

Credibility of Online Newspapers

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Abstract

This research examined the credibility of online newspapers. There were strong relationships between credibility and respondents' experiences with the Internet, online newspapers, and familiarity with printed newspapers. Timeliness, depth, reputation, and accuracy of online newspapers appeared to be important to respondents. The findings suggest that respondents perceived the content of online newspapers to be the same as printed newspapers. Online newspapers' credibility was evaluated as being high.

Credibility of Online Newspapers

Introduction

Internet technology has made communication much easier and less expensive. It has attracted many people and has penetrated into people's daily lives. The mass media also have accepted the Internet. Almost all forms of traditional media, such as radio, television, and newspapers have extended their work into this new field. The first online newspaper to present its content electronically was the *Chicago Tribune* in 1992 (Deuze, 1999). Since 1992, online media have dramatically evolved. The Internet and the World Wide Web have both significantly influenced modern journalism. Many television, radio broadcasting stations, and newspapers operate their sites using Internet technology.

Online media distinguish themselves from traditional media. Online media allows readers to enjoy browsing their content and offer not only texts but also digital images. Online media can present the most recent information and links to related news articles from local to international topics. The interactive features of the Internet seemingly imply that online media have more advantages than traditional media forms. People's expectations for new types of journalism are driving them online. Some have begun seeing the Internet as an alternative to traditional media.

It is still uncertain if online media meet people's expectations, however many people do rely on it for news. Research has found that online audiences go to news web sites "to get information that is unavailable elsewhere, for convenience, and the ability to search for news on a particular topic" (Pew Research Center [PRC], 1998). People must place some reliance on online journalism if they are using it. Online audiences are surely

increasing despite of the fact that there is a serious concern about misinformation on the Internet. An evaluation of Internet sites that presented health information showed a drop in reliability between 1996 and 1997 (Spang & Baker, 2000). If reliability is an issue, what are the reasons for increased dependency on online media? How do readers evaluate the content of online media? This research was conducted to examine the credibility of online media by focusing on online newspapers. It will provide a better understanding of why people read online media and how people perceive the information. Finally, it will help develop and improve future journalism on the World Wide Web.

Literature Review

Usage of the Internet

The Internet allows people to do a variety of things. People use email or chat to keep in touch with people who are far away and with people whom they meet everyday. Some people use games on the Web to have fun or to kill time. Others look for information through search engines. People also go to online media to get weather reports, entertainment news, local or international news, business information, and political news.

There are two dimensions of usage of the Internet. The Internet can be used as mediated interpersonal technologies, which are for social bonding, relationship maintenance, problem solving, and persuasion. The Internet can also be used as mass communication, which is for informational and leisure purposes (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). One study suggests that Internet users are classified along with these two categories, interpersonal utility and information seeking (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Motivations of using the Internet for the former are isolation, dislocation, long-distance social network, lack of satisfaction of current situation, and sense of belonging (Bakardjieva & Smith, 2001). Those for the latter are surveillance, economic security, and self-education (Mings, 1997; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001).

People go to the Internet increasingly as a source of information. Nearly half of all Internet users go to the Internet at least once every week to get information (Pew Research Center [PRC], 1999). Information seeking is widely accepted as a usage of the Internet in the previous studies (Mings, 1997; Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000; Ferguson & Perse; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). To acquire information is a principal reason why people go online.

Online media attract the audience for several reasons: interactivity, personalization of news, and convergence (Deuze, 1999). For example, interactivity means that people instantly send feedback to the writer by email. It could possibly lead to a dynamic shift in power control of mass media. The dominant paradigm in traditional communication, one sender to many receivers, can be changed on the Internet to many senders to many receivers (Li, 1998). An audience can possibly give further or detailed information by interacting with the newsroom. This is able to happen since journalists increasingly rely on online information for newsgathering (Garrison, 2001). Online media users commonly prefer the personalization of news. It allows people to customize news in terms of their interest. They can read only what they want to know when they have time. Convergence is one of the great features of the Internet, hyperlinks. Online media offers links to the related topics, history of an incident, background stories, and visual images.

