



American Communication Journal
2012 WINTER (Volume 14, Issue 1)

The Politics of the Source: How the Credibility of a News Source Changes Based on the Political Perception of Blogs

Joshua C. Murphy, M.S.

University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Philip J. Auter, Ph.D.

University of Louisiana at Lafayette

ABSTRACT

The credibility of traditional news media has shown some recent signs of decline. With the increase in available news media comes a decrease in the use of traditional electronic news outlets, with people increasingly likely to use the Internet as a news source. Most traditional news sources have expanded their operations to include Internet coverage. This convergence of media formats expands people's options and provides journalists and pundits with more platforms for reporting both hard news and opinion-based analysis. This allows viewers to retrieve information with ease, as well as find news sources that are consonant with their personal worldviews and avoid those that are dissonant. This study sought to determine whether or not the credibility of traditional news sources was affected by the availability of opinion-based news sources and the audience's increasing desire for opinion-based news. The study determined that partisanship does not necessarily affect believability. People are willing to take information at face value regardless of the source or his political perspective. The data also showed that partisanship does slightly affect the perception of political slant, particularly when the source represents a political position. When the source is neutral, viewers perceive virtually no political slant.

Contact information: Joshua C. Murphy and Philip J. Auter, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Department of Communication, Burke-Hawthorne Hall, Room 135, P.O. Box 43650, Lafayette, LA 70504, Email: auter@louisiana.edu.

Introduction and Review of the Literature

The credibility of traditional news media has shown signs of decline in recent years, with polls demonstrating a decrease in trust from viewers. With the increase in available news media comes a decrease in the use of traditional electronic news outlets like network nightly news programs ([Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006](#)). This marked decline in credibility for institutional sources of “mainstream media” produced a shift in emphasis to the credibility of individual sources, namely those who reach their publics by relying on multiple media channels.

This study seeks to determine whether or not the credibility of traditional news sources was affected by the availability of opinion-based news sources and the audience's increasing desire for the latter ([Perlmutter, 2008](#)). What is not clear is whether a consumer is more willing to trust an established source, or if the information that the source covers is credible, even if it runs counter to the source's established political position.

Source Credibility

The study of credibility in media was a major focus since the early days of mass communication scholarship. Media credibility is defined as, “perceptions of a news channel's believability, as distinct from individual sources, media organizations, or the content of the news itself” ([Bucy, 2003](#)). The two main divisions, or “channels,” of credibility, were attributed to the source and the medium.

Source credibility involves determining the ways that characteristics of communicators influence how receivers process the message ([Kiouisis, 2001](#); [O'Keefe, 1990](#)). Medium credibility is differentiated by its focus on how the chosen medium affects the way that viewers decipher the message ([Kiouisis](#)).

With modern mass media and the trend toward convergence, source credibility gains importance over medium credibility because certain sources appear to transcend individual platforms, often using multiple channels simultaneously to reach their audiences with news and opinion.

Early source credibility studies analyzed how changes in certain characteristics of the presenting source affected audience members' attitudes toward various topics. In these studies, researchers created several experiments in order to determine what qualities in a presenting source attracted attitude change among consumers. The studies often involved measuring the attitudes of participants on issues, exposing them to mediated messages, with various personal qualities of the source being manipulated, and then repeating the measurement of participants to see how their opinions had changed, if at all ([Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953](#); [Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949](#)). One conclusion was that the impact could be attributed to the medium as well.

Source and medium credibility are not mutually exclusive. They tend to converge on the Internet. Interpersonal discussion is thought to have an undermining effect on general media

credibility. However, using the Internet is usually an individual activity, which mimics reading a newspaper – a medium that is not conducive to interpersonal discussion. While this is the case, much of the communication that occurs online is interpersonal (e-mail, chat rooms, message boards) – including messages found on news corporations' websites, most of which now include features of interpersonal discussion. This allows for both synchronous and asynchronous discussions of current events worldwide, as well as confirmation and refutation therein ([Kiouisis, 2001](#)).

