

Internet Credibility and the User: Response to Fitzgerald and Metzger
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First, I'd like to compliment both Mary Ann and Miriam on their excellent papers. Both are especially cogent, scholarly, well-reasoned, and insightful. I learned a great deal from reading them. Thank you.

According to my understanding of a memo from Carrie, my job this morning is to "address the papers" rather than to review them and to use my remarks to spark your "discussion of the papers and related ideas." So I hope you still have some ideas left to discuss about this issue, or I'll feel like a miserable failure!

There are both common themes and disparate ideas that emerge from the papers. The first and most obvious common theme is the implicit assumption in both papers—and indeed in this symposium—that the credibility of Internet information is an important issue. In fact, increasing that credibility and enabling users to judge it is presented here as a kind of holy grail. Now, I wouldn't be here if I weren't looking for the same holy grail, but I think it's important to note that we're having this conversation in a world that doesn't necessarily see the credibility of information as important. We've just come out of a political season in which "swift boat veterans" as well as CBS News have dealt real blows to the whole idea that information should be accurate, authoritative, objective, current, and comprehensive—the five criteria for credibility that Miriam drew from the literature. In the final analysis, it seems that people on both sides of the political spectrum cared very little about credibility when they went to the polls. So it seems to me that one issue we need to address is re-establishing the importance of credibility of ANY information. The issue is far larger than the Internet, and we can't look at the Internet—and the relatively sophisticated people who use it rather than other communications media—in a vacuum.

So, some questions I'd propose for our discussion are these: How do users' considerations of Internet credibility play out against their assessments of credibility in the larger information world? Are the issues the same or different? Is the Internet an even bigger problem, as both papers suggest, or might it provide an opportunity to revitalize ideas—especially young people's ideas--related to credibility throughout the information world? What do blogs and peer-review sites, recommender sites, and projects like Wikipedia, for example, say about users' concerns with credibility and their strategies for addressing it? These tools may be flawed, but I do think they represent users' attempts to deal with the "credibility" issue.

The second common theme is the sheer complexity of the issue, even when we confine it to the Internet and the Web—and even when we further delimit it to USERS rather than tools or institutions. Each author underscores this complexity repeatedly. Whether we look at Miriam's more content-oriented approach, which focuses on the individual elements and facets of credibility, or Mary Ann's more process-oriented approach, which focuses on the cognitive processes and strategies users bring to bear when assessing

credibility, it's clear that this complexity is a many-tentacled beast. The authors' bibliographies provide a touchstone for this complexity: one paper has over 70 citations and the other has over 30. (I'll leave it to you to figure out who's who.) Although both papers theoretically address the same general topic, they have only 6 citations in common—and 2 of these were given to us as participants in this symposium.

Again, some questions for discussion come to mind: Where should we start? What is the best way to get a handle on Internet credibility and users? Is there a best way? Should there be priorities in the issues regarding credibility that we address in our research, or should our lenses continue to focus on vastly different aspects of credibility and the user? And how do we bring our ideas into convergence, both to develop a comprehensive understanding of the situation and perhaps to improve it?

A third commonality is that both authors stress how little we know about how people assess credibility. Indeed, reading their reviews of the existing studies raised for me all manner of questions about the research into these issues: who were the subjects or participants in many of these studies? How were they selected? Were most of them fairly "savvy" users—the college students and academics who populate so much of the psychological and educational research literature? If so, what do we really know about this issue? What do studies of elite groups tell us about the everyday folks who wander into our public libraries and sit down in front of the Internet stations—and who don't rely on intermediaries to assist them?

The discussion questions that arise from this point are fairly easy to raise: how do we learn more about the full spectrum of users? Those of you who know my own work won't be surprised that I'm happy that both authors call for less experimental and more interpretive, "anthropological" research to develop a solid understanding of our constituencies. But can we do this credibly in an environment that calls for "scientific" research? Even though the Department of Education has modified its initial definition of scientific research to include any kind of "systematic" research, as researchers we must be aware that the methodology that's most likely to bring us the understanding we seek is still suspect in many quarters. Can we get it funded? Will decision makers pay attention to it or will it remain, as they say, "academic"?

The issue of learning more about our users leads easily to the next commonality our authors present. Both of them speak about models that are strongly theoretical but have little empirical evidence supporting them. Both mention Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model, which highlights the importance of users' levels of motivation and ability, and Walther and Burkell's iterative model, which proposes that credibility evaluation consists of three stages: looking at surface characteristics, looking at characteristics of the source and the message, and considering the user's purpose and contextual factors.

I find both these models intriguing—and the questions that arise from the authors' discussion of them relate directly to questions noted above: how do we gather evidence to support or refute the claims of these and other models—like Mary Ann's own four-

stage model, which she includes in her paper? How do we develop solid grounded theory to guide our research and our practice? Again, the way I've posed the question reveals my own bias toward interpretive, qualitative research for this task. But the same questions and concerns I raised in regard to user studies also relate to verifying models through this approach. Are there other ways, perhaps combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods, that will provide both stronger evidence and increased "credibility," if you will, for our own work?

Another commonality involves both authors' implicit assumption—and stated belief—that someone must teach people how to assess the credibility of Internet information. Mary Ann, whose work deals primarily with children in school, shares my own position that schools need to teach the concepts and processes we call "information literacy." And even though Miriam raises the question of whether she believes this is possible—and cites evidence that even knowledgeable people don't always apply the criteria we think they should apply—she suggests a range of educational strategies.

