

Credibility Perceptions of Content Contributors and Consumers in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This panel addresses information credibility issues in the context of social media. During this panel, participants will discuss people's credibility perceptions of online content in social media from the perspectives of both content contributors and consumers. Each panelist will bring her own perspective on credibility issues in various social media, including Twitter (Morris), Wikipedia (Metzger; Francke), blogs (Rieh), and social Q&A (Jeon). This panel aims to flesh out multi-disciplinary approaches to the investigation of credibility and discuss integrated conceptual frameworks and future research directions focusing on assessing and establishing credibility in social media.

Keywords

Credibility, social media, user-generated content, content contributors, social media users.

BACKGROUND

New media and credibility perceptions have long been tied closely together. Major credibility research on media began in the 1950s, when television was first introduced and was seen as a competitor with newspapers. The scholarly investigation of credibility was revived in the late 1990s by the rise of the Internet. For the past decade, social media have become popular as people increasingly create, discuss, share, or exchange information using a variety of social media technologies. Social media include social networking sites, blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), Wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), social news sites, and social Q&A services (e.g., Yahoo!Answers). Social media differ from traditional media in terms of the creation of user-generated content and

frequent exchange of content, among other things. The assessment of information credibility in social media may be both more challenging and critical for users compared to other media because content available through social media may often be disconnected from original sources, and thus may be missing one of the most important and frequently-used criteria for judging credibility.

Credibility is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. As there is no clear definition, credibility has been defined with respect to several related concepts such as believability, currency, fairness, accuracy, trustworthiness, completeness, reliability, and objectivity. Among these, trustworthiness and expertise have long been known as the two key dimensions of credibility perceptions. Trustworthiness denotes perceived "goodness and morality of the source" (Fogg and Tseng, 1999, p. 123) and expertise refers to perceived "knowledge, skill, and experience of the source" (p. 124).

The various technologies and services involved in social media pose both barriers and opportunities for people to assess the credibility of online content. Previous work has shown that people tend to evaluate information differently depending on whether the information is posted by established media or by individuals (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2007). In social media, people interact with mostly user-generated content, which may make credibility assessment more challenging. Yet the growth of social media has been accompanied by the development of new features and tools that can assist people with making credibility judgments. While the greater number of content contributors can pose challenges to most people's ability to assess the credibility of digital information, various features implemented in social media provide unprecedented ways of helping people to make more informed credibility judgments.

There are at least three significant problems with the current scholarly investigation of credibility in social media. First, there is a lack of integration or consensus on terms and concepts of credibility. Therefore, each study starts its

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investigation of credibility with different sets of questions and measures, which makes it difficult to build on previous work. The second problem is that most credibility constructs used to examine the credibility of online information, including trustworthiness and expertise, were initially developed to compare credibility perceptions across different media (e.g., live speakers, television, newspapers, and magazines). However, as Rieh and colleagues' study (2010) found, people may conceptualize credibility differently depending on the types of information they interact with on the Web. For instance, when using social media, authoritativeness and expertise of the author were not considered to be important, while trustworthiness, reliability, accuracy, and completeness were considered to be important across different types of information sources including social media, multimedia content, online news, and general websites (Rieh et al., 2010). Third, the majority of previous credibility studies have focused on understanding credibility perceptions from the viewpoint of information consumers. In social media, users play dual roles as information consumers and content contributors. Therefore, it is important for credibility researchers to discuss credibility issues with respect to more diverse kinds of information activities, including posting, commenting, voting, rating, recommending, and reading.

For the past fifteen years, there have been numerous studies about credibility on the Web. There are at least three distinct conceptual frameworks for examining the credibility of online information, namely, a media-based framework, a website-based framework, and a content-based framework. The media-based framework was developed in the field of communication to investigate the relative credibility of various media channels. Typical research questions address which medium people would believe if they received conflicting messages from different media such as television, radio, magazines, and newspapers (Roper, 1985). When the Internet was widely adopted, communication researchers simply added the Web as another type of information channel and made comparisons of credibility perceptions across media. A limitation of this framework is that it draws empirical findings from people's general perceptions of a medium rather than from their actual use of information obtained from it. The website-based framework goes beyond examination of the Web as a unitary medium. It is presumed that there is variability in websites; that is, each website can be perceived to be highly credible or not credible, depending on numerous characteristics of the website. The strengths of this framework include the comprehensive scope of assessment, including content, presentation, and design. A limitation of the website-based framework is that it does not consider the fact that most websites are information-intensive and that all of the information included within one website is not equally reliable. Finally, the content-based framework presumes that credibility assessment is made on the basis of content contained in a website. The underlying notion is that credibility perceptions could vary even within the

website. The challenge of this framework is that it is difficult to separate out the content from peripheral cues such as design or presentation.

