

Identification, Transparency, Interactivity: Towards a New Paradigm for Credibility for Single-Voice Blogs

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ABSTRACT

This article explores traditional conceptualizations of credibility relying on quantitative and qualitative analyses of data collected by the Institute for the Future of the Book, which conducted an online survey of readers of Pharyngula and Informed Comment, two popular, widely read, single-author blogs. The results suggest that a new pattern for online information credibility is emerging for blogs that supplements credibility's traditionally understood dimensions of expertise, accuracy, and absence of bias with new, medium-specific or medium-enabled dimensions, including interactivity, transparency and, perhaps most significantly, identification. The responses indicate that mainstream news media may want to adopt more of the principles and techniques of blogging and readers of the two blogs appreciate the conversation each author facilitates. This preference for real human voices, especially when combined with the explosion of interest in and use of online social networks like Facebook and Twitter, indicates the need for a "re-voicing" of journalism.

Keywords: Believability, Blogging, Credibility, Identification, Interactivity, Objectivity, Transparency

INTRODUCTION

The relative ease and near-zero cost of blogging has fueled an explosion in the numbers of bloggers worldwide.¹ This huge, in some ways unprecedented expansion of public voices has subsequently raised the issue of information credibility, including its identification and evaluation. Though credibility assessment as an area of study can be traced to the ancient Greeks, systematic empirical research of

source, message and media credibility began in the twentieth century (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). Today, with dramatic shifts in the news media and the lack of sustainable revenue models, interest in the subject has only grown.

During the last decade, interest in information credibility has largely related to the phenomena of the Internet and the World Wide Web that reduced the amount of information undergoing editorial control. Newspaper sales have been decreasing since the early 1990s, and the declines have accelerated in recent

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years (Metz, 2009). Although overall online newspaper readership tripled in 2007-09, newspapers are losing their young audiences (18-24-year-olds), according to a survey conducted by IBM's Institute for Business Value (2010). In 2008-09, several national and regional American newspapers ended or reduced their print production to boost an online presence, including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Capital Times* (Madison, WI) and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. By 2009, more than 80% of news organizations had converged their digital and traditional newsrooms (Pew Research, 2009), and according to the 2010 *State of the News Media* report, 60% of Americans reported reading online news from various media platforms daily (Pew Research, 2010).

This article explores traditional conceptualizations of information credibility relying on quantitative and qualitative analyses of data collected by the Institute for the Future of the Book, which conducted an online survey of readers of *Pharyngula* and *Informed Comment*, two popular, widely read, single-author blogs.² The results suggest that a new pattern for online information credibility is emerging for blogs that supplements credibility's traditionally understood dimensions of expertise, accuracy, and absence of bias with new, medium-specific or medium-enabled dimensions, including interactivity, transparency and, perhaps most significantly, identification.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Credibility as "a chief element of the information quality" (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 344) has been widely researched in many disciplines, and for a long time. Pioneering research was conducted in the 1930s and 1940s, when warring nations became keenly interested in learning how to persuade through the means of propaganda and how to harness the newfound power of radio. This work continued after the war, notably with the work of psychologists Hovland, Janis and Kelley in the 1950s on mainly source credibility as opposed

to message or media credibility. Building on the Yale team's findings, McCroskey in the 1960s (McCroskey, 1966, 1969) led a movement away from uni-dimensional measures and toward a factor analysis approach, beginning a tradition that continues in mass communication research today.³

As mentioned, one reason for such sustained interest by news media in credibility research is the long-term decline in newspaper readership, which has been connected to a diminishing of credibility over time. Meyer (1988) pointed out in the 1980s that even after a great deal of research, there was no widely agreed-upon definition or operationalization of the term or concept of credibility. Meyer surveyed credibility research in mass communication and developed an index for the two dimensions of the concept he identified in the literature: believability and community affiliation (p. 567).

Believability, which Flanagin and Metzger (2000) found to be the most consistent dimension of media credibility, is based on the notion that news media present accurate, unbiased and complete accounts of news and events. Other dimensions of media credibility used by researchers identified by Flanagin and Metzger were accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness. Community affiliation encompasses a news organization's efforts in unifying and leading the community it serves, efforts that require some degree of harmony in outlook or perspective. Meyer's two dimensions are important to this study in suggesting that the public can disapprove of the way a media outlet or source covers a story but still believe what it says (1988, p. 568). They are also important in their inclusion of affiliation, which in rhetorical scholarship is strikingly similar to the concept or dimension of identification that is so important to this study.

The boom in Internet use since the Web's popularization in the mid- and late 1990s fueled interest in research on online information credibility, scholarship that in the aggregate is serving to correct an historical imbalance. Prior to the proliferation of online media, credibility

research focused almost entirely on traditional media—newspapers, radio, and television.⁴ Many if not most of these newer studies suggest that those who do look online for their information deem what they find on the Web as credible, or even more credible than that found in traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000, 2002; Rieh & Danielson, 2007). More generally, how credible one views a medium is strongly correlated to how often one relies on that medium, a principle called reliance (Johnson & Kaye, 2000, p. 866). Increasing numbers of consumers are accessing the Web for information, and studies examining Web credibility show that the more people go online, the more credible they evaluate the information they find there. This seems to be true for all media; people tend to judge their preferred medium as the most credible (Carter & Greenberg, 1965, p. 965). In fact, the amount of time a person spends online might be the single best predictor of that person's perceptions of credibility for an online medium (Greer, 2003).

