

Beyond Convergence: User Evaluations of Identical Syndicated News Content Across Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how online content consumers evaluate the credibility of the media they read on the Internet. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to explore whether individuals evaluate identical content differently based upon the media type that displays the news. Survey results indicate that individuals rated news appearing on blogs as less credible than identical news articles syndicated on mainstream news Web sites. Additionally, when interviewed students claimed to be able to easily distinguish between blogs and traditional news content, but struggled to provide specific criteria to make distinctions. Taken together these results suggest a mismatch between what individuals say is credible, and how they actually make assessments.

Keywords

Blogs, Blog Readers, Convergence, Credibility, Online News, Syndication

1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the scholarly work regarding blogs (or weblogs) focuses on the production side of the medium [2, 20]. Previous research in this area has investigated ways to define blogs [3, 23] and developed categorization systems [11, 16]. More recently, the application of social network analysis to map the blogosphere has created new ways in which to understand the community aspects of blogging [7, 8]. However, focusing on the production aspects of blogs and blogging ignores a key component in the construction of the medium: blog readers.

In their work on the production of blogs, Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht [20] note that blogging is as much about reading as it is about writing, with user choices driving the formation of the blogosphere. And yet, despite this call for further enquiry, few studies focus on the reader side of the blogosphere [9]. A 2006 Pew Internet and American Life report on blogging stated that approximately 12 million American adults keep a blog, and approximately 57 million read blogs [18], making it clear that there is a very large readership comprised of people who do not keep blogs themselves, and it is that readership that is often overlooked in blog research. Therefore, while there is insight into the function of blogs in terms of creation [10], little is known about why individuals choose one blog over another, or blogs over other online offerings. This study seeks to illuminate blogging from the reader's point of view, by asking blog readers about their perceptions of online media and their online blog-

reading behavior, and by giving them the opportunity to assess the credibility of the Web sites they view, in order to better understand how they allocate their media attention.

1.2 Credibility

One element that is used in determining content choices of individuals online is credibility [4]. Models developed to explain how users assess the credibility of the information they find online suggest that an important component of credibility perception is based on site interface attributes such as visual presentation, choice of design elements, and information organization [7, 27]. Additionally, Fogg [6] notes that though site elements are the primary aspect of credibility evaluation, judgments are also influenced by a variety of contextual factors such as culture, experience, skill level and expectations. Other research suggests that credibility is assessed prior to seeing a site, with users putting their trust in the results provided by search engines [21, 9]. Thus studies on media credibility need to consider both the presentation of content, as well as the context in which the display takes place.

1.3 Convergence

According to Johnson and Kaye [14], media credibility research often assumes that the Internet is a 'single entity,' rather than recognizing differing forms of online media. This suggests that blogs as a media category is a stable one, which is predicated on the belief that all blogs share in common a set of similar physical characteristics [15]. Additionally, this assumes that blog readers both have a conceptualization of blogs as being a distinct form of media, and that they can tell the difference between blogs and other forms of online media.

However, the difficulty in differentiating blogs has grown recently as media organizations and platforms increasingly overlap in content offerings. In today's media landscape, many offline news and information outlets, both in broadcast and print, have developed their online presence to mix traditional reporting and blogs written by reporters, moving toward what Jenkins [12] refers to as a "convergence culture." Given that an important element of online credibility assessment and trust is reliance on brands [9], this kind of convergence may lend blogs that are situated on traditional news sites, such as cnn.com or nytimes.com the authority users may have traditionally conferred upon the brand name of the news outlet. It also makes defining blogs as a standalone media increasingly difficult, as blog content is mingled with traditional reporting on the same Web sites, and features that were once the domain of blogging (such as the ability for readers to comment on each post), and traditional media (writing done by professional journalists), are converging as well.