The Pew Research Center (1999) found that Internet users are more interested in news than non-users. Furthermore, those who seek information for the printed newspapers also look for news online. Mings (1997) found that those who gain gratification from traditional newspapers also seek the same gratification from online newspapers. She also suggested that people are more likely to use online newspapers when they look for specific topics, such as business. The online audience perceives online newspapers as more useful for getting particular information than scanning a printed paper.

Misinformation on the Internet

The Internet's credibility is a major concern since information seeking is one of the main purposes of using the Internet. Online users have easy access to abundant sources but also run the risk of getting false information. Apparently, there is less control and gatekeeping on the web than for print publications. Neither authoritarian governments nor institutions screen can all the information on the Internet due to its nature. Nearly anyone could publish on the Internet. It needs to be considered that thousands of individuals have the opportunity to publish in even highly prestige newspapers' sites, such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* online (Gilster, 1997, p. 89). However, less critical and uninformed people are more likely to accept an untruth as a truth (Hernon, 1995). Falsity on the web is seldom revealed because there is too much information. The more information is put on the Internet, the chance of discovering misinformation decreases. In addition to that, most people neither have time to verify its accuracy nor go back to the same site because the browser may fail to find it again (Calvert, 2001). Individual education is the most plausible way to avoid getting

inaccurate information. Studies suggest the necessity of new criteria for the online media literacy (Floridi, 1996; Levi, 2000).

Credibility of the Internet

Despite the fact that the findings show the existence of misinformation on the web, other researchers found that the online media has believability as high as the traditional media in certain circumstances. Internet users judged online political information sources as more credible than traditional media counterparts (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). More experienced users trust more the content of the online media (Flanagin et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2000; Schweiger, 2000). There are no significant findings that people rate the Internet less credible than television and radio. Newspapers are rated the most credible (Flanagin et al., 2000; Schweiger, 2000). According to the Pew Research Center (1998), “Internet audiences find the websites of various news organizations no more or less accurate than the information found in those organizations’ traditional news outlets.”

These findings indicate that people regard the Internet as being credible even though they should think of it as less credible. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) gave an explanation for this gap, “respondents may judge credibility on the basis of content rather than medium.” Existent studies only compared credibility of the Internet to that of the traditional counterparts. Schweiger (2000) suggests, “Future studies on credibility should not only examine the credibility of the web as a whole, but also its single subsystems.” Thus, this research attempts to investigate the credibility of online news media by examining online newspapers.

The gap is a considerable issue for the betterment of the online media. Why do people perceive online media as credible (specifically online newspapers) when there is still anxiety over the accuracy of the Internet? This is the main purpose of this research project.

Study Design

This study examines how college students evaluate credibility of the online newspapers. Therefore, the research question is:

RQ: How do students perceive the credibility of online newspapers?

Many studies that examine the credibility of the Internet found that an individual's experience with the Internet is mutually related to the perception of the Internet's credibility; more experienced people assess the Internet as being more credible (Flanagin et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2000; Schweiger, 2000). In addition to that, online users are more interested in the news than non-users (PRC, 1998). Therefore, my hypothesis is that:

H1: Online newspaper credibility will be correlated with an individual's experience with the Internet.

Former researchers who measured the credibility of the traditional media found that usage of the media and its believability are somehow interrelated to each other (Carter & Greenberg, 1965; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987); people who spend more time reading newspapers are more satisfied with them (Burgoon, M., Burgoon, J. K., & Wilkinson,

1981). Thus, my second Hypothesis comes from the assumption that the media's credibility has a relationship to an individual's use of the media:

H2: Online newspaper credibility will be correlated with an individual's use of online newspapers.