Research on blog credibility is emergent. As Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, and McCann (2003) pointed out, the vast preponderance of research on online credibility has been done on Web sites, at the expense of other emerging online media formats, including blogs. Among those leading the way in exploring online credibility in the blogosphere are Johnson and Kaye (2004), who surveyed blog readers to determine how credible readers rate the format. They discovered that almost three-fourths of respondents viewed blogs “moderately to very credible” (p. 634). The researchers found that only 3.5% of respondents considered blogs “not at all” credible or “not very credible (p. 630). This study seeks to build on Johnson's and Kaye's 2004 research, by asking *why* blog readers view those blogs they rely on as credible when the information typically presented in and by them is so different from that published in and by traditional news media.

Johnson and Kaye (2004) also found that the only reliable predictor of perceptions of blog credibility was reliance on blogs, strengthening the connection between reliance and perceptions

of credibility across all media. “The more users rely on Weblogs, the higher their assessments of credibility,” in spite of the fact that bias is recognized and even seen as a virtue by blog readers. Blog readers are “seeking out information to support their views and are likely to consider information they receive from blogs as highly credible,” the authors wrote (2004, pp. 631, 633). The value of bias, or perspective, rather than its absence when judging traditional news media strongly suggests a new paradigm for credibility of information in blogs, particularly when an alarming and growing number of people say they believe little of what they read in their daily newspapers. A Pew Research Center (2005) poll taken during the 2004 election found that 45% of Americans said they believe “little or nothing” of what they read in daily newspapers, and the percentage saying they can believe most of what they read in their daily newspaper dropped from 84% in 1985 to 54% in 2004. The death of objectivity as a journalistic ideal is perhaps one reason why. As one blogging journalist put it, “Veteran journalists know that the objectivity ethos is the ‘big lie’ of their profession . . . journalists are beholden to various points to view” (Zachary, 2006). Geneva Overholser, professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism emphasized that 2005 would be remembered as the year “when it finally became unmistakably clear that ‘objectivity’ has outlived its usefulness as an ethical touchstone of journalism” (Kline & Burstein, 2005, p. 9).

A key communicative concept that offers valuable theoretical and pragmatic potential, both in explaining the means by which blogs have traversed traditional boundaries and predicting the power of blogs to foster trust, is identification, a concept frequently used in rhetorical theory. While communication theorists since the writings of Aristotle have focused singularly on the role of persuasion in public discourse, Kenneth Burke called into question traditional notions by introducing a theory grounded in identification. As Burke explained, “You persuade a man insofar as you talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality,

order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your way with his” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1986, p. 158).⁵ Burke theorized that humans are uniquely individualized beings, but when their interests are joined, or one perceives or is persuaded to believe that they are joined, then identification occurs, a description that resonates at the atomic level with Meyer’s descriptions of affiliation at the community level. Burke added that one is “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another,” with consubstantiality rooted in the notion of a perceived “sameness” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1986, p. 158).

Identification emerged as the focal point for the development of contemporary rhetorical theory in the 1950s. Kirk explained that identification functioned both as a process and a structure, a motivator and an organizer of the communicative act (1961). The profound effect that Burke’s concept of identification has had on communication research was noted by Wright in 1994 when he observed that scholarly treatments of identification had appeared regularly in communication journals for more than 30 years. Early research conducted by Day (1960), Carpenter (1972), Armbruster (1974), and Baxter and Taylor (1978) focused on explaining identification by relating it to works of philosophers and scholars from Aristotle to Freud.

Brock (1969), Brummet (1975), and Crable (1977) each extended the theoretical base of the concept through political applications. Benoit’s political approach labeled three variants of identification outlined by Burke: explicit, implicit, and common enemy identification (2000). From the mid-1970s, organizational communication researchers have made numerous workplace and structural organizational applications (Bulla & Bach, 1989; Cheney, 1983; Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Tompkins, Fisher, Infante, & Tompkins, 1975). More recently, John C. Meyer in 2000 and Jonathan Cohen in 2001 brought to light the identifying effect of humor, an important element in this study’s analysis of blogs. In 2006, Crable associated identification with credibility by explaining how

identification functions as rhetorical strategy in discourse aimed at gaining another’s cooperation in defense of the rhetor’s identity.

The individual voice of the blog makes rhetorical theorists from Aristotle to Burke relevant to research on blogs and their readers. Aristotle’s focus on the persuasiveness of the individual voice and on ethos derived from the singular persuasive context seems to provide insight into emerging media formats. The re-introduction of the citizen voice invites a visit to the theory and wisdom of ancient Athens. Burke’s concept of identification emphasizes the human elements of persuasion that appear to be important in the blogosphere. Burke provides insight into the apparent resurgence of authenticity and genuineness as significant factors in establishing credibility.

This study is also a response to research by Donald Matheson (2004), who found journalism to be slow to develop distinctive forms in response to the new contexts provided by the Internet (2004). Matheson admonished journalism to adapt to these new contexts, and this article seeks to inform that development and process of adaptation. Matheson examined how blog writers orient themselves vis-à-vis news journalism, finding that they draw upon journalism’s modes of knowledge, at times setting themselves in opposition to it and at times seeking to cross discursive spaces. Rather than emerging as a new public communicative form or genre in relation to journalism, Matheson argues that the distinctiveness of the blog form is, in part, its ability to traverse the boundaries of news and other institutional discourses, which serves as another call to journalism to adopt and adapt to these new forms, and to understand their potential to connect, to foster community and to engage readers in a more human way.