The Internet is important to examine because it is a medium that people consistently rely on for news. Online news channels are perceived under the four lenses of *credibility*, *liking*, *quality*, and *representativeness* ([Sundar, 1999](#)). Credibility in the online context is deemed to be a, “global evaluation of the objectivity of the story,” meaning the more people who view an article as fair, the more credible the article seems.

The inability to trust a news source in an age when a seemingly limitless amount of news media channels are available is a troubling sign for traditional media outlets. In fact, one study found that, while both online and traditional news media were perceived as somewhat credible, online media were thought to be more believable, accurate, in-depth, and fairer than traditional media ([Johnson & Kaye, 2000](#)). Another study found that online news was perceived as more credible than television, and there was also a correlation between the perception of a medium's credibility and the use of said medium ([Kiouisis](#)). However, a study in Germany found that, even among those who don't use the Internet, credibility of online news is viewed as similar to that of traditional news media ([Schweiger, 2000](#)).

The result of all this was a significant drop in nightly news viewership. In 2008, 29% of the overall evening television audience watched the nightly news ([Pew Research Center, 2008](#)). This dropped from 72% in the early 1980s ([Bucy, 2003](#)). In terms of Internet users, only 26% said they regularly viewed a network's nightly newscast eight years ago, and the number continues to decline ([Pew Research Center, 2009](#)). Adding to this is the concept of “infotainment” – the sensationalism of news stories to highlight an entertainment value, in order for news programs to gain viewership ([Thussu & Freedman, 2003](#)).

There could be other factors to attribute for this phenomenon. For instance, television news in the 1990s suffered repeated blows to its credibility due in part to sensationalized coverage of the Monica Lewinsky and Chandra Levy scandals, and in 2000 for errantly announcing that Al Gore won in Florida early on election night ([McClellan et al., 2000](#)). Online news remained relatively unscathed, however, possibly due to offering a deeper fund of information about a broader swath of topics than television news. Further, online news also has reinforced its own credibility even when network channels are praised for their coverage, such as the September 11th attacks ([Kohut, 2002](#)).

Blogs

This synergy also has encouraged communicators to move from one medium to another in order to distribute their content across multiple platforms. From traditional journalism sources

like Charles Gibson and Brian Williams to opinion-based sources like Bill O'Reilly and Keith Olbermann, among others, news providers appear on older and newer media channels almost simultaneously. They utilize the Internet in multiple ways: archiving material, streaming video – either recording something strictly for online use or showing programming content online – and attaching their names to personal *blogs*.

A *blog*, or weblog, is, “a website that displays in chronological order the postings by one or more individuals and usually has links to comments on specific postings” ([American Heritage Dictionary, 2006](#)). Blogs first became popular in 1999, although similar online journals predated them. Some attribute their initial popularity to Blogger, a free Internet software system designed to set up an online diary or weblog with ease. Such an ease in creating and accessing blogs helped to promote blogging as a popular online activity, jumping from under 50 blogs in 1999 to an average “birth rate” of one new blog every second in 2008 ([Marchionni et al., 2008](#)).

Some bloggers examine political news from the perspective of their own personal viewpoints. People with particularly partisan viewpoints are more likely to selectively choose information, like blogs, that support their political positions. The consequence of this quest for resonance is that the Internet lowers the possibility of a user viewing stories that dissent from their ideological positions, which now appears to increase political polarization ([Iyengar & Hahn, 2007](#)).

Selective Exposure and Selective Perception

The theory of selective exposure states that people prefer exposure to arguments supporting their position on issues over those supporting other positions, avoiding cognitive dissonance. A person's reliance upon online media and cable networks is a major indicator of selective exposure ([Stroud, 2007](#)), while reading newspapers is more likely to expose people to a wider variety of views, thus mitigating selective exposure ([Mutz & Martin, 2001](#)). This finding reinforces previous studies that demonstrate how people are likely to select information online which they feel is more supportive of their values, especially in the political realm ([Stroud, 2007](#)). In fact, Stroud discovered that partisanship was a stronger predictor of selective exposure than the use of online media.

Similar to selective exposure is the theory of selective perception, which holds that a person “recognizes her or his needs, interests, cultural values, and background in the stimuli at hand- all the stimuli at hand.” That person then, “responds, or does not respond, according to how well the stimuli make it through the four phases of processing. The process of choosing what will make it through these four phases is selective perception” ([Howard, 2001](#)).