So the discussion question for the group is whether and how we can devise both formal and informal ways to help people become capable assessors of the credibility of Internet information. (And I think "informal" might be the most important avenue here.) First. Let's consider the "whether." For centuries, people have tended to judge books by their covers, despite proverbial advice to the contrary. And the world hasn't yet collapsed. Perhaps it's an inescapable human tendency to judge web sites by their presentation and design, to remain content with flawed information about what movie to see and to rely on our physicians and other authorities for more important information. Should the responsibility for evaluating the really important information in our lives fall to us as individuals? That question relates to a very serious policy issue. Perhaps the next groups of speakers will relieve us of this responsibility by providing all the answers we need. But if they won't let us off the hook, we have to consider the "how": how can we design, develop, and implement curricular and instructional strategies to address the issue of credibility assessment?

The final point I'd like to raise relates to the way each author chose to conclude her discussion of users and the skills they need to assess the credibility of Internet information. In some way, each author talks about the role of "motivation" in this process. Both mention Fritch's (2003) insight that "some information is not important enough to require careful evaluation" and suggest that credibility assessment is itself multifaceted rather than monolithic. Both authors in fact use very clever phrasing to highlight the issue at hand: Mary Ann addresses the question of when and how people flick their "evaluation on" switches, and Miriam talks about the "sliding scale" that people use to initiate credibility assessment.

This concept raises a point that I believe is absolutely crucial: Assessing the credibility of Internet information is inextricably tied to understanding how that information is USED. The only way we can address the issue at the heart of this symposium is by asking whether information is credible TO whom FOR what purpose in what CONTEXT and to what DEGREE. Assessing the credibility of Internet information will always rest

ultimately on the beliefs, perceptions, abilities, needs, and other characteristics of individual information users. Our models, our strategies, and our research questions must inevitably fall out of the paradigm of individual USE.

I can't imagine talking about the skills individual users need for evaluating information credibility without considering the variety of uses to which information can be put. Indeed, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, the national guidelines for the school library media profession, defines information literacy a little more broadly than we've defined it here: that is, as the ability to access, evaluate, and USE information from various sources, in various formats, and for various purposes. In the interest of full disclosure, I'll confess that my own research interest is how children use information for a specific use—learning. That's a very different use of information than, say, gathering information about buying a car. So I'm tempted to say that there simply are no questions for discussion about this issue! You've heard the truth: intended use is the cornerstone of credibility assessment. No questions allowed!

But I guess I'll have to do what was asked of me and raise one final question for our discussion. It's simply stated but crucial to our purpose here today: How can we tie our models, our strategies, and our research to the question of credibility assessment for the myriad uses to which people put the information they seek? How can we design, monitor, and construct theory, research, and practice to focus on the key issues related to all the information users whose lives we seek to improve?

Before I set you loose on answering all these questions—or any others you'd like to address—I'd like to commend the symposium organizers for beginning our discussions with attention to users. Users are where the symposium begins, and users are where all Internet use ends. Even if the next groups solve all the difficult problems inherent in credibility buttressed by better tools and fostered by more knowledgeable and committed institutions, skills required of individual users will always be at the heart of establishing and ensuring the credibility of Internet information.

Thank you.

Internet Credibility and the User: Discussion Starters

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1. How do users' considerations of Internet credibility play out against their assessments of credibility in the larger information world? Are the issues the same or different? Is the Internet an even bigger problem, as both papers suggest, or might it provide an opportunity to revitalize ideas—especially young people's ideas--related to credibility throughout the information world? What do blogs and projects like Wikipedia, for example, say about users' concerns with credibility and their strategies for addressing it?
2. Where should we start? What is the best way to get a handle on Internet credibility and users? Is there a best way? Should there be priorities in the issues regarding credibility that we address in our research, or should our lenses continue to focus on vastly different aspects of credibility and the user? And how do we bring our ideas into convergence, both to develop a comprehensive understanding of the situation and perhaps to improve it?
3. How do we learn more about the full spectrum of users? Can we use interpretive methods in an environment that calls for "scientific" research? Can we get such research funded? Will decision makers pay attention to it or will it remain, as they say, "academic"?
4. How can we gather evidence to support or refute the claims of credibility-assessment models? How do we develop solid grounded theory to guide our research and our practice? Can we get that research funded and accepted? Are there other ways, perhaps combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods, that will provide both stronger evidence and increased "credibility" for our own work?
5. How we can devise both formal and informal ways to empower people as capable assessors of the credibility of Internet information. Is it an inescapable human tendency to judge web sites by their presentation and design, to remain content with flawed information about what movie to see and to rely on our physicians and other authorities for more important information. Should the responsibility for evaluating the really important information in our lives fall to us as individuals? If so, how can we design, develop, and implement curricular and instructional strategies to address the issue of credibility assessment?
6. How can we tie our models, our strategies, and our research to the question of credibility assessment for the myriad uses to which people put the information they seek? How can we design, monitor, and construct theory, research, and practice to focus on the key issues related to all the information users whose lives we seek to improve through better ways to use information to solve problems, make decisions, and live happy and productive lives?