Finally, the present study builds on the conversation initiated at Harvard University with its *Blogging, Journalism & Credibility* conference in early 2005, specifically the questions it raised about how bloggers win, lose, and retain credibility online.⁶ As the conference participants agreed, transparency is a key dimension to credibility online, but

it is not enough. "Credibility depends on a relationship of trust that is cultivated between the media organization or blog and the people it aims to serve," according to the conference's executive summary (MacKinnon, 2005, p. 3). It is this relationship and transaction of trust this study explores.

Specifically, the research questions this article asks:

RQ1: Why do readers loyally read their blogs of choice, and what does this say about the values or qualities of A-list blogs and their authors that make them credible to their readers?

RQ2: Why do blog readers trust the blogs they read?

METHODOLOGY

In October and November 2005, an online survey was conducted by the Institute for the Future of the Book of readers of *Pharyngula* and *Informed Comment*, two well-read single-author blogs. The Institute for the Future of the Book investigates "the evolution of intellectual discourse as it shifts from printed pages to networked screens" (www.futureofthebook.org) and is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and affiliated with the University of Southern California.

Pharyngula is written by Dr. P. Z. Myers, a biologist and professor at the University of Minnesota Morris. At the time of the survey, Myers was, according to Web site ranking service Alexa, the most-read blog in the state of Minnesota after the political commentary blogs *Power Line* and *Captain's Quarters* (CityPages, 2005), and according to Myers, in 2010 the blog attracted from 90,000 to 100,000 visits daily. *Informed Comment* is written by Dr. Juan Cole, a professor of history at the University of Michigan specializing in the Middle East. His blog on contemporary Middle East politics and affairs routinely logs more than a million page views and more than a quarter-million unique visitors per month, ranking him in readership

with many of the nation's largest newspapers and magazines (Cole, 2006). According to Cole, the blog attracted an average of 10,000 unique hits and about 13,000 page views per day.

A short survey was appended to each blog, where self-selecting, volunteer readers keyed in narrative answers to the open-ended questions. The two blogs (see Figures 1 and 2), therefore, represent a convenience sample.

The blogs' readers were asked, among other open-ended questions, "Explain why you became a regular reader of X?" and, "What leads you to trust and rely on X more or less than on other bloggers writing about these issues?" All of the survey questions were open-ended, giving respondents latitude to comment as briefly or as comprehensively as they wished. In *Pharyngula's* case, 70 people responded to the survey, and for *Informed Comment*, 222 readers. The responses were categorized and analyzed using traditional dimensions or elements of credibility, as well as dimensions based on Burke's concepts of identification and consubstantiality. Traditional dimensions included expertise, accuracy, fairness, and absence of bias. Burkeian dimensions encompassed identification, including common enemy identification, and interactivity, which was used to indicate the blogger's interest in and capacity for fostering community, conversation, and engagement with readers. Other important criteria emerged in the responses, such as transparency, authenticity, humor, and a role as a sort of counter to or filter of mainstream news coverage.⁷

Those who are particularly motivated to rely on the Web to a large extent perceive the Web as more credible than traditional information sources, confirming earlier work on reliance as a predictor of media credibility and the suggestion that people process news information consistently across media (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003, p. 312). The consistency also underlines the relevance of credibility research on traditional media to online environments. In some ways, credibility research is less problematic when looking at blogs because source, message, and medium

Figure 1. Pharyngula



Pharyngula
Evolution, development, and random biological ejaculations from a godless liberal

Latest Posts Archives About Dungeon Blogroll Commenters RSS Contact

Search MAY 14, 2010

Now we've got some big numbers to throw around, too
Category: Evolution - Molecular Biology

Blogging on Peer-Reviewed Research
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Only ours are methodologically valid. It's a common creationist tactic to fling around big numbers to 'disprove' evolution: for instance, I've had this mysterious **Borel's Law** (that anything with odds worse than 1 in 10^{50} can never happen) thrown in my face many times, followed by the declaration that the **odds of the simplest organism forming by chance are 1 in $10^{340,000,000}$** . It's **complete nonsense**, of course — their calculations all ignore the reality of the actual events, assuming that everything must form spontaneously and all at once, which is exactly the opposite of how **probability plays a role in evolution**. It's annoying and inane, and the creationists never seem to learn...perhaps because the rubes they pander to are easily dazzled by even bogus mathematics, so they keep doing it.

We're going to have to start firing back. Doug Theobald, a long-time contributor to Talk.Origins and the Panda's Thumb, has written a very nice paper testing the

PZ Myers is a biologist and associate professor at the University of Minnesota, Morris.
...and this is a pharyngula stage embryo.

- a longer profile of yours truly
- my calendar
- Nature Network
- Richard Dawkins Network
- facebook

1. Available at <http://www.scienceblogs.com/pharyngula>

are not as easily conflated as with other online media. The perceived source for a Web site, for example, could be an individual author, a publication or organization, a sponsor, or even the site host. Most blogs are identified with and written by a single person.