A famous example of selective perception is drawn from the television program *All in the Family*. Researchers performed a study to determine how viewers perceived the program. Respondents were asked whether or not bigoted protagonist Archie Bunker “won” or “lost” at the end of the program. Those who were high in prejudice claimed that he won, while those who were low in prejudice argued that he lost ([Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974](#)). This example of selective

perception demonstrates how people side with those views supporting their personal belief sets. Thus, the source of the message becomes a part of the message itself.

According to Perlmutter (2008), blogs help to reinforce partisan affiliations because they tend to attract a community of like-minded people, offering them convenient access to forums that feature similar viewpoints. When politically interested people go online in order to seek political information, they tend not to submit themselves to a wide range of perspectives, but rather they seek out information that reinforces pre-existing viewpoints (Stroud, 2006).

Citizen journalism also has become a popular concept, largely fueled by the explosion of the “blogosphere” as an informational force. This phenomenon, combined with the decline of credibility in professional media in recent years, has led to a growing number of people going online for news. Every day, roughly 50 million Americans use the Internet to get their news (Horrihan, 2006). Much of this news is generated by “citizen journalists” – self-styled reporters who have to convey credibility to those who are skeptical of such unwashed reporting (Johnson, 2008) since they regularly compete with the traditional news media establishment.

Blogs often challenge or attempt to correct conventional media reports that appear to mislead or contain inaccurate information. The most prominent example of this function was documented in the 2004 presidential campaign, when CBS News presented a story about President Bush's alleged preferential treatment during the Vietnam conflict, using suspect memos as proof. Bloggers of a conservative stripe used their craft to broadcast the error, and the torrent of blogging attention produced an internal investigation that ultimately caused anchor Dan Rather to retract the story, offer an apology, and eventually resign his position as anchor of CBS Evening News (Adamic & Glance, n.d.). There are numerous other examples where errors in mainstream media news were discovered and exposed on blogs, spreading through other blogs and after gathering momentum, produced retractions and apologies from the mainstream sources (Drezner & Farrell, 2004) further eroding mainstream media credibility. As indicated by these examples, blogs can have an agenda-setting power under such circumstances.

Blogging has even spread to reporters across traditional media. Some journalists use it as an apparatus to report unique news stories in a decidedly impartial forum designed to discuss current events. Others use it as a print-based version of the programs they host. Despite its growing relevance to the next generation of news consumers, the impact that prominent personalities have when they enter the blogosphere appears to be an open question.

Talk-Show Hosts

Talk-show hosts often provide analysis on issues while emitting an air of political expertise on television. They provide opinion-based analysis of political events and usually have, and in fact often tout their political preference. Typically, but not always, they have experience on a high-profile political campaign or have held elected office. Their media role is distinguished, though, from that of a traditional journalist (Hitlin, 2005).

A general format has been observed in the talk media's use of political punditry. Topics are typically discovered by hosts and analysts a couple of days after an incident has occurred or a controversy has arisen, discussed and dissected by pundits representing both political parties for a few more days to a week afterward, and then they recede in favor of a new topic ([Hitlin, 2005](#)).

The talk-show format on television and radio has for years enabled analysts to propagate a particular viewpoint, especially with the political focus of cable news networks, syndicated television programs, and news radio. These shows are unique in that the host often makes no attempt to hide his own political opinions and, in fact, cater to those with similar beliefs.

The downfall of this format in terms of disclosure is that the nature of competition between cable news networks leads to a lack of opinion diversity among analysts and talk-show hosts, which creates a bi-modal monolith of cable television punditry where issues are vetted by analysts who stick to the Democratic or Republican party lines ([Hitlin, 2005](#)). Empirical research can serve to clarify what impact such analysts have in terms of source credibility, especially when juxtaposed with traditional journalists or talk-show hosts.

Hypotheses

H1: A viewer's perception of the believability of a blog commentary will positively correspond to that viewer's level of political commitment, if they share the same perceived political affiliation. It will be negatively correspond to the audience member if they are of opposite political affiliations.