Previous research found that there are no significant differences between the contents of the traditional newspapers and the online newspapers (PRC, 1998; Singer, 2001). Online newspapers publish the same articles without any changes from the printed form. Thus, people may assume that the online newspapers are the same as the traditional newspapers. Previous researchers have a consistent finding that newspapers are rated the most credible when compared to other media (Flanagin et al., 2000; Schweiger, 2000). If people more trust newspapers and see no difference between print and online forms of news, people may evaluate the credibility of online newspapers as highly as traditional newspapers. Therefore, familiarity with the media organizations is taken into consideration. My third hypothesis is:

H3: Online newspaper credibility will be correlated with an individual's familiarity with the printed form of the online newspaper.

Factors of Online Newspaper Credibility

Factors of the media credibility have been studied by many researchers in the past half a century. Earlier researchers agreed that credibility is a multi-dimensional concept (Meyer, 1974). Hovland and Weiss (1951) discovered two dimensions of source credibility: 'trustworthiness' and 'expertness.' Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1969) examined 83 scales to find out what factors should be used to measure credibility. They

reduced those items to 35 scales and categorized them into three dimensions: ‘safety,’ ‘qualification,’ and ‘dynamism.’ Safety is the same dimension as trustworthiness, and qualification is the same as expertness. Jacobson (1969) put trustworthiness and expertness together and labeled them as ‘authenticity,’ and used other dimensions, which are ‘objectivity,’ ‘dynamism,’ and ‘respite.’ Shaw (1973) found that ‘impartiality,’ ‘trustworthiness,’ and ‘completeness’ are influential factors of media credibility. Singletary (1976) tested six factors: ‘knowledgeability,’ ‘attraction,’ ‘trustworthiness,’ ‘articulation,’ ‘hostility,’ and ‘stability,’ and found ‘knowledgeability’ the most accounted for among them. The findings of these earlier studies are consistent. Accordingly, ‘expertness,’ ‘trustworthiness,’ ‘objectivity,’ and ‘dynamism’ are reasonable factors to be labeled and adopted in this research project.

Meyer (1988) analyzed credibility factors based on Gaziano and McGrath’s (1986) study, and came up with five items: ‘fair,’ ‘unbiased,’ ‘tells the whole story,’ ‘accurate,’ and ‘can be trusted.’ Meyer’s five dimensions seemed to be the most appropriate to measure credibility and have been adopted by most recent researchers (Slattery & Tiedge, 1992; Johnson et al., 1998, 2000; Mayo & Leshner, 2000; Flanagin et al., 2000).

In this research, a total of fourteen factors were selected to measure online newspaper credibility. ‘Expertness,’ ‘objectivity,’ ‘dynamism,’ and Meyer’s five items: ‘fairness,’ ‘no level of bias,’ ‘completeness,’ ‘accuracy,’ and ‘trustworthiness’ are pulled out from the previous studies on the traditional media. ‘Dynamism’ consists of ‘timeliness’ and ‘depth’ in this case. These two items will be one of the main factors for online newspapers’ credibility since they are major features of the Internet. The online newspapers allow readers to get newer and further information than the traditional

newspapers. How fast and deeply the media delivers news must be key points. Two more items are drawn from past findings. Those are ‘newsworthiness,’ and ‘reputation.’ ‘Newsworthiness’ is taken into consideration because people tend to go online to fulfill their personal interests (Mings, 1997). ‘Reputation’ is separated from expertness because people may positively judge online newspapers only because printed versions of the same newspapers are highly reputable.

Other three factors are employed due to the nature of the online media. Sunder (1998) found that poorly sourced news stories online negatively affect reader’s perceptions. Therefore, ‘source reliability’ will be one component of credibility. ‘Interactivity’ is one of the main features of the online media. It allows senders and receivers to have mutual communication, and will possibly change the culture of journalism (Deuze, 1999). ‘Editorial process’ is also included. Most online articles are the exact same stories as those in print (Singer, 2001), but some online newspapers give readers a chance to add information to the web (Gilster, 1997; Massey & Levy, 1999). If people think the editorial process online is the same as that of print, online newspapers’ credibility will be as high as traditional newspapers. In this study, online newspaper credibility is measured by the following factors: ‘reputation,’ ‘expertness,’ ‘timeliness,’ ‘completeness,’ ‘fairness,’ ‘accuracy,’ ‘source reliability,’ ‘editorial process,’ ‘depth,’ ‘objectivity,’ ‘trustworthiness,’ ‘interactivity,’ ‘newsworthiness,’ and ‘no level of bias.’