Using Scott's *pi*, the rate of agreement among the two coders ranged across criteria from 100% for manifest dimensions such as humor, timeliness, and depth and breadth of reporting, to a low of 66% for "quality of writing." Before reading through the responses, the researchers developed a list of categories or attributes based on the literature, attributes or dimensions of credibility to look for in the qualitative survey responses. The researchers developed the following list: expertise, fairness, accuracy, absence of bias, identification (or point-of-view), common enemy, interactivity

(conversation, community, engagement), goodwill, dynamism, authenticity (humanness), good writing (clarity, appropriate level of writing, engaging), and transparency. The responses were then categorized based on this typology, with any one entry eligible to be listed in any or all of the dimension categories. Disagreements on several criteria were resolved by discussing their definitions or operationalizations, and by identifying what kinds of expressions mostly likely represent or fulfill these criteria. As an example, for "experience and/or credentials," a 69% agreement rate reached 98% by including mentions of "academics" specific to the blogs' authors. Similarly, an intercoder reliability of 66% on "character" improved to 96% after the researchers agreed to include explicit references to "trust" in the author in measurement of the criterion.

Figure 2. *Informed Comment*

The screenshot shows a blog post on a website titled "Informed Comment". The page has a header with the title "Informed Comment" and a subtitle "Thoughts on the Middle East and Religion". Below the header is a decorative banner with a repeating geometric pattern of black, white, and gold. Underneath the banner is a black bar with the word "About" in white. The main content area features a post titled "US Troop Withdrawal in Iraq on Track" posted on May 14, 2010, by Juan. The post text discusses the Obama administration's plan to withdraw troops from Iraq, mentioning that there are currently 92,000 troops, down from 160,000 when Obama was elected, and that another 5,000 are expected to be withdrawn in May. The author speculates on the reasons for the withdrawal process, mentioning opposition from some generals and the Status of Forces Agreement. To the right of the post is a search bar, a profile picture of a woman, her name "Jitcole", her email "jitcole@gmail.com", and a "PayPal" donation button.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Available at <http://www.juancole.com>

Acceptable thresholds of reliability were not achieved for two measures, “uniqueness” (the reader feels he or she cannot get the information or perspective anywhere else) and, mentioned earlier, “quality of writing.” The coders were not able to consistently agree on these criteria across the two questions asked of the two blogs’ readers. These measures were, therefore, dropped from the analysis. The lowest intercoder reliability rate for any measure used was 74% (“identification”).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A traditional print media organization’s ethos typically is based on values such as accuracy, fairness, timeliness, precision, clarity, and comprehensiveness (Fedler, 2001, pp. 537-562; Russial, 2004, pp. 4-8). To create and communicate this ethos, large metropolitan dailies employ shifts of reporters, fact-checkers, copy editors, wire editors, section editors, page

editors, page designers, photo editors, and photo technicians. Traditional print journalism requires that its journalists swear allegiance to the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.⁸ Newsrooms filter, edit, fact-check, and re-check. They vet copy to ensure accuracy, fairness, precision, and balance, or as much of each as deadline pressures and human foibles allow. Print media strive for credibility by ensuring that coverage is based on the aforementioned values. Traditional print media organization contrasts with the lonely blogger, a single node in a vast blogosphere. One blogger’s description, though not entirely representative, signals a very different ethos embodied in the blogosphere, one that communicates or signifies a different value set from traditional media that bloggers share with their readers: “Good blogs are authentic, credible, very human, candid and personal in the sense that it’s usually one voice. A blog doesn’t have to be clever, but it does have to be useful” (McCarthy, 2003). The emerging stereotype of bloggers has mostly amateur writers using easy-

to-use software and committing random acts of journalism. Messages for mass audiences are eschewed in favor of microcontent that targets a small, like-minded, dedicated audience.

This study is an attempt to discern changes in how readers determine online information credibility by examining how readers characterize their relationship with and activity on a favorite blog. In establishing credibility, the study looks at how two widely read bloggers encourage trust among their readers, finding emergent criteria of or for establishing information credibility.

Research Question 1

Why do readers loyally read their blogs of choice, and what does this say about the values or qualities of A-list blogs and their authors that make them credible to their readers? Survey participants overwhelmingly cited Cole's expertise when responding to the statement, "Explain why you became a regular reader of *Informed Comment*." Of 222 valid responses, nearly 70%, or 154 of the respondents, mentioned in their narrative answers Cole's expertise. The author's experience living in the Middle East, his Arabic language skills, knowledge of and affinity for Middle Eastern culture, and his published scholarship in the history of the region all were specifically and repeatedly cited by the survey participants. "Juan Cole has the language skills to either correct or confirm the official translations," was one typical response. "Juan Cole is an expert Arabist whose news and insights I trust about matters Iraqi [*sic*]," wrote another.

This expertise and the reporting it informs stood in stark contrast for many with coverage they felt they were getting from mainstream media. Descriptives used to categorize mainstream news coverage included "propaganda and shallow comments," "information serving vested interests," "political spin," "distorted" reporting, reporting with a "lack of depth," "drivel," and "corporate-owned media [with] conservative, self-serving management." As one respondent wrote, "I recognized that the mainstream media sources were not reporting

accurately about the region in the run-up to the war, and realized I was going to need alternate sources of information if I wanted to really understand what was going on."