- H1a: A blog commentary by Rush Limbaugh will be viewed as more believable by Republican partisans and less believable by Democratic partisans and non-partisans.
- H1b: A blog commentary by Keith Olbermann will be viewed as more believable by Democratic partisans and less believable by Republican partisans and non-partisans.
- H1c: A blog commentary by Charles Gibson will be viewed as more believable by non-partisans and moderately believable by Democratic and Republican partisans.
- H1d: A blog commentary by an anonymous political blogger will be viewed as more believable by non-partisans and less believable by Democratic and Republican partisans.

H2: A student's view of the bias in a blog commentary will be inverted to their level of partisanship -- if the viewer and the blog author are of the same political affiliation. There will be a positive relationship if they are of opposite political affiliations.

- H2a: A blog commentary by Rush Limbaugh will be viewed as more biased by Democratic partisans and non-partisans and less biased by Republican partisans.
- H2b: A blog commentary by Keith Olbermann will be viewed as more biased by Republican partisans and non-partisans and less biased by Democratic partisans.
- H2c: A blog commentary by Charles Gibson will be viewed as more biased by Democratic and Republican partisans and less biased by non-partisans.
- H2d: A blog commentary by an anonymous political blogger will be viewed as more biased by Democratic and Republican partisans and less biased by non-partisans.

Methodology

Population of Interest

The viewers of interest – the theoretical population – defined for this study were college students. This unit of analysis was considered to be an ideal audience since it generally includes young people who are in the early formulation stages of both their news consumption habits and political philosophy. The sample in this study was collected by drawing upon undergraduate communication classes, which were divided into sections producing four groups of approximately 18 participants each.

Experiment

While many experiments have tested credibility, only a few have covered the Internet in this context. Kiouisis (2001), for example, tested the Internet against newspapers in an experiment testing medium credibility, focusing more on media platforms than individual sources. His experiment provided the basis for the present study. With the expansion of the Internet as a source of news, and with the growing number of media personalities who are communicating across platforms, the blogger becomes more suitable as a source to evaluate for credibility effects.

The experiment proposed to draw the analysis involved setting up Web pages using University of Louisiana at Lafayette digital space, all containing the same text material. The content that formed the treatment condition was created by the researcher to resemble a blog, and the topic the blog commentary covered was a timely and controversial issue. The researcher's opinion blog was written in such a way as to avoid overt political bias. It was placed into four templates resembling current political websites. One page simulated an anonymous political website with no named author that served as the control condition blog.

The other three pages used templates from the websites of World News with Charles Gibson, (abcnews.go.com/wn), Rush Limbaugh (www.rushlimbaugh.com), and Countdown with Keith Olbermann (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3036677). The three media personalities were selected in order to compare the opinions of a traditional news anchor (Gibson), a well-known conservative analyst (Limbaugh), and a less well-known but familiar liberal analyst (Olbermann), and measure reactions to their simulated blog commentary. Each page had the same opinion blog commentary contrived for it, with the byline of the person of interest on the website identified by a photo and a title. Titles were supplied in case viewers were unfamiliar with the three personalities and in order to give emphasis and identity to their positions.

The topic of the contrived blog commentary was the governmental bailouts that were enacted by the Bush and Obama administrations. This topic was chosen because the bailouts were still topical and controversial at the time the experiment was performed, and opinions from Democratic and Republican partisans were plentiful.

The commentary was created by taking opinions expressed from various blog articles from Democratic and Republican sources, as well as an e-mail about the topic that was sent to the researcher from a former instructor. The information was combined and reworded for the sake of removing overt partisanship, as well as to make the blog commentary easy to read.

In this experiment, the independent variable for both hypotheses was the viewer's compatibility with the author's perceived partisanship. The dependent variables in the first hypothesis were the perceived credibility of the blog commentator, the trustworthiness of the blog commentator, and the trustworthiness of the message. For the second hypothesis, the dependent variables were the perceived political slant of the blog commentator, the trustworthiness of the blog commentator, and the trustworthiness of the message. The control variable for both hypotheses was the content of the blog commentary, which remained the same between groups, compared to the purported blog authors, which varied between three groups.