1.3 Convergence to Syndication

While the transfer of content across media has been grouped under the construct of convergence, a subset of this trend, where information is reproduced and not remixed, can be more specifically viewed as a form of syndication. Syndication involves the reuse or integration of material across a number of publishing outlets, such that the original content is not altered, but is merely reproduced and displayed through multiple channels [28].¹ This is similar to the way that a cartoon or horoscope might appear in multiple newspapers, or how episodes of long-running sitcoms are rebroadcast on multiple television stations.

Internet content is ideal for syndication because it represents an “information good” and the consumption of it in one context does not limit use in another context [28]. Syndication of blog content by mainstream media represents a potential revenue stream for bloggers and can increase their reach to audiences [26]. For media organizations syndication represents an expansion of content offerings without the need to dedicate internal resources. Additionally, mainstream media such as newspapers may be more receptive to models of content syndication compared to other interaction with blogs as it is a business model they are familiar with and have previously used [22].

Thus, whereas convergence has been characterized largely as a process of active creation [12], syndication is a process of duplication in a new setting. This process of syndication raises questions about whether conceptions of news content shift depending on the online context in which it is viewed. This study begins to address this issue by asking a single research question: *Does the syndication of blogs on newspaper sites result in different assessments of credibility compared to the original blog display?*

2. STUDY DESIGN

The study integrated both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. In terms of qualitative work, we conducted semi-structured interviews [17] asking participants about their perceptions and use of blogs. We conducted 27 interviews, ranging from 17 to 40 minutes (mean= 27). Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted by both researchers and regular meetings were held to discuss adjustments to the interview protocol, and ensure consistency in data collection. Respondents were asked questions related to 1) How they define a blog, 2) What they see as the goal of blogs, 3) How they recognize blogs, and 4) Their overall online activities. Attention was paid to elicit individual perceptions and experiences, and particular efforts were made to probe when respondents provided ambiguous responses.

The second part of the study consisted of an online survey. Individuals were told they would be answering questions related to their “Internet Behaviors and Opinions” and were given a link which directed them to a survey hosted online via the software Qualtrics. The survey was designed to test the effect of convergence between the display of blog posts and the display of news articles. At the outset of the survey individuals were shown

four Web sites and asked to view the display and evaluate the credibility of the site. The remainder of the survey asked respondents specific questions about Internet use including the duration of time spent engaged in various online activities. A total of 191 individuals began the survey, with nine incomplete submissions, resulting in 182 complete responses.

2.1 Participants

Participants were drawn from the undergraduate population at a midsized, private, Midwestern, university. Each was enrolled in an introductory class in the Communications Studies department, and participated in the study in order to partially fulfill a class requirement. Individuals were eligible to participate if they had viewed at least one blog in the last month. By using a pool of participants enrolled at a single university, drawn from classes of similar level and major, and who were active blog readers, we created a biased sample. Our intent was to tilt the results toward positive conceptualizations of blogs and homogeneity of experience making it more difficult to find variability in assessments and providing a more conservative test of our research question.

2.2 Web Site Selection

We used existing Web sites in order to improve the ecological validity of the analysis. The authors identified four news outlets (washingtonpost.com, nytimes.com, businessweek.com, and msnbc.com) that syndicated content from blog sites (listed respectively: techcrunch.com, venturebeat.com, gigaom.com, and motleyfool.com). Next, the name of the blog site was entered into the search engine of the news outlet’s Web site in order to identify articles that were syndicated from the blog and appeared on both sites. We then selected the most recent article that we identified as representative of “hard news” in order to reduce the role of bias due to message source. These articles were then examined by six independent reviewers who unanimously rated them as hard news articles and not opinion pieces.

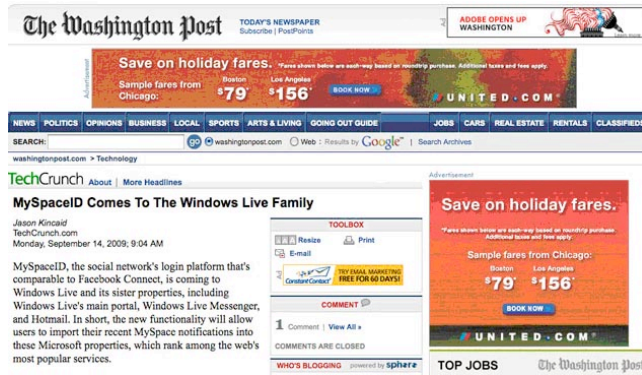
We saved the images of each Web site, capturing the full page along with any comments that may have appeared at the bottom (See Figures 1 & 2). The identification of the articles and the image collection was conducted on the same day to ensure continuity of display.

