surveys* using electronic mail and the Web (Schweiger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000, 2004). The other tool used to investigate credibility and the manipulation of the message or source is the *laboratory and field experiment* (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; D'Alessio, 2003; Austin & Dong, 1994; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Slater & Rouner, 1996; Chartprasert, 1993; Burgoon, 1978; Andsager, 1990; Slattery & Tiedge, 1992; Meyer, 1988; Kim, Weaver, & Willnat, 2000; Bucy, 2003; Greer, 2003) the *focus group discussion or panel* (Gaziano &

McGrath, 1987; Major & Atwood, 1997), and *content analysis* (Wanta & Hu, 1994; Kim, Weaver, & Willnat, 2000).

The type of audience surveyed includes *students* (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Slater & Rouner, 1996; Chartprasert, 1993; Burgoon, 1978; Lee, 1978; Andsager, 1990; Slattery & Tiedge, 1992; Sundar, 1999; Kim, Weaver, & Willnat, 2000; Bucy, 2003; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Sigletary, 1976; Flanagan & Metzger, 2000; Greer, 2003), the *general public*, and *Internet users* (Stamm & Dube, 1994; Al-Makaty, Boyd & Tubergen, 1994; Gantz, 1981; Wanta & Hu, 1994; Major & Atwood, 1997; Abdalla et al., 2002; Schweiger, 2000; Newhagen & Nass, 1989; Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Kim, Weaver, & Willnat, 2000; Bucy, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

From the literature review, it can be noted that most of the research on media credibility has been conducted using quantitative studies applying closed-ended questionnaires to collect data from an audience, usually students or the general public. The question that could be asked is this kind of audience qualified to judge media credibility? Students often lack experience with the news media, and they are more likely to be less independent from it, especially from the traditional media for receiving news. At the same time, students often are less politically interested. The same concerns might be applied to the general public. Therefore, in my opinion, credibility studies should be applied to an audience with the experience and qualifications that enable good judgment.

Most of the credibility studies in the literature review used the experimental method, so some reservations can be expressed concerning their design and how the various intervening variables are controlled. As Samuel Stouffer argues, the experimental design offers “a wide-open gate through which other uncontrolled variables can march” (cited in Meyer, 1988, p. 567). Also, most of these studies used the closed-ended questionnaire which usually included adjectives that the respondents would judge on Likert-type or semantic differential scales. This kind of questionnaire limits the expression of the respondent’s opinion and forces him/her to choose among the alternatives proposed by researcher (Sundar, 1999, p. 374). On the other hand, most of the samples used in credibility research are not representative to population, and the studies do not follow statistical standards for choosing the sample. Therefore, these studies are not valid to be generalized to the society in which they are conducted.

The boundaries of the relationship between source, message, and media channel in credibility research are somewhat blurred and interrelated. Not only does each of them affect the other, but also it is impossible to define the origin of the source. This complexity may account for the inconsistencies of the research findings and make the judgments of perceived credibility imprecise. The other misleading issue in the research findings is an evaluation of the credibility of the whole media type and general comparisons between the media. For example, it would be more accurate to evaluate a specific component

or single genre of television, but not television as a whole. Also in this context, I want to suggest that “credibility” is one mass, indivisible: it is associated with the whole system of a country—politically, socially, ideologically, and to the extent that a country is democratic and free. In my view, the study of media credibility should be conducted by linking it with a specific issue across time, especially a controversial one (e.g., the Arab conflict, the image of Arabs and Muslims in the American media or vice versa) to see how a specific medium represents it.

Most dimensions and standards of media credibility are derived from ethical norms and media ethical codes based on social responsibility, which have been established to guide the work of journalists and media professionals. However, they neglect current political, ideological, and technological developments in the world. It is argued that media credibility is a kind of professional, cultural, and ethical treatment of media content. In my opinion, the following is the framework within which credibility could be best achieved and studied. When presenting an issue to the public, all positions or points of view should be presented; facts should be based on evidence and separated from private interests and opinions; harmony, balance, accuracy, and completeness should be strived for; and the media should reflect the community’s social agenda.

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