Student groups met at separate times, and each group was assigned a webpage and invited to read the corresponding blog. Participants received two-section questionnaires before reading. The first section, administered before the experiment, posed demographic questions including age and sex, plus psychographic questions of political affiliation and participation, modified from similar studies ([Weisberg, 1983](#)). These questions ascertained which political party, if any, a participant supported. If no party were selected, a question was asked to determine which party the participant more likely support.

After reading the commentary, the subjects answered to what degree they agreed with the commentary and how factually accurate they found it, as well as if they perceived it as having a political slant and if they had a shift in attitude toward the commentator. All of these used five-point Likert-type scales.

The researcher coded the results afterward in order to determine the relationships between factors in the pre-test and in the post-test. The categories ranged from most compatible to least compatible with the blog commentator.

For the first research question, the researcher compared political preference in the pre-test against accuracy of the commentary in the post-test. For the sake of fully discerning the participant's political preference, the questions of political leaning, party affiliation, and the political opinion of the blog commentary that the individual read, could be combined into a composite political preference coefficient. The researcher was able to observe the size effect by running cross tabulation tests between the designated pre- and post-test variables for the main hypothesis, as well as testing mean scores between designated variables for each sub-hypothesis.

In order to answer the second hypothesis, the researcher compared political preference in the pre-test against political bias of the commentary in the post-test. For the sake of fully discerning the political influence, the composite political preference coefficient that was created for testing the first hypothesis was used to test this hypothesis as well. The researcher measured effect size by running crosstabulation tests between the designated pre- and post-test variables for the main hypothesis and testing mean scores between said variables for each sub-hypothesis.

Chi-square tests were used in measuring interaction for both hypotheses. These tests were used to discern whether the number of participants who fit into the categories of *political compatibility*, when compared to *believability* and *political slant*, deviated from what would normally be expected for groups of a similar size. This would help to demonstrate if, and by how much, the relationships between variables were caused by chance.

The researcher looked for relationships that were significant at the $p = .1$ level. This was due to small sample size.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 67 students participated in the experiment. Of the sample, 68.7% ($N = 46$) were female and 31.3% ($N = 21$) were male. The average age of the participants was 21.8 years, and the median age was 20 years old.

Of the participants, 59.7% ($N = 40$) belonged to a political party, with 29.9% ($N = 20$) identifying themselves as Democrats and 29.9% ($N = 20$) identifying themselves as Republicans. Of the 30.3% ($N = 27$) who did not identify with a political party, 11.9% ($N = 8$) leaned toward the Democratic Party, 9% ($N = 6$) leaned toward the Republican Party, and 19.4% ($N = 13$) did not lean toward either party.

Believability was measured on a five-point scale where 5.0 represents full believability and 1.0 represents no believability. Slant was measured on a five-point scale where 2.0 represents a strong conservative slant and -2.0 represents a strong liberal slant.

Hypothesis One

For the first hypothesis, the political-compatibility variable was measured in a crosstabulation applied to the responses to the question, "How factually accurate do you think the blog commentary was?"

To create cells that would meet the minimum expected amount for valid crosstabulation, the slightly accurate and strongly accurate categories, as well as the neutral and slightly inaccurate categories, were collapsed to make two categories of validity each. Also, the three compatible categories and the three incompatible categories were combined to make two categories. In applying this statistic, every cell had an expected count of at least 13.4.

The chi-square result was 3.344, which exceeded the minimum value of 2.706 that is necessary at the $p = .1$ level.

There were 20 participants who read the blog commentary attributed to Limbaugh. Of those, 40% ($N = 8$) were most compatible with Limbaugh's political position, 20% ($N = 4$) were

very incompatible, and 30% ($N = 6$) were most incompatible. One person respectively fit the categories of somewhat compatible and very compatible.

The mean believability score for the readers of the Limbaugh-authored blog commentary was 3.8, indicating that viewers were slightly prone to believe the contents of the blog identifying him as the author.

There were 17 participants who read the Olbermann blog commentary. Of those 17, 17.6% ($N = 3$) were most compatible with Olbermann's political position, 17.6% ($N = 3$) were very compatible, 23.5% ($N = 4$) were somewhat compatible, 17.6% ($N = 3$) were very incompatible, and 23.5% ($N = 4$) were most incompatible.