Figure 1: Display for Web site 1 of blog condition on the survey (participants saw full image)



¹ The type of syndication described here is different than the type of syndication referenced in the RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feature commonly integrated into Web sites. RSS represents a form of syndication from the content provider directly to the consumer and operates in a manner more analogous to a subscription.

Figure 2: Display for Web site 1 of mainstream media condition on the survey



2.3 Measurement

Participants were first randomly assigned to either the blog or mainstream media type condition. Because previous research has shown that the perceived source of a displayed message can affect assessments of credibility [24], we randomly assigned participants to one of four message source conditions and asked them to focus on the respective source when answering the subsequent questions: message, individual, organization, and overall site. Lastly, each participant was shown the four Web sites corresponding to media condition to which they were assigned.

The dependent variable of interest in our quantitative analysis was user evaluations of the credibility of each Web site viewed. Credibility was measured using a single composite result derived from a four-item scale asking individuals to evaluate on a 7-point Likert scale the extent to which the display was Trustworthy, Believable, Accurate, and Biased (reverse-coded). This measure was drawn from previous five-item scales of media and news credibility that identify credibility as a multi-faceted construct [8, 13, 20, 5]; however, we chose to omit the element of comprehensiveness used in previous scales in order to focus attention on the content and not the physical layout of each site. Reliability testing of the scale provided a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

The ordering of the display of the Web sites, as well as the ordering of the credibility scale questions was randomly displayed for each participant.

A factorial ANCOVA was conducted to compare the effect of media type, message source, and Web site on article credibility resulting in a 2 x 4 x 4 design with 32 conditions (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Given previous research demonstrating that experience and exposure are related to media credibility assessments [6], three covariates were included to control for the variance in credibility perceptions caused by differences in Internet and blog exposure: Weekly hours on the Internet, weekly hours reading blogs, number of blogs currently reading.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by Condition

(Averages Across Four Web Sites)				
Blog v. Mainstream Media	Message Source	Mean Credibility Score	SD	N
Blog Condition	Message	4.5464	1.18997	31
	Individual	4.2009	1.03399	14
	Organization	4.9355	1.16882	28
	Site	4.6394	1.18947	26
Mainstream Media Condition	Message	4.9522	1.16563	17
	Individual	4.9414	1.15362	16
	Organization	4.9958	1.13481	30
	Site	4.9625	1.0525	20
Totals		4.7153	1.16845	182

3. RESULTS

3.1 Quantitative Results

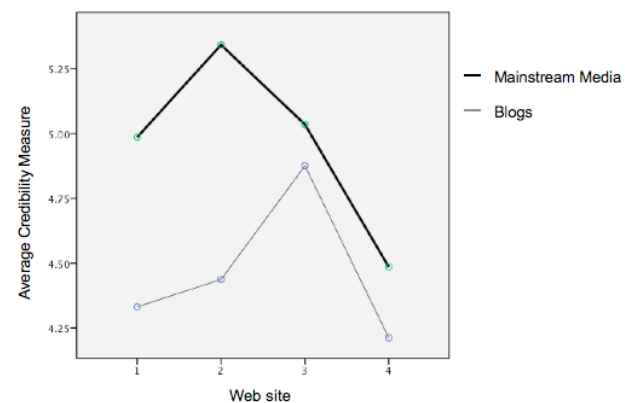
Blog v. Mainstream Media: Analysis revealed a significant main effect of media type on article credibility at the $p < .05$ level for the two conditions [$F(1, 727)$, $p = 0.000$]. Among our sample respondents rated the mainstream media sites as more credible than the blog sites, and this difference held regardless of one's level of Internet or blog exposure.