Other traditionally used dimensions of credibility, including fairness, accuracy, and absence of bias, did not appear with much frequency in the responses. Fairness and absence of bias was mentioned by 26 respondents (12%) and accuracy by 15 (7%). That absence of bias was the second-most frequently cited or named dimension of credibility is a bit of surprise given Cole's self-professed point of view and political views. His expertise and willingness to hear and even include contrarian views appeared to produce a sort of balance, according to his readers. "I feel he can be trusted to be objective in his presentation," one poster wrote, after lauding Cole's knowledge of the area. For others, this perceived objectivity relates to Cole's independence, or to the fact that he does not write for an organization or publication other than his own, and it reflects a recognition that Cole does not blog for money. "Cole thinks for himself," wrote one poster. He is "not influenced by anybody or anything," wrote another.

In sharp contrast to *Informed Comment*, expertise for P. Z. Myers's *Pharyngula* was not explicitly a factor in explaining why its readers loyally returned. Only 11 of the 70 respondents (or 16%) used the term expertise. However, when including mentions or descriptions of Myers's research, the total increased to 55, or 79% of respondents. Traditional elements of news credibility in general were largely absent in the responses for Myers's blog, with no one citing fairness, accuracy, or absence of bias as reasons for reading. Myers is far more strident in his views, opinions, and biases than is Cole. The tagline for *Pharyngula* is, "Evolution, development, and random biological ejaculations from a godless liberal." Myers also is much more apt to identify an ideological enemy than is Cole, which may explain some of the variance. As one poster described Myers's blog, it is a "brilliantly written series of commentaries written by a combative, unapologetic atheist . . . a rare thing." Another liked the author's

“wonderfully irascible smackdown of clueless idiots on a regular basis.”

Research Question 2

Why do blog readers trust the blogs they read?

On this question, *Informed Comment* once again scored surprisingly well in dimensions of credibility traditionally measured in credibility research on newspapers and TV news. Despite the fact that all of the terms or criteria or measures mentioned by posters were unsolicited, the attribute most often mentioned in the survey responses to this second question was “expertise,” just as it was for the first question. It was manifest in 153 responses, or 69% of the survey population of 222, more than double of any other dimension.

It is worth noting that more respondents cited Cole’s perceived expertise in explaining why they read his blog regularly than when answering why they trust his blog, where one might expect to find the term more frequently and more explicitly articulated. The instrument is limited in offering insight into why; the reason could merely be the sequence of the questions. It could also signify that the readers’ most important determinant when choosing what (or who) to read online is the credibility of the blog and its author.

Underlining the importance of Cole’s expertise to his readers, 39 responses (18%) referenced the author’s and/or the University of Michigan’s credentials as reasons for trusting the blog. Fairness and absence of bias also ranked high as a reason Cole’s readers say they trust him. These qualities appeared in 66 responses (30%), the third-most frequently cited reason, though this attribute was alluded to in different ways. The statement, “Dr. Cole tends to represent arguments fairly, even ones he disagrees with,” is one of more explicit references to the dimension. Typical of the more indirect allusions is this statement: “Cole makes his opinions clear, and keeps them largely separate [*sic*] from his analyses of the facts.” Other traditional credibility dimensions such as accuracy and timeliness were not as frequently

mentioned or described. Cole’s accuracy was cited in 16 responses (7%) and timeliness in another 10 responses (5%).

When citing the writer’s expertise in answer to the second question, several respondents again compared Cole’s posts to what traditional journalism routinely offers, both in print and on television. One respondent called Cole “an expert” because his “views are not mediated by an editor or publisher concerned with the bottom line or accommodating political power.” Another wrote that he or she preferred *Informed Comment* because it provides “a bigger picture that [*sic*] the one presented in mainstream media.” In describing a distrust of “most” mainstream reporters, another respondent wrote that big media’s “job is to sell a story which will bring eyeballs before their sponsors [*sic*] advertisements, so they can be hysterical or dismissive depending upon who is paying them to promote a POV” (point of view). For one respondent, language proficiency was the differentiator: “He speaks Arabic,” he or she wrote of Cole. “The failure of the American media to use analysts and reporters who actually themselves speak Arabic is probably at least as important as the whole ‘embedding’ fiasco in the failure of news coverage of this war,” referring to Iraq.

Though not terribly important in explaining loyal readership of *Pharyngula*, expertise also was important to respondents outlining why they trust the science blog. Approximately 63% (44 out of 70 total) referenced Myers’s expertise and knowledge of biology and evolutionary psychology as reasons for their trust. “He knows what he is talking about,” wrote one poster in a statement representative of many of the responses. “He is a qualified scientist” is another. As for Cole’s readers, Myers’s readers valued the writer’s academic credentials. As one respondent wrote, “He is a person with a PhD and is working in biology. I trust he knows his subject matter.” Scholars are accustomed to citing their sources, and Myers is no exception. More than one respondent noted the author’s readiness to “cite his sources” as a reason to trust the blog.