The mean score of believability for the readers of the Olbermann blog commentary was 3.7, indicating that viewers were slightly prone to believe the contents of the blog with Olbermann as the author.

There were 14 participants who read the Gibson-authored blog commentary. Of those 14, 35.7% ($N = 5$) were most compatible with Gibson's political position, 14.3% ($N = 2$) were somewhat compatible, and 50% ($N = 7$) were somewhat incompatible.

The mean believability score for readers of the Gibson-authored blog was 3.6. This indicates a slight willingness to believe the contents of the blog commentary with Gibson as the author.

There were 14 participants who read the anonymous blog commentary. Of the 14 participants, 71.4% ($N = 10$) were somewhat incompatible, 21.4% ($N = 3$) were most compatible, and 1 person was somewhat compatible.

The mean believability score was 3.6, indicating a slight willingness to believe the contents of the commentary with no author established. This indicates that political preference is likely not a factor in believability.

Hypothesis Two

For the second hypothesis and its subcategories, the political-compatibility variable was measured in a cross tabulation against responses to the question, "Did the blog commentary have a discernible political slant?"

The chi-square results between political compatibility with the source and whether the blog commentary was slanted show a significance of .090, which is significant at the $p=.1$ level.

To create cells for valid cross tabulation, the categories of slight liberal slant and strong liberal slant, as well as those of slight conservative slant and strong conservative slant, were collapsed and, including the neutral category, left three categories. Also, the three compatible

categories and the three incompatible categories were combined to make two categories. In performing this, every cell had an expected count of at least 8.2.

The chi-square result was 2.954, which did not meet the minimum value of 4.605 that is necessary at the $p=.1$ level to declare a significant difference.

In the case of the participants with Rush Limbaugh's blog commentary, the mean score was .85, indicating a conservative slant. The only group that did not show a mean score of 1.0 was those who were most compatible with Limbaugh's political leanings. Those participants had a mean score of .62, indicating a weaker perception of slant among those individuals.

The mean score of all participants with Olbermann's blog commentary is -.29. This finding indicates that most viewers perceived him to be generally neutral. The only group that scored less than -.25 was those who were most compatible, who had a mean score of -1.33. Thus, viewers who are more compatible with Olbermann are more likely to perceive a political slant in his reporting – a somewhat negative relationship.

The mean score of all participants that viewed the Gibson blog commentary is -.43. This indicates that viewers tend to perceive Charles Gibson as relatively without slant.

The mean score of all participants who read the neutral blog commentary was -.23. This indicates a general impression of political neutrality when the author is unknown.

Summary

In the first hypothesis, some interaction between the variables of compatibility and believability was detected after categories were collapsed, indicating a difference from what would be expected with no difference in population. All of the tests for the H1 subhypotheses demonstrated a consistency between compatibility sets when it comes to believability. The participants were willing to take what was said at face value regardless of whether or not they were compatible with the supposed blog author.

In the second hypothesis, no significant level of interaction between the variables of compatibility and believability was detected after categories were collapsed. However, a post hoc test that removed the category of conservative slant demonstrated interaction that was significant at the .1 level. The tests for subhypotheses in H2 demonstrated that participants were generally prone to perceive bias from the blog authors who were known to be partisan, and partisan participants were more prone than their more neutral counterparts to perceive bias from supposedly neutral sources as well.

Discussion

Results

The results of the first hypothesis test contradicted expectations in that the less compatible an individual is with the source, the more believability the blog has to the viewer. This may be because the viewers whose views are more compatible know the politics of that perspective and perhaps know the way this person speaks and/or writes. Therefore, someone who is more compatible may be more likely to discern that the commentary was not truly authored by the claimed source. Someone who is less compatible with the author could more easily spot such nuances in order to identify the blog commentary as a simulated blog.

When comparing the sub-hypotheses for the first hypothesis, the pattern seems to show that partisanship does not necessarily affect believability. Viewers seem to take what's said at face value, at least when the blog commentary does not contain partisan bickering, which this blog commentary was careful to exclude.