Method

Measures

Online newspaper credibility is a dependent variable. Credibility was measured by fourteen factors that were presented above. Respondents were asked if they agreed that the fourteen items represent online newspapers' characteristics. They were required to rate each factor by "strongly agree," "agree," "neither," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." (See appendix A) Respondents' perceptions of online newspapers appeared through examination of each factor.

The independent variables are the following: 1) an individual's experience with the Internet, 2) an individual's usage of online newspapers, 3) frequency of the online newspaper use and 4) an individual's familiarity with the printed form of the online newspaper. Respondents were asked if they use the Internet and if they read any online newspapers. They were also asked for frequency of the Internet use and online newspapers use, and for familiarity with the printed newspapers.

Sampling

Researchers found that the dominant users of the Internet were the well educated (PRC, 1998). The U.S. Department of Commerce released the statistics of Internet usage in 2000. According to the statistics, 74.5 % of the users had a bachelor's degree or more. 56.8% of those between the ages of 18 and 24 use the Internet. This is relatively higher than other age groups and the national average (2000, p.41). There is also a finding that younger people tend to view the Internet as more credible (Johnson et al., 2000).

This study was limited to undergraduate students of Ohio University. Undergraduate students are classified as an age group of 18 to 24 within higher education. This age group is an appropriate sampling population (56.8% of those between the ages of 18 and 24 use the Internet) and the main purpose of this research is to seek reasons why people think of online newspapers as being credible. If most respondents are inexperienced with the Internet, it might be difficult to obtain what influences people's attitudes about online newspapers' credibility.

Procedure

A survey was employed to collect the data. One undergraduate telecommunication class, which had wide cross-section of students, was selected. Questionnaires were distributed in the beginning of the class. The questionnaires posed close-ended questions. The respondents were only informed that the survey was about online newspapers, but nothing else. It took about five minutes for them to fill out the questionnaires. Twenty responses were collected from the undergraduate class.

Analysis

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used for testing H1, H2, and H3. Each independent variable (an individual's experience of the Internet, an individual's usage of online newspapers, and the familiarity with the printed form) and each dependent variable (factors of the credibility: reputation, expertness, timeliness, completeness, fairness, accuracy, source reliability, editorial process, depth, objectivity,

trustworthiness, interactivity, newsworthiness, and no level of bias) were computed to see if any relationships existed between the two of them.

In addition to that, each mean of the dependent variables was calculated to see which factors respondents rated higher than others. What percentage of respondents strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree on each factor were also calculated to see the dispersion more clearly. This additional analysis gave us some ideas how respondents perceive online newspaper credibility and for what reasons.

Results

Pertaining to H1, each correlation of the credibility factors and frequency of the Internet usage were calculated. Each factor was rated 1= “strongly agree” to 5= “strongly disagree.” The number of hours spend on the Internet indicates the frequency of Internet usage. Table 1 shows that there are strong negative correlations between the frequency of Internet usage and timeliness ($r=-0.529$, $p<0.05$), completeness ($r=-0.529$, $p<0.05$), and newsworthiness ($r=-0.597$, $p<0.01$). These negative correlations indicate positive relationships in this case since each factor was numbered 1= “strongly agree” to 5= “strongly disagree.” For example, 1 indicated the highest timeliness and 5 indicated the lowest timeliness of online newspapers. When an individual’s hours spent on the Internet increased, the credibility factors showed a lower score. In other words, the more time respondents spent online, the more positive attitudes they had toward online newspapers’ credibility, especially in timeliness, completeness, and newsworthiness.