No one cited an absence of bias, and only a handful (five) said anything about fairness or accuracy. For this question, too, respondents were much more apt to use criteria and language related to the emergent, Burkeian values of identification, interactivity, and transparency. It would be misleading to compare credibility's traditionally applied dimensions to these newer dimensions, at least in terms of frequency of citation, because the survey questions were open-ended; no menu or checklist of terms or criteria was provided. Whatever references respondents made to these newer attributes they made entirely on their own. While far from conclusive, the responses do indicate an emergence of new attributes and, in aggregate, of a new paradigm of credibility for information delivered online, specifically in and through blogs.

A language of identification is present in the responses of *Informed Comment* readers. When asked to explain why they became regular readers of *Informed Comment*, 53 out of 222 (24%) expressed that sharing Cole's perspective had played a role, though some appeared to be reticent in admitting this reason. One concluded a four-sentence answer with, "Honestly, his politics agree with mine too." Another respondent described Cole as "an expert whose views are similar to mine." When asked about trust, 45 readers cited identification. One poster observed, "his judgment often echoes my own." Another concluded, "Frankly, too, his views align with mine, and as I came to trust that judgment, I stuck around."

Beyond overt identification, Burke's notion of identification through a common enemy appears to be present, as well. While the referent "common enemy" may be a bit strong, the language choices clearly reflect that readers identify with Cole in contrast to the "mainstream media" (mentioned by 44 respondents, or one in five). Respondent No. 5 represents a majority of these skeptical readers: "Mainstream media offers 'propaganda' and shallow comments as well as information serving vested interests." The language of this group of respondents reflects a common rejection of traditional media sources.

It should also be noted that 10 respondents (5%) contrasted Cole's views with those of the Bush Administration. One respondent tied together both threads of rejection in the following: "In this era of corporate-owned media effectively reined in by this administration and conservative self-serving management, it is refreshing to see [Cole] 'tell it like it is.' It's nice to see him call the bastards bastards." The candid language evidence of identification in the form of this "he-they" dichotomy. Readers describe Cole in individual, personal, human terms while the "others" are vilified as a negative, vested collective. Identification is fostered through a common rejection.

References to Cole's humanity and authenticity comprise another dimension of identification. Consubstantiation occurs when individuals connect with others on the basis of shared perception. Burke describes identification as a uniquely human process that binds separate entities together. The perception of authenticity and/or human values was mentioned by 20 readers (9%) in response to question one, and by 25 readers (11%) in response to question two. Responses to question one reveal that Cole's humanity is perceived in three areas: as a part of his personal character, in his treatment of those about whom he is writing, and in his reader relations. One respondent stated, "I like his unpretentious, non-confrontational and humble presentation, including his posting of guest contributors with differing takes or opinions." Another remarked, "The fact that Mr. Cole's readiness to be politically honest – and say, 'I don't know' or 'I was wrong' – convinced me that IC is a good blog." In response to question two, 13 readers mentioned specifically that Cole's willingness to admit mistakes was important, while another 11 cited his willingness to change his views as a positive factor. In all, the author's transparency was described in 31 responses, or 14%.

Cole is perceived as an expert who is honest about his flaws and limitations. Readers' descriptions of Cole's regard for his subjects highlight his humanity. One poster noted, "He cares about the Middle East and has real

sympathy for the people living there.” Another remarked, “I was sick of reading very superficial or absurd descriptions of people in the Middle East, Juan Cole seemed very different. He described political matters in very human terms.”

Another factor that emphasizes Cole’s human appeal are the descriptions of his reader interactions. One respondent mentioned the fact that Cole responds to email, while another offered, “I met him through the internet and have had the pleasure of dining with him twice.” One’s admitting to mistakes, a willingness to change views, a compassion for others, and engagement in interpersonal interaction form a human foundation for identification. Perhaps the identifying effect is best summarized by Respondent No. 40, who wrote, “He . . . communicates as though we’re all in this together, as though he has a duty of care to see that his information is solid, for both himself and us.”

The presence and importance of identification is equally apparent in the comments of regular readers of *Pharyngula*. In response to question one, 38 readers (54%) expressed a form of identification overtly, while in response to the second question, 13 readers stated that a shared perspective is a reason for their trust of Myers. An example of explicit identification is provided by Respondent No. 14: “I also share most of PZs [*sic*] social and political positions (yes, I am a liberal atheist).”

Identification through a common enemy appears to be more dominant among *Pharyngula* readers than among readers of *Informed Comment*. In response to question one, 20 out of 70 (28.5%) mentioned the creationist or intelligent design “enemy.” Speaking of Myers, one poster observed, “he disposes of creationists in such an entertaining manner.” This sentiment was echoed by another, who commented, “Watching PZ assault creationists is the most entertaining thing on the internet.” Several respondents, in fact, commented on the entertaining nature of Myer’s assaults on creationists. A shared sense of humor is a potentially powerful identifying attribute, and a common perspective or world view is often reflected in and projected by humor. In response to question one, 17 readers

(24%) specifically mention Myers’s humor in their answer, allowing identification to occur as a result of readers “laughing with” Myers and “laughing at” creationists.

The personal, human attributes that were important to *Informed Comment* readers emerge as significant reasons among *Pharyngula* readers, as well. In response to question two, seven readers focus on the personal nature of Myers’s blog. One respondent commented, “*Pharyngula* is different from other, similar sites in that it has a very personal touch, and a sense of humor/outrage.” Another offered the clearest evidence for identification on personal grounds when he or she noted, “PZ has a great mix of personal items, liberal politics, news, and humor, so I feel that he has become a friend and I look forward to seeing him on a regular basis.”