The mean scores from the subsets of the first hypothesis demonstrated a willingness by the participants to believe what is written, regardless of who the author happens to be. Thus, this study finds that the perception of an author's political ideology does not necessarily affect believability as posed in the hypothesis.

The group that viewed the Olbermann blog commentary was also somewhat inconsistent in its results when it came to believability. Those who were very incompatible with Olbermann's political position scored higher than any other group among the four blog commentaries. Conversely, those who were somewhat compatible had the lowest believability score, and steadily rose from that point forward. A possible explanation for this could be an anomaly or a general unfamiliarity with Keith Olbermann as a political commentator.

In contrast with the participants who read the Limbaugh and Olbermann blog commentaries, those who viewed the Gibson blog commentary grew slightly more cynical the more their ideology approached the political center. This could be because those who are less compatible with a generally neutral perspective are those who are more strongly political in their convictions, and thus were more attuned to the news. On the other hand, those who were more compatible may be less likely to pay attention to the news and view partisan politics more skeptically than their counterparts. The same can be inferred from the participants who read the blog commentary from the anonymous author.

One slight relationship that is noticeable in terms of believability is that the less partisan one is, the more skeptical that person will be of what they read, at least when it comes to a political blog commentary. An explanation for the relatively strong perception of believability may be due to people's increasing reliance on the Internet as a credible news medium.

There is a slight indication of interaction between political preference and the perception of bias as indicated in the second hypothesis. The cross tabulation similarly indicates interaction

between political preference and bias perception, although not as strongly for those who sense a conservative bias. When removing those who perceive a conservative bias from the condensed cross tabulation, the results of interaction between the two remaining categories of bias become significant. The reason for the indication of no significance with those who detected a conservative bias could be because viewers who are incompatible with the blog author may be more prone to perceive the commentary as neutral because it lacks a harsh tone, which they may expect from him.

The group who read the Limbaugh blog commentary believed the opinion piece had a conservative slant. The only viewers who did not perceive Limbaugh as having a definite conservative bias were those whose political positions were most compatible with Limbaugh's – strong Republican partisans. This could be because either such partisans were more likely to listen to Limbaugh and see some pragmatism in his comments, or because they recognize the commentary as either not Limbaugh's work or less partisan than his usual work. Despite this, the analysis generally identified some conservative bias with Republican partisans.

The opposite effect was observed for the group that read the Olbermann blog commentary. In this case, those whose political positions most strongly reflected Olbermann's perceived positions were more likely to view the commentary as having a liberal bias than their less politically compatible counterparts. A reason for the difference between this result and the results of the group that viewed the Limbaugh blog commentary could be due to Rush Limbaugh's fame as a political commentator. In contrast with Limbaugh's relative fame, there seemed to be less familiarity with Olbermann than was expected.

With the Gibson blog commentary group, almost no bias was detected. The results showed consistent neutrality across the spectrum of political preference. Similarly, the blog commentary with the anonymous author was perceived as generally neutral in terms of bias. Perhaps this is because of a lack of recognition of either of them as a representative of a party or political ideology.

Selective perception seems to be another factor in the second hypothesis. The degree of slant that the participants perceived in the blog commentary seemed to align with how they perceived the political preference of the supposed blog author.

Limitations and Suggestions

First, not enough participants were available or willing to participate in the experiment. This prevented the researcher from obtaining an appropriate amount of data for the main hypotheses, as well as the Gibson and anonymous sub-hypotheses.

Second, the researcher was limited to working with a demographic that is often generally apathetic when it comes to politics and current events. This was demonstrated in a recent study that showed only 36% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 voted regularly ([Pew Research Center, 2009](#)). Future studies could benefit by considering the option of accepting participants from outside the collegiate setting.

Further, regarding testing, no real difference was discerned between politically neutral, moderate, and apathetic. Future studies would benefit by developing a tool that could discern whether an individual is moderate or apathetic, as well as possibly discerning the individual's strength of political commitment.

A final overall limitation was that, since this was experimental research, significance was met only at the .1 level and not the .05 level. A larger base of participants could also help to approach the .05 level of significance.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing tentative evidence that political persuasion does not necessarily matter in terms of the perception of believability of a piece of information. It also contributes to knowledge by tentatively displaying a slight relationship between one's political preference and the perception of bias in a commentary, as well as expanding such knowledge into the realm of online commentary. Further investigation is needed to study these potential relationships.

