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Digital Media and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Political Communication

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

The rich research heritage on source credibility is fundamentally linked to processes of political communication and the provision of political information. Networked digital technologies, however, have recently complicated the assessment of source credibility by modifying people's ability to determine source expertise and trustworthiness, which are the foundations upon which credibility evaluations have traditionally rested. This chapter explores source credibility in online contexts by examining the credibility of digital versus traditional channels, the nature of political information conveyed by social media, and the dynamics of political information online. In addition, this chapter considers related research concerns, including the link between credibility and selective exposure, the potential for group polarization, and the role of social media in seeking and delivering credible political information. These concerns suggest challenges and opportunities as information consumers navigate the contemporary information environment in search of the knowledge to make them informed members of a politically engaged citizenry.

Keywords: source credibility, political communication, digital media, selective exposure, polarization, social media

The Importance of Source Credibility to Political Communication

Persuasion lies at the heart of political communication. The capacity of political communicators to persuade others is in many ways more important than—though not mutually exclusive of—their ability to formulate effective public policies, to work collaboratively with others, and to grasp the complex interplay of the diverse goals of their constituencies. It is therefore not surprising that scholars have long been concerned with the myriad factors that affect a communicator's ability to persuade audiences. An enduring and critical factor in this pursuit has been *source credibility*.

In the West, interest in understanding source credibility dates to Aristotle, for whom a central interest was persuasion in political oratory. For Aristotle, the three modes of persuasion were *logos* (the logic used to support a claim), *pathos* (emotional or motivational appeals), and *ethos* (the source's credibility or the speaker's/author's authority) (Kennedy, 1991). This general treatment set the foundation for the study of source credibility, and the features of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* remain evident in modern treatments of this issue, although in revised form.

The seminal work of social psychologist Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale in the 1950s, for example, examined the characteristics of persuasive speakers to ascertain the factors contributing to their perceived credibility (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley, 1953; Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Their ambitious research program assessed source credibility and its influence on attitude formation, with the goal of developing a systematic theory of persuasion (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). The Yale team suggested that source credibility is a receiver-based construct, determined by the acceptance of the speaker and of the message by the audience. Building on this

notion, McCroskey (1966) and his colleagues investigated how message recipients perceived particular communicators (Perloff, 1989). This research was followed by hundreds of empirical studies that sought to determine the dimensions of source credibility from the perspective of message recipients.

Hovland and his colleagues defined source credibility in terms of the *believability* of a communicator, which is determined by the receiver's evaluation of a source's *expertise* and *trustworthiness* (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley, 1953). This basic definition persists today (see, e.g., Fogg, 2003; Gass and Seiter, 2003; Metzger et al., 2003; Sternthal, Phillips, and Dholakia, 1978), although other dimensions have been suggested, including reliability, composure, sociability, similarity to the source, goodwill, dynamism, safety, and likability (Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz, 1969; Giffin, 1967), as well as composure and sociability (Gass and Seiter, 2003; Jurma, 1981; McCroskey, 1966; Perloff, 1989; Whitehead, 1968). Although credibility is also a concern in information science, where it is conceptualized primarily as a criterion for information selection and usage, the locus of most scholarly work on source credibility has been in the fields of communication and social psychology (O'Keefe, 2002; Wilson and Sherrell, 1993; Self, 2008).

For more than half a century studies probing source credibility's influence on learning and persuasion have focused on political or policy-related topics (e.g., Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Hovland and Mandell, 1952). For example, participants in one study (Hovland and Mandell, 1952) were exposed to messages delivered by a television news commentator on the issue of changing US monetary policy. That study manipulated the source credibility of the communicator and found that less credible sources were perceived as having given a worse presentation than higher credibility speakers and were rated as less fair and honest, even though the message was held constant across conditions.

In the decades that followed, scholars concluded that source credibility is positively associated with persuasion (Albarracín and Vargas, 2010; Wilson and Sherrell, 1993), an effect moderated by factors including issue involvement, timing of source identification, and how closely the position advocated by the source matches the receiver's position and his or her own expectations (O'Keefe, 2002; see also Pornpitakpan, 2004). Some of this work looked specifically at how source credibility affects *political* persuasion, finding that greater political persuasion results from high- rather than low-credibility sources (Chebat, Filiatrault, and Perrien, 1990; see also Morton and Villegas, 2005), and that moderators such as issue involvement and the alignment between receivers' beliefs/expectations and the position advocated affect political persuasion (Iyengar and Simon, 2000; Iyengar and Valentino, 2000; Nelson and Garst, 2005). Collectively, Iyengar's research showed that source credibility can affect voters' acceptance of political campaign ads, and that voters view politicians as most credible and persuasive when they advocate issues that are consistent with their party's platform. In a similar vein, Nelson and Garst (2005) found that persuasion is greatest when voters share a political source's values and attitudes, and when the source advocates a position consistent with those values and attitudes.

An area that has received particular attention is how credibility moderates the effects of negative political campaigning. O'