In summary, identification played a prominent role in drawing readers to *Informed Comment* and *Pharyngula*. While several respondents openly admitted that a shared perspective with the blog creators was a reason for their choice, others referred to identifying factors such as a common enemy or object of rejection, humor, compassion for others, responsiveness to readers, willingness to admit mistakes and change views, and other personal, human characteristics as reasons for reading, trusting, and returning to these blogs. A composite view of the responses suggests that perhaps blog readers are contrasting the personal, individual voice of the bloggers with the impersonal, generalized conglomerate of “vested” voices from mainstream media. And while the accuracy of this perspective can certainly be questioned, the fact of its existence is undeniable.

Finally, a handful of responses mentioned the blog’s easy navigability and clean design as reasons for regularly reading and trusting that blog. The references point to the importance of human-computer interface, particularly when communicating or projecting an individual personality. Despite the fact that users are interacting with emotionless machines, which typically are for work, the two bloggers and their blog formats have managed to create a sense of intimacy and trust. The navigability of

both sites is simple, allowing readers to relax enough to worry about other things, like the content and what it means.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Americans have already said that in their journalism they want more interactivity, transparency, and accountability, according to the State of the News Media (2007). Between 1997 and 2003, the only significant advance in interactivity by newspapers online was the addition of reporters' email addresses (Greer & Mensing, 2004), and a recent study shows that although newspapers are moving in the direction of cross-platform work, they are not moving as quickly or completely as some observers indicate (Russial, 2009). Blogs as adopted by journalism sites online for the expression by individual voices, voices that readers can potentially identify with, represent an important step towards interactivity and with it, trust. With fully interactive media, the roles of sender and receiver are interchangeable, the distinctions between the two less meaningful, and this blur or blend is being welcomed by blog readers, as the survey responses analyzed in this chapter clearly show.

The responses suggest that mainstream news media may want to adopt more of the principles and techniques of blogging, including the practice of being transparent. Readers of the two blogs examined responded positively to the authors' willingness to disclose their personal politics and biases, their readiness to acknowledge error and to incorporate or consider new information, and the sharing of and pointing to original source materials that go into their posts. There is evidence that media elites are awakening to the need for greater transparency. *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller acknowledged in 2005 that his newspaper can no longer to argue "reflexively that our work speaks for itself. . . . We need to be more assertive about explaining ourselves – our decisions, our methods, our values, how

we operate" (Seelye, p. C4). Echoing Keller's sentiments, Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC World Service and Global News Division, said, "We don't own the news anymore. This is a fundamental realignment of the relationship between large media companies and the public" (Shutel, 2006). The BBC College of Journalism explored this realignment in an in-depth report on how journalism is changing called, *The Future of Journalism*, a report in which the death knell is sounded for what the study group calls "fortress journalism" (Miller, 2009).

Of course, allowing journalists to acknowledge and even base comments on their biases, as well as to point to and otherwise reveal source materials, is to relinquish control, and institutions are not surprisingly reticent to do this. New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen, however, argues that single-voice blogs allow individual journalists to be involved in creating trust, to be at the point of the transaction of trust with the reader, rather than merely rely upon the institutional trust of the publication and/or brand (2006). In doing so, blogging empowers journalists because they can add to the organization's reputational capital rather than merely spend it or ruin it, addressing at the level of the individual journalist the key problem of eroding credibility.

It is clear the blogs' readers appreciate the conversation each author enables and participates in. These intelligent conversations appear to act as a sort of filter, screening out crackpots and the unreasonable, and attracting those who do in fact want to interact both with the author and with other readers. This interaction in turn produces better commentary if the author is willing to learn from his or her readers, and, judging by the posts themselves and the survey responses, both Cole and Myers are more than willing, even eager to learn from and adapt to changing circumstances and new information. The content itself, then, serves as a filter, and the filter the authors provide is an increasingly smart filter. This "smartness" is an attribute that seems to virtuously generate ever more trust.

The third item on journalism's "to do" list as prescribed by the public is accountability,

which has to do with perceived bias and journalism's misguided attempts to objectively report only "the facts." At the Harvard conference on blogging, Micah Sifry reasoned that mainstream journalism is "dying" in part because it has insisted on objectivity and, in the process, has "killed the human voice." Blogs, he argued, mark the return of "real human voices" and "real human conversations over the Web" (MacKinnon, 2005, p. 61). This study reinforces Sifry's premise, as does the explosion of interest in and use of online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Several survey respondents, particularly readers of *Informed Comment*, said they read the blog because of the biases, "propaganda," "political spin," and "distorted reporting" of mainstream news media. Instead, the two blogs provide, according to their readers, authentically human voices, despite or perhaps because of the fact that the authors are up front about their own biases and points of view. As one *Informed Comment* poster wrote, "I kept coming back for his deep sense of humanity. He's a hero." Rosen calls this the "re-voicing" of journalism (Rosen, 2005).