Bibliography

- Adamic, L., & Glance, N. (n.d.). The political bogosphere and the 2004 U.S. Election: Divided they blog. Retrieved October 8, 2008 from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/7617566/Adamic-and-Glance-Political-Blogosphere-2004-Election>
- American Heritage Dictionaries (Ed.). (2006). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. (4th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Bucy, E. P. (2003). Media credibility revisited: Synergy between on-air and online news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 80(2), 247-264.
- Drezner, D., & Farrell, H. (2004). The power and politics of blogs. Retrieved October 7, 2007 from: <http://www.utoronto.ca/~farrell/blogpaperfinal.pdf>
- Hitlin, P. (2005). *A content analysis of television political pundits*. Master's thesis, Georgetown University.
- Horrigan, J. B. (2006). Home broadband adoption 2006: Home broadband adoption is going mainstream and that means user-generated content is coming from all kinds of internet users: Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. K., & Kelly, H. H. (1953). *Communication and persuasion*. New Haven, Conn.
- Hovland, C. I., Lumsdaine, A. A., & Sheffield, F. (1949). *Experiments on mass communication*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Howard, M. O. (2001). *Selective perception*. Retrieved September 30, 2008, from http://www.ciadvertising.org/student_account/fall_01/adv382j/howardmo/selectiveperception.html
- Johnson, K. A. (2008). *Writer information and perceived credibility of stories on a citizen journalism web site*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago, IL.
- Johnson T. J., & Kaye, B. K. (2000). Using is believing: The influence of reliance on the credibility of online political information among politically interested Internet users. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77, 865-879.
- Kiousis, S. (2001). Public trust or mistrust? Perceptions of media credibility in the information age. *Mass Communication & Society*, 4(4), 381-403.

- Kohut, A. (2002). The press shines at a dark moment. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 40(5), 54-55.
- Marchionni, D., Meyer, H. K., & Thorson, E. (2008). *When newspaper reporters blog: An experimental test of hostile-media effects in public contexts*. Submitted to the Association for the Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference, Chicago.
- McClellan, S., Higgins, J. M., Trigoboff, D., & McConnell, B. (2000, November). It's Gore! It's Bush! It's a mess! (television election coverage). *Broadcasting & Cable*.
- Mutz, D. C., & Martin, P. S. (2001). Facilitating communication across lines of political difference: The role of mass media. *American Political Science Review*, 95(1), 97-114.
- O'Keefe, D. J. (1990). *Persuasion theory and research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Perlmutter, D. D. (2008). Political blogging and campaign 2008: A roundtable. *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, 13(2), 160-170.
- Pew Research Center. (2009). *Independents take center stage in Obama era*. Retrieved October 26, 2009, from <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1523>
- Pew Research Center. (2008). *Audience segments in a changing news environment*. Retrieved August 2, 2011, from <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/444.pdf>
- Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2006). *The state of the news media 2006*. Retrieved November 10, 2008, from http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative_overview_eight.asp?cat=2&media=1
- Schweiger, W. (2000). Media credibility—Experience or image? A survey on the credibility of the World Wide Web in Germany in comparison to other media. *European Journal of Communication*, 15, 37-59.
- Stroud, N. J. (2007, May). *Polarizing effects of partisan selective exposure*. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Political Communication Division, San Francisco, CA.
- Stroud, N. J. (2006, November). *Partisan selective exposure and the media environment*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, Political Communication Division, San Antonio, TX.
- Sundar, S. S. (1999). Exploring receivers' criteria for perception of print and online news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76(2), 373-386.

Thussu, D. K., & Freedman, D. (2003). *War and the media: Reporting conflict 24/7*. London: Sage Publications.

Vidmar, N., & Rokeach, M. (1974). Archie Bunker's bigotry: A study in selective perception and exposure. *Journal of Communication* 24(1), 36-47.

Weisberg, H. F. (1983). A new scale of partisanship. *Political Behavior*, 5(4), 363-376.