It appears that none of the existing credibility frameworks provide a comprehensive and useful framework to better understand credibility perceptions in social media. Given the unique characteristics of social media in which the creation and exchange of user-generated content is allowed, it would be significant for credibility researchers to promote discussions about credibility in social media. That is the motivation of this panel proposal.

GOALS OF THE PANEL

The goals of this panel include:

- (1) To examine credibility constructs that have emerged to investigate credibility in the context of various social media including Twitter, blogs, social Q&A services, and Wikipedia.
- (2) To review what new system features have developed to assist with credibility assessment in social media.
- (3) To identify various methods to investigate credibility perceptions and discuss future methodological approaches.
- (4) To discuss an integrated credibility framework that could be commonly used in the investigation of credibility in social media.

STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL

The proposed structure of the panel is as follows:

- The moderator (Rieh) will introduce the purpose of the panel and panelists.
- Three of the panelists (Morris, Metzger, and Jeon) will address credibility perceptions of social media from the perspective of information consumers.
- Two of the panelists (Francke and Rieh) will address credibility issues from the perspective of content contributors.
- The moderator will facilitate a discussion among the panelists and the audience about the challenges and opportunities for future research directions based on a set of pre-developed discussion questions to accomplish the four goals outlined above.

THE PANELISTS

Each panelist brings unique expertise to the issues of credibility perceptions in social media as follows.

Soo Young Rieh is Associate Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Her research areas lie in the intersection of credibility assessment and information behavior. Recently, she has investigated how online content contributors establish and enhance the credibility of their content through credibility-related constructs and practices they have developed (e.g., St. Jean et al., 2011). In this panel, she will introduce *audience-aware credibility* as a theoretical construct which she identified based on an analysis of interviews with independent bloggers. Audience-aware credibility is

defined as how bloggers signal their credibility based on who they think their audience is and how they provide value to that perceived audience (Rieh et al., 2014). She will report on the bloggers' blogging practices for establishing credibility and strategies for interacting with their audience to enhance credibility. She will then discuss the results, demonstrating how a multi-dimensional construct of audience-aware credibility serves as a driving factor influencing and shaping practices of bloggers. She will moderate the panel.

Meredith Ringel Morris is a senior researcher at Microsoft Research and an affiliate associate professor in the Computer Science & Engineering department and in the iSchool at the University of Washington. She has done research on several aspects of online credibility, including studying the factors that impact users' perceptions of webpage credibility when they view search engine results pages (Schwarz & Morris, 2011) and studying the factors that impact users' perceptions of credibility of tweets (Morris et al., 2012). Her work also explores cross-cultural differences in credibility perceptions, such as differences in factors impacting credibility perceptions of microblog posts in the U.S. and in China (Yang et al., 2013). On this panel, she will discuss how the interface designs of traditional and social search engines can impact users' credibility perceptions.

Miriam J. Metzger is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her research centers on how information and communication technologies alter our understandings of credibility and force us to confront new challenges in protecting our privacy. She has co-edited two volumes on digital media and credibility. She will present recent survey and experimental work that examines Wikipedia's credibility from the perspective of users. Wikipedia presents a particularly interesting case with regard to issues of credibility of user-generated information online, pitting the 'wisdom of crowds' against traditional models of information provision based on credentialed expertise. Her presentation will discuss evolving perceptions of the credibility of Wikipedia as an authoritative information resource, factors that influence users' credibility evaluations, and tools designed to help people evaluate information quality in this particular context.

Helena Francke is a senior lecturer at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science, University of Borås. She has researched online credibility practices from the perspectives of producers, mediators, and users, including how high school students, teachers and librarians as well as editors on Wikipedia speak of and act in relation to the credibility of Wikipedia (e.g. Francke & Sundin, 2010; 2012). On this panel, she will address content creation on and maintenance of Wikipedia based on a study which included document analysis and interviews with editors. Wikipedia content creation is conceptualized within a nexus of tensions between a "freedom-to-contribute" ideology and

rules for contributions that point to traditional authoritative publications and quality systems, but also in terms of personal networks and the MediaWiki architecture. She will argue that how such tensions are interpreted is productive in forming Wikipedia as a potentially credible source for various groups of users.

Grace YoungJoo Jeon is a doctoral candidate in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. She studies people's information behavior, with emphasis on their online interactions with other people and with information provided by those people in the context of social technologies. She is interested in interactions in social Q&A settings in which people ask questions and receive answers from other users on a broad range of topics. Her research examines how online interactions with a large group of strangers influence people's information seeking and credibility assessment practices on Yahoo! Answers (Jeon & Rieh, 2014). On this panel, she will discuss how individuals judge the credibility of unknown people who answer their questions, and information provided by those people in the social Q&A setting.

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