This re-voicing in some respects marks a return to the past – the distant past. From a rhetorical perspective, Aristotle's traditional description of *ethos* appears to have withstood the test of time, particularly his notions of good sense (competence, intelligence, expertise) and good moral character (honesty, trustworthiness, fairness). Readers of both blogs clearly reaffirmed the importance of these characteristics. The philosopher's third component of *ethos*, or goodwill, may be making a comeback in the blogosphere, as well. Hints of goodwill as an important attribute can be seen in respondents' references to compassion and other humane characteristics, and also in contrast to the perceived vested interests and bias of mainstream media sources. Components of speaker credibility that have generally been associated with the rise of television and other mass media, such as dynamism and attractiveness, are mentioned rarely if at all. In this particular survey, authenticity appears to trump polish. Aristotle's focus on *ethos*, a concept derived from the competence,

character, and goodwill of the individual citizen voice, offers great insight into the credibility of *Informed Comment* and *Pharyngula*.

Beyond Aristotelian analysis, Burke's concept of identification calls into question the traditional boundaries of credibility. The idea that individuals determine credibility in part on the basis of a shared perspective offers great insight into the popularity of emerging media formats. McCroskey's definition of source credibility, the image of the source in the mind of the receiver, may need to account for the degree to which the image of the source reflects the mind of the receiver. And while ethical implications abound, the trend is hard to deny. Additionally, identification helps to explain the contrast between traditional and emerging media formats. The personal perception of bloggers versus the almost bureaucratic mainstream media descriptions presents a dichotomy that can be explained by, and further explored through, the concept of identification.

Future Research Directions

A systematic approach to researching credibility in and of blogs is needed. People seem to apply different criteria to different media in order to evaluate their credibility. Expertise and trustworthiness still apply, but new criteria such as transparency and identification should be added to the factor analytic approaches being used to measure credibility of online media. These approaches could be used in longitudinal studies and in comparative studies that include multiple media. A logical next step in building on this study, for example, would be to compare these blogs with traditional news media by surveying traditional news' readers and viewers with an instrument similar if not identical to that used to poll online media consumers.

Research that considers the relational or transactional nature of credibility development, including trust, also is sorely needed, especially because blogs are more interpersonal than are mass media and, therefore, much closer to the transaction than are mass media. This interpersonal nature places the writer at the point

of transaction in the building (or spending or ruination) of reputational capital, and this proximity deserves further study if traditional news media hope to recover a measure of the public's trust. This proximity perhaps points to the resurgent utility of uses and gratifications research, or research that includes the expectations and needs and desired gratifications with which users approach online media.

Finally, it is recognized that any sample of Internet users is not representative of the population in general, but only possibly of the population with Internet access. It is in this latter population, however, that news media increasingly are interested. Those who do have access tend to be more highly educated, more affluent, and younger than those who do not, and access or connectivity is only increasing (eMarketer, 2006). The non-probability sample method used in this study was the self-selected volunteer sample, which also is admittedly flawed. The results, however, offer insight into how those who bothered to respond think and feel, and into why they find the two individual voices studied here credible.⁹

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In August 2010 BlogPulse (blogpulse.com) tracked over 140 million blogs on the Web. By some estimates (Penn, 2009), in April 2009 there were 20 million bloggers in the U.S., including nearly 2 million earning money from their writing.
- ² *Pharyngula* is available at: <http://www.scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/>. *Informed Comment* is available at: <http://www.juancole.com/>. *Pharyngula* is the blog of University of Minnesota biology professor P. Z. Myers. *Informed Comment* is the blog of University of Michigan history professor Juan Cole.
- ³ For some examples of important work in mass communication building on McCroskey's research, see Westley, B., & Severin, W. (1964). Some correlates of media credibility. *Journalism Quarterly*, 41, 325-335; Carter, R.

- F., & Greenberg, B. S. (1965). Newspapers or television: Which do you believe? *Journalism Quarterly*, 42, 22-34; Shaw, E. (1973). Media credibility: Taking the measure of a measure. *Journalism Quarterly*, 50, 306-311; Greenberg, B., & Roloff, M. (1974). Mass media credibility: Research results and critical issues. *American Newspaper Publishers Association News Research Bulletin* (November); Singletary, M. (1976). Components of credibility of a favorable news source. *Journalism Quarterly*, 53, 316-319; Gaziano, C., & McGrath, K. (1986). Measuring the concept of credibility. *Journalism Quarterly*, 63, 451-462; Rimmer, T., & Weaver, D. (1987). Different questions, different answers? Media use and media credibility. *Journalism Quarterly*, 64, 28-36, 44.
- ⁴ This point is dramatically made by Metzger, Flanagin, et al., 2003. Their chapter has an exhaustive literature review of credibility research in several disciplines, including mass communication, categorized for source credibility research, message credibility research, and media credibility research.
- ⁵ For more on Burke's theory of identification and consubstantiality, see Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; and Burke, K. (1962). *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- ⁶ The conference blog is available at: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/webcred/>. The conference report by the same name was written and compiled by Rebecca MacKinnon.
- ⁷ For more on transparency and how it has been embraced by at least one American newsroom, see Smith, S.A. (2005, November 21). Fortress journalism failed. The transparent newsroom works. *PressThink*. Retrieved December 1, 2007, from <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pub-zone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/11/21/spk.ss.html>. Smith included in his definition the importance of "being open about mistakes . . . fessing up, speaking directly to readers with a genuine openness."
- ⁸ See the SPJ Code of Ethics at http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp.
- ⁹ For more on self-selected volunteer samples, see Couper, M. P. (2000). Web surveys: A review of issues and approaches. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64(4), 464-494.

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