Table 1
Correlations

Factors		Frequency of the Internet Use	Use of Online Newspapers	Frequency of Online Newspaper Use	Familiarity with the Printed Newspapers
Reputation	Correlation	-.116	.229	-.012	-.311
	Sig.	.627	.331	.961	.183
Expertness		-.092	.215	-.055	-.271
		.698	.363	.817	.248
Timeliness		-.529*	.594**	.571**	-.333
		.017	.006	.009	.152
Completeness		-.507*	.343	.564**	-.094
		.022	.139	.010	.692
Fairness		-.283	.000	-.147	-.169
		.227	1.000	.537	.477
Accuracy		-.261	.524*	.092	-.570**
		.266	.018	.701	.009
Source Reliability		-.181	.203	.066	-.340
		.445	.391	.782	.143
Editorial Process		-.237	-.207	-.046	.147
		.315	.382	.847	.537
Depth		-.264	.312	.425	-.333
		.261	.180	.062	.151
Objectivity		-.048	.312	.297	-.312
		.842	.180	.204	.181
Trustworthiness		-.097	.374	.234	-.551*
		.683	.105	.320	.012
Interactivity		-.203	.062	.514*	-.201
		.391	.795	.020	.395
Newsworthiness		-.597**	.000	.287	-.128
		.005	1.000	.220	.590
Unbiased		-.022	.075	-.111	.221
		.928	.754	.640	.349

* (P<0.05)

** (P<0.01)

(N=20)

Note:

1=Strongly Agree
2=Agree
3=Neither
4=Disagree
5=Strongly Disagree

Hours Spent

1=yes
2=no

1=more than once a day
2=once a day
3=every other day
4=once a week
5=less than once a week

1=only by names
2=sometimes
3=often

Pertaining to H2, each credibility factor was separately calculated according to the use of online newspapers and frequency of use of online newspapers. The use of online newspapers (if respondents read online newspapers) were numbered by 1= “yes” and 2= “no.” Some significant positive relationships were found from table 1. Timeliness ($r=0.594$, $p<0.01$) and Accuracy ($r=0.524$, $P<0.05$) were highly correlated with use of online newspaper. Respondents positively rated timeliness and accuracy as credibility factors when they read online newspapers, and vice versa. The frequency of use of online newspapers (how often respondents read online newspapers) were rated by 1= “more than once a day,” 2= “once a day,” 3= “every other day,” 4= “once a week,” and 5= “less than once a week.” Other strong positive relationships were also found between frequency use of online newspapers and credibility factors. Timeliness ($r=0.571$, $p<0.01$), completeness ($r=0.564$, $p<0.05$), and interactivity ($r=0.514$, $p<0.05$) were highly correlated with the frequency of use of online newspapers. The more often respondents read online newspapers, the more positively they rated those three factors, and vice versa. H2 was also supported because there were significant relationships between online newspapers’ usage and credibility factors, and between frequency of online newspapers’ usage and credibility factors. By testing H2, timeliness, completeness, accuracy, and interactivity were highly noted.

Pertaining to H3, each credibility factor and familiarity of the printed form of online newspapers was calculated. Familiarity (if respondents read or know the printed form of online newspapers) was rated by 1= “only by names,” 2= “sometimes,” and 3= “often.” Two strong negative relationships were found in accuracy ($r=-0.570$, $p<0.01$) and trustworthiness ($r=-0.551$, $p<0.05$) in table 1. The more respondents were familiar with

the printed form, the higher credibility based on accuracy and newsworthiness they had, and vice versa.