Message Source: There was no significant main effect for the difference in credibility across message source conditions [$F(3, 727)$, $p = 0.328$]. Asking respondents to focus on the message, individual source, organizational source, or site when making assessments did not produce significant differences in credibility evaluations.

Different Web sites: Results found a significant main effect for the different web sites used across the four conditions [$F(3, 727)$, $p = 0.000$]. This indicates that individuals rated the credibility of the respective articles differently regardless of whether the material was in a mainstream media or blog context.

Additionally, there was a significant interaction effect between the media type and Web site displayed [$F(3, 727)$, $p = 0.008$]. A plot of the means for Web site by media type revealed that the main effect held across the different sites (see Figure 3). However, it reveals that in the mainstream media condition Web site 2 (nytimes.com) was rated as the most credible, yet in the Blog condition Web site 3 (gigaom.com) was the most credible. A post-hoc pairwise comparison was conducted using the Bonferroni method and revealed significant differences between Web site 2 (nytimes.com/green.venturebeat.com) and Web site 4 (msnbc.com/motleyfool.com) = 0.000) as well as between Web site 3 (businessweek.com/gigom.com). Web site 4 was listed as the least credible in both media conditions.

Figure 3: Interaction effect of media type and Web site displayed



3.2 Qualitative Results

3.2.1 Confidence in Identifying Blogs

During their interviews, participants were asked a number of questions designed to uncover their perceptions of what a blog is, and whether or not blogs share characteristics with other online media, such as news reporting. The goal was to understand the process through which individuals were assigning credibility to the sites they viewed in the survey. Respondents made it clear that

they believed that it should be easy to distinguish between traditional news reporting and blogging while they were reading content online.

I guess, I think a regular article should be as unbiased as possible and something very professional. I think that, like, there's a clear-cut difference in professional articles as opposed to personal blogs that you may see. - *Respondent 4*

[Blogs] seem to be an opportunity to be even more opinionated than like an editorial would be. So the person can say exactly what they want and typically, they're not affiliated with anything. They don't have any limitations by say like some media organization I guess. - *Respondent 25*

Yeah, they're [blogs] not, I guess as reliable as far as information. It's more just opinion-based. I mean, it's - it's a blog. It's more of like a diary or a journal. So you can't take what you read too seriously, I guess. And you can't take it as fact - *Respondent 24*

Yet despite the confidence expressed in identifying blogs and understanding differences between blog content and other content they read online, respondents provided few, if any, elements that were either consistent among blogs or differentiated blogs from other media online:

A lot of blogs end with blogspot or some blog website and there's often like a little introduction of the person who writes that blog, and his name, and some of his personal information like what he wants the blog to be like, so I don't know, it's just pretty - you can tell fairly easily if it's a blog or other website. - *Respondent 8*

When probed by the interviewers for more specifics as to how they make distinctions among Internet content, many respondent admitted that their criteria was far from foolproof:

It sounds bad, but I guess just I judge by the way the blog looks. It's, like, if it looks more like a real website that's been, you know, where the image's been, I guess, to be tailored to look a bit nicer. I know that's probably a bad way to judge it. But I mean, I guess you can sort of tell based on that if it is actual or if it's just, like, something someone does at home that looks less nice. I don't know. - *Respondent 23*

Thus respondents' comments produced a paradox in which it seemed clear to them that blogs were a distinct category of media, yet they were unable to clearly articulate a difference between blogs and other forms of online media.

