

CAIS Paper: Getting the News: How news credibility is assessed

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Abstract:

Getting the News: How news credibility is assessed examines how young people determine the believability and credibility of their news sources in a multi-platform, transitional news environment. Using interviews and a framework of cognitive authority theory, this study will provide an analysis of how young people access and understand news.

Résumé:

Librarians have a role of finding and providing the public with trusted and credible information—in the past, journalists or news anchors have had a similar role, acting as gatekeepers in communicating news to the public. Citizens relied on these news professionals to tell them what they needed to know to be participants in a democratic discourse. With new processes of news distribution and consumption, citizens must now act as their own gatekeepers: choosing what news to consume, verifying news from anonymous and widely differing sources, and disseminating news to their social networks. Changes to traditional news reporting have altered where, how, when, and from whom people get their news—revolutionizing the industry but calling into question the reliability of news stories that are being broken faster and with less verification than ever before. Young people are particularly affected by this change as more of them are getting their news online, rather than from traditional news sources. *Getting the News* examines how new practices in the production, consumption, and distribution of news, have altered the way young citizens become informed and evaluate what news to believe.

News is being redefined by new technologies, new authorship, and a lack of controls and filters that previously assessed, validated, and verified news stories (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Metzger, et al, 2003; Metzger, 2007; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Robinson, 2007; Singer, 2003; Thorson, 2008). Professional journalists are no longer the primary sources of news: indeed, when asked in 2010 to name the journalist or newsperson they most admire, half of Americans could give no specific answer (Pew, 2010)—a notable shift from forty years prior when Walter Cronkite was considered to be the most trusted man in America. Not only are we unable to identify reporters, we are also believing them less; in 2012, Pew reported that the believability of news organizations had dropped from 71% in 2002 to 56% a decade later (2012a). Carroll Doherty (2005) refers to this dramatic drop in the believability of news organizations as a credibility crisis. This lack of believability leads to a loss of audience members, makes the impact of the news ineffective (a matter of great importance to the function of a democratic and informed citizenry) and represents a basic change in news production and consumption—a turn away from the journalist and news organization as the primary news source, gatekeeper, and agenda-setter.

A 2010 survey from Pew found that 92% of those surveyed use multiple sources to get their news rather than a single source as had previous generations. Similarly, when Nielsen ranked the most popular online news sources, six of the top twenty sites were news aggregators, not news organizations (Pew, 2010). In 2010, Pew reported that 68% of people aged 18-29 get news from one of these aggregators and 38% of them get their news from social media—making them the population most affected by these changes. And almost half of the online traffic to news sites comes from either Google or Facebook, rather than direct traffic to news organizations (Pew, 2010). Furthermore, these statistics do not take into account the rise in citizen journalism and blogs as news sources. We no longer rely on an individual news organization or journalist to inform us, we seek multiple sources (both professional and amateur) and decide what to believe rather than being told “that’s the way it is”.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011) refer to this evolution in gatekeeping as the difference between “trust me” and “show me” journalism. The former describes the Cronkite era of being told news, where the cognitive authority was obvious and where we expended little mental energy to determine what news to trust, and who to believe. The latter describes the current news environment where we act as our own editors, gatekeepers, and news disseminators. In “show me” journalism, the citizen takes a greater responsibility for selecting what news to consume, determining what news is believable, and curating the news on their social networks. Individuals are relying less on cognitive authorities, and taking on the role of determining credibility on their own. The source, author or institution, are less important than the aspects of credibility ascribed by the individual. However, citizens do not have the same training as professional journalists in investigating, verifying, and vetting news stories. Even more problematically, we often believe misinformation and disbelieve facts (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Edelman, 2001; Fox, 1983; Mintz, 2002). With an increasing number of young people getting their news from online sources (Pew 2011; Pew 2012; Salem & Alshaer, 2013)—an arena that is well known for its mis- and dis- information—it is crucial that researchers and news organizations have a better idea of how young people are making decisions about what news to read and what news to believe.

There are a number of studies that have been undertaken in a variety of different disciplines about evaluating the credibility, believability, and quality of information, search results, health instruction, and news. These studies use a variety of methods and analysis to develop theoretical frameworks to assess credibility (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007). In LIS, the majority of these studies base themselves in Wilson’s cognitive authority framework (1983), assuming that the information seekers are assessing credibility based on author and source (Fritch & Cromwell, 2000; Fritch & Cromwell, 2002). But this form of credibility assessment cannot be applied to contemporary news consumers, who get their news from a variety of both known and unknown sources. What then, are the criteria that make news credible? What makes news believable? How do people decide what news to believe?

Getting the News: How news credibility is assessed seeks to answer these questions through interviews with young people and uses a qualitative methodology to establish that there are common habits young people use to determine if they believe a news story or source. This study explores 21 interviews undertaken with young people between the ages of 18-24 residing in a south-western Ontario city. As education has been found to affect news choices—especially for proponents of selective exposure theories, seven of the interviewees were either enrolled in or have completed an undergraduate degree at a post-secondary university, seven of the interviewees were either enrolled in or have completed a diploma program at a post-secondary college, and seven of the interviewees have never attended a post-secondary institution. This paper provides a work-in-progress analysis of these interviews and focuses on developing an understanding of how young people in Canada understand and judge the credibility of contemporary news. A democratic society relies on informed citizens and it is vitally important that news organizations and news researchers understand how digital natives are being informed.

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