An additional analysis was conducted to see which credibility factors respondents rated higher. Each mean of the credibility factors (how respondents agreed with them) were calculated (table 2). Timeliness (M=2.05, SD=0.6408) was ranked on the top, and depth (M=2.3, SD=0.6569) was ranked second. Reputation (M=2.35, SD=0.6708) and accuracy (M=2.35, SD=0.4894) were both third. The rest were respectively ranked as the following: completeness (M=2.4, SD=0.5982), source reliability (M=2.45, SD=0.7592), newsworthiness (M=2.5, SD=0.8272), interactivity (M=2.55, SD=0.8256), trustworthiness (M=2.55, SD=0.6863), fairness (M=2.6, SD=0.5026), objectivity (M=2.7, SD=0.6569), expertness (M=2.75, SD=0.7164), editorial process (M=2.85, SD=0.7452), and no level of bias (M=3.05, SD=0.6863).

Table 2
Reasons for Credibility of Online Newspapers

Ranking	Factors	Mean	SD
1	Timeliness	2.05	.6048
2	Depth	2.3	.6569
3	Reputation	2.35	.6708
3	Accuracy	2.35	.4894
5	Completeness	2.4	.5982
6	Source Reliability	2.45	.7592
7	Newsworthiness	2.5	.8272
8	Interactivity	2.55	.8256
8	Trustworthiness	2.55	.6863
10	Fairness	2.6	.5026
11	Objectivity	2.7	.6569
12	Expertness	2.75	.7164
13	Editorial Process	2.85	.7452
14	Unbiased	3.05	.6863

Note: 1=Strongly Agree 2=Agree 3=Neither 4=Disagree 5=Strongly Disagree

To obtain a clearer picture of the dispersion of responses, the percentages of which respondents agreed with the credibility factors were calculated (table 3). 15% of respondents strongly agreed that online newspapers are timely in their reports, and 65% agreed. 10% strongly agreed that online newspapers deliver in-depth information, and 50% agreed. As other notable points, more than 60% either strongly agreed or agreed that online newspapers are reputable. 65% agreed with accuracy, 55% agreed with trustworthiness, more than 50% either strongly agreed or agreed with interactivity, and more than 50% either strongly agreed or agreed with newsworthiness.

It is also notable that 60% neither agreed nor disagreed with fairness, 50% with objectivity, and 70% with no level of bias. Even 10% disagreed with objectivity, and more than 15% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with that online newspapers are unbiased.

Editorial Process was ranked lower in table 2, and did not distinguish differences among each extent of the agreement. Source reliability also had a wide range, but still more than 55% either agreed or strongly agreed with the factor. The most interesting finding is that newsworthiness got the whole range of agreements. More than 50% either strongly agreed or agreed, though 5% strongly disagreed and 40% said neither.

Table 3
Percentage of Agreement on each Credibility Factor

Factors						(%)
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Reputation	5	60	30	5	0	0
Expertness	0	40	45	15	0	0
Timeliness	15	65	20	0	0	0
Completeness	5	50	45	0	0	0
Fairness	0	40	60	0	0	0
Accuracy	0	65	35	0	0	0
Source Reliability	5	55	30	10	0	0
Editorial Process	0	35	45	20	0	0
Depth	10	50	10	0	0	0
Objectivity	0	40	50	10	0	0
Trustworthiness	0	55	35	10	0	0
Interactivity	5	50	30	15	0	0
Newsworthiness	5	50	40	0	5	5
Unbiased	0	15	70	10	5	5

(N=20)

Discussion

Usage and credibility

H1, H2, and H3 were upheld from the findings. There is a correlation between an individual's experience using the Internet and the online newspapers' credibility in terms of timeliness, completeness, and newsworthiness. There is a correlation between an individual's usage of online newspapers and online newspapers' credibility in terms of timeliness, completeness, interactivity, and accuracy. There is a correlation between an individual's familiarity with the printed form and online newspapers' credibility in terms of accuracy and trustworthiness.

The perception of online newspapers' credibility is positively related to an individual's experiences of the medium. More experienced users of the Internet tend to

think of online newspapers as being more credible. Users of online newspapers perceive it as being credible. The more often they read them, the higher they evaluate credibility. Credibility of online newspapers becomes higher when readers are more familiar with the printed form of the same newspapers. The main finding here is that credibility of the medium is correlated to familiarity with it. As it is mentioned already, previous studies have consistent findings that people's usage of traditional media has correlations with their perceptions of credibility (Carter et al., 1965; Rimmer et al., 1987; Burgoon et al., 1981). This research found that online newspapers' credibility is accordant to the past findings. Online newspapers are more credible when people are more familiar with them.

