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New Perspectives on Media Credibility Research

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Guy J. Golan

The mass media serves as an important forum in which journalists, public relations professionals, advertising practitioners, politicians, and issue advocates (as well as many others) try to educate, inform, pursue, and influence media audiences. The success or failure of such efforts can often depend on audiences' overall perceptions of media credibility (Wanta & Hu, 1994).

Scholarship has identified the concept of media credibility as a complex and multidimensional construct (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970). Research has typically focused on two main dimensions of media credibility: source credibility (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Sundar, 1998; Greer, 2003) and medium credibility (Gaziano, 1987; Kiousis, 2001; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Source credibility research typically focuses on the characteristics of the message source (such as the speaker, the organization, or the news organization), whereas research on medium credibility focuses on the medium through which the message is delivered (for example, newspaper compared to television).

Scholars of media credibility have pointed to the important influence of audience-based variables in their assessments of both source and medium credibility. These include, but are not limited to, variables such as age (Bucy, 2003), income (Ibelema & Powell, 2001), education (Mulder, 1981), gender (Robinson & Kohut, 1988), and race (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2005).

The current issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* presents readers with up-to-date research on media credibility. The studies explore media credibility across communication fields, including political communication, civic journalism, advertising, online journalism and media convergence, and religion and the media.

Specifically, the studies investigate some of the key audience-based variables that may influence the manner in which audiences evaluate perceived media crediblity. The variables in these studies include political ideology, trust in government, news consumption, perceived expertise, branding, media exposure, media reliance, and personal religiosity. To provide some of the freshest and most insightful scholarship on the

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important field of media credibility, the authors apply a variety of research methods and theoretical constructs.

In his article titled "Why They Don't Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust," Tien-Tsung Lee (2010) tests the idea that there is a positive association between political ideology and partisanship and political and personal cynicism. Moreover, he examines whether such an association may lead to increased perceptions of media bias.

The study analyzes secondary data from the National Election Studies from 1948 to 2004. A series of multiple ordinary least squares regression tests and two separate path analyses are used as the statistical procedure for the testing of the research hypotheses. Lee's research findings provide support for the argument that political trust, ideology, and partisanship are associated with consumers' trust in the news media. The author argues for the importance of his model and invites future research to further test and develop it.

In his article titled "Online News Exposure and Trust in the Mainstream Media: Exploring Possible Associations," Yariv Tsfati (2010) explores the possible associations between mistrust in mainstream news media and consumption of online news.

The author analyzes the complex relationship between media skepticism and exposure to mainstream and nonmainstream media using secondary data from a public opinion poll ($N = 523$ adults) conducted by Tel Aviv University's Chaim Herzog Institute for Politics and Society. Through this analysis, Tsfati identifies a significant negative association between skepticism and exposure to online news. He also found support for an association between mainstream media consumption and trust in the media and a relationship between media skepticism and the consumption of nonmainstream media. The author argues on the basis of his research results that the effect of media skepticism on general media exposure may depend on the overall level of the respondents' experience with the Internet.

In a study titled "Correlations Among Variables in Message and Messenger Credibility Scales," Chris Roberts' (2010) study analyzes two key indices commonly used by media credibility scholars in their examination of source and medium credibility. This methodological piece applies the P. Meyer (1988) five-dimension media credibility scale (used to assess the messenger or source credibility) and the Flanagin and Metzger (2000) credibility scale (used to assess the message credibility) to two separate experiments. Roberts aggregated the results from the two experiments into a single database and then ran a factor analysis that tested and confirmed the reliability of the two credibility scales. The results of the two experiments suggest that the quality of a message does have an effect on the perceptions of a messenger, especially in news stories that readers would expect to be objective. The author discusses the methodological significance of his findings and calls for their integration into future studies.

In a study titled "Still Cruising and Believing? An Analysis of Online Credibility Across Three Presidential Campaigns," Thomas J. Johnson and Barbara K. Kaye (2010) examine the credibility of online information among politically interested Web users. The study aimed to provide scholars with a better understanding of media credibility

of online sources and its potential effect on the political process using public opinion data gathered from online surveys conducted 2 weeks before and after the 1996, 2000, and 2004 U.S. presidential elections.

The authors' analysis provides one of the first longitudinal studies of online media credibility, and the results of the study provide mixed patterns in online users' assessments of online sources across the different election periods. The high credibility of online issue sources and the low credibility of online broadcast TV news sources are among their key findings. The authors integrate their research findings into the broader scholarship on online media credibility and suggest further investigation of the credibility of online political sources during political elections in future studies.

In his study titled "The Credible Brand Model: The Effects of Ideological Congruency and Customer-Based Brand Equity on News Credibility," Tayo Oyedeji (2010) proposes and tests the credible brand model (CBM), which explains the process by which media consumers assess media credibility regarding media sources and their content.

The author tests the relationship between customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and political ideology on audiences' assessments of media credibility using an audience-based approach. The study employs a public opinion survey as well as an experiment to measure the significance of these variables as a predictor of source credibility (CNN and the Fox News channel). The study identifies a significant relationship between CBBE and media credibility but only mixed evidence for political ideology and media credibility. The author argues for the importance of the integration of the CBM into research on media credibility and discusses both the implications of his results and suggestions for future research.

In their study, Hans Meyer, Doreen Marchionni, and Esther Thorson (2010) explore the association between audience expertise, demographics, and co-orientation on both source and medium credibility. Their experiment tests audiences' assessments of media credibility for four types of news stories: straight, collaborative, opinionated, and blog news. Article credibility used Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) credibility scale, and source credibility used the Hamman (2006) credibility scale.

Research findings suggest that the strongest predictor of article and organizational credibility online is the author's perceived expertise, but in today's digital age, said expertise is largely determined by the level of co-orientation between the sender and receiver.

The authors argue for the importance of co-orientation as a mechanism for news organizations to increase perceived credibility by audiences and appeal for future scholarship to further explore co-orientation and expertise as variables used to predict media credibility.

In their study "In God We Trust: Religiosity as a Predictor of Perceptions of Media Trust, Factuality, and Privacy Invasion," Guy J. Golan and Anita Day (2010) provide one of the first empirical tests of the relationship between religiosity and media credibility. The authors discuss the problematic interaction between religious audiences and the mainstream media. They contend that personal religiosity may serve as a powerful

predictor of media credibility. The authors analyze how religiosity may affect perceived media credibility (across five dimensions) using data from a public opinion poll.

The results of their study provide mixed evidence as to the predictive nature of religiosity on media credibility. Although religiosity was not directly related to media credibility when it came to newspapers and magazines, study results indicate a significant relationship between personal religiosity and perceived media credibility of online news.

The authors apply their findings to the discussion of the complex relationship between religious audiences and the mainstream media and call on future research to further explore the role that religion and religiosity may play in influencing perceived media credibility of both online and traditional media outlets.

In their article titled "A Citizen's Eye View of Television News Source Credibility," Andrea Miller and David Kurpius (2010) explore the role of race and news types (hard or soft news) on perceived source credibility. Their experiment ($N = 244$) introduced participants to 10 television news stories with varying source affiliation (officials or citizens), source race (African American or Caucasian) and type of story (hard or soft news).

The results of the experiment yielded three major findings. First, audiences perceived official sources as more credible than nonofficial sources. Second, race did not serve as a predictor of perceived media credibility in either the White or African American participants. Finally, TV news viewers perceived hard news stories as significantly more credible than soft news stories.

The authors apply their findings to research on media credibility as well as to the real-life implications for civic journalism.

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