3.2.2 Importance of Editorial Control

The one consistent element mentioned differentiating blogs and other news sites was content, with the difference between the two being some form of editorial control. The idea of the news being the product of a formal process with an element of accountability was central to perceptions of credibility:

[Blogs are] just to inform people about your ideas. One thing that sets it apart from, like, I think it's a good contrast between, like, blogs and, like the news media, per se. Because - [interruption] - news media or something that's, ya (sic) know, been written by some professional writers who edited it. It's been scrutinized. It's been censored. It's been screened. And then it finally gets to the public. And - so it's this official sort of information. But when you have a blog - [interruption] - that's just from an anonymous figure in the public. So it just gives you a different perspective on things - *Respondent 26*

I feel like it's - it [journalism] has to pass through an editor and it has to be certified by someone and it has to be true, like in the same way that - I mean, I guess it's the equivalent of me reading something on Yahoo sports versus reading something on some individual's blog. I trust something that's in print or on - tied with some organization or something like that more so than just an individual. - *Respondent 13*

I would call something from a newspaper site, for the most part, more credible because it's usually an accredited journalist writing the article, whereas a blog, anyone can just really say whatever they want, and the evidence is really not to substantiate usually. So I kinda take that with a grain of salt, whereas I would put more value on an article from New York Times. - *Respondent 3*

Individuals looked for signals that content had gone through some type of editorial process or was produced by an accredited individual. Overwhelmingly, this signal came in the form of the brand or organization responsible for displaying the content. The prevailing logic was that anything appearing on the Web sites of mainstream organizations was subject to the same level of scrutiny and was the product of an editorial process.

DISCUSSION

The main effect in the survey results suggests that even when identical message content is displayed, readers will rate that content as more credible if they view it on a newspaper Web site than if they view it on a blog. One implication of this is that participants may make credibility assessments based largely on the site presenting the information, and not the content displayed. This echoes previous work done by Hargittai et al. [9], which found that users assign online credibility to brand names that they recognize and are comfortable with. However, the main effect for Web site type, and the observed interaction with media type reveal a more nuanced picture of online credibility assessments. This, coupled with the finding that the inclusion of covariates related to online experience did not eliminate the effect, suggests that credibility may need to be evaluated at a more granular level and that exposure to online content types may be too broad a distinction for meaningful insights.

When juxtaposed with the survey results, the qualitative findings present an interesting mismatch. When asked about how they assess content credibility in interviews, participants uniformly stated that there was a difference between blog writing and journalism, and they were confident that they would know the

difference when they saw it. However, they found it difficult to articulate that difference beyond the assumption that journalism involved an editorial process. Furthermore, there was the consistent belief that online mainstream news sites are more credible than blogs. Yet despite these proclamations, when presented with blog content syndicated through news sites, individuals did not discount the credibility of the presented material to match those of the blogs that were viewed.

What emerges is a picture of readers who are not as savvy as they believe themselves to be with regard to assessing what they read online. If they believe they are reading a blog, they assess content as less credible than if they believe they are reading a newspaper, despite their protestations that their credibility assessment is based on the actual content, and not how it is presented to them. One implication of these findings is that what matters most in online content production is the host of the content at the point of consumption, not the actual content. As Internet content moves past convergence into a syndication model and syndicated blog content becomes more common on sites that are affiliated with more traditional, offline, media, it acquires credibility simply by virtue of where it is being presented. This suggests a type of "halo effect" in which the credibility of the mainstream site is transferred to the blog content through the syndication process. It also may mean that if credibility is a goal of organizations, traditional models of news production, and the editorial process, are less important in online content presentation. Rather, the assumption of editorial scrutiny is conferred through publication on the site. Simply put, content does not need go through the editorial process to be rated as credible, as long as it is displayed on a news site's home page.

CONCLUSION

In examining the ways in which readers assess the credibility of the content they read online, we must consider how they reach those assessments and the importance context plays when readers are deciding what content to trust. This paper presents a mixed-methods study that indicates that readers of online content may describe their content assessment practices one way, but when presented with a site to assess, decide on the credibility using a different set of criteria. Rather than using content as the basis of their decision-making process, users relied on known signals of journalistic professionalism, provided in the form of the media organization presenting the content. Thus our analysis suggests that judgments of online content can be easily altered by changing the specific media type or site through which they are displayed. Further investigation is needed to examine whether these findings will hold across different contexts and forms of online syndication.

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