It is interesting that H3 was supported especially in terms of accuracy and trustworthiness. That implies that readers are unaware of differences between online and printed newspapers. Actually, they do not differ in their content, except that online newspapers give more emphasis to local news (Singer, 2001). As a supplement for this research, qualitative in-depth interviews were also conducted to make sense of Ohio University's students' usage of the online newspapers. This study shows that interviewees perceived the content of online newspapers as being exactly the same as printed newspapers. It also revealed that printed newspapers have quite a high credibility. Therefore, online newspapers, which carry the same stories as printed newspapers, are automatically perceived as being credible. If people completely relied on traditional newspapers, they also relied on online newspapers without any doubts as to their level of believability.

This study also found that people evaluate online newspapers differently from the Internet. Interviewees had concerns when they talked about the Internet as a whole.

They mentioned the importance of cross-referencing information on the web if it was not from a reputable source. In other words, people trust online information as long as a web site has a reputation. Online newspapers are perceived as being highly reputable. People trust online newspapers as much as they trust print newspapers. But they still acknowledge the instability of the Internet. The findings suggest that online newspapers are independent from the Internet as a medium, but are dependent on traditional newspapers. Online newspapers are considered nothing more than printed newspapers that go online.

Reasons for online newspapers' credibility

Online newspapers are highly evaluated by timeliness and depth. These two factors were expected to be placed higher because they are main features of the Internet. Most respondents think online newspapers deliver information in a timely and in-depth manner.

Reputation and accuracy were rated high. It is probably because respondents do not see differences between online newspapers and the printed newspapers. Accuracy is especially correlated with familiarity of the printed form of the online newspapers, people automatically think of the online newspapers as accurate if they think the traditional newspapers are accurate. It is probably the same for trustworthiness, which also has a strong relationship with familiarity of the printed form. Therefore, there might be significant differences between online newspapers that have the printed form and the online newspapers that operate only on the Internet. The latter tend to be new organizations and have not established their reputation.

More than half of the respondents answered that online newspapers have completeness and source reliability in their coverage. According to this, people relatively trust what online newspapers say.

Frequency of Internet use and online newspaper use are correlated with newsworthiness and interactivity. They were not ranked high, but still more than half of the respondents agreed with these factors. Previous studies found that people use the Internet mainly for information gathering. If people seek particular information, of course, the information must be newsworthy for them. Interactivity has a strong relationship with frequency of online newspaper use, probably because those who do not read online newspapers are unaware of online interactivity, and vice versa.

An important finding here is that more than half of the respondents neither disagree nor agree that online newspapers are fair, objective, and unbiased. It is obvious that those factors are not reasons for why people think of online newspapers as being credible. The past research found that the traditional newspapers are mostly credible in all factors but impartiality (Schweiger, 2000). People probably judge online newspapers with the same criteria that they do for traditional newspapers.

Editorial process is also rejected as a reason for credibility. However, it is interesting to see the dispersion of this factor. People fail to have a consistent idea of whether or not online newspapers have the same editorial process as the traditional newspapers. This confusion may be because people do not really know what online newspapers are. 45% answered neither for this question. People do not know what is going on in the newsroom online.

Accordingly, reasons for online newspapers' credibility are evaluated by the following nine factors: timeliness, depth, reputation, accuracy, completeness, source reliability, newsworthiness, interactivity, and trustworthiness.

Conclusion

A significant finding in this research is that college students at Ohio University think of online newspapers' credibility as being relatively high. Although the sampled population was small and limited, reasons for the credibility still became clear. The reasons for online newspapers' credibility are not so different from those for the traditional counterparts, except for some online characteristics. Ohio University's students perceive online newspapers as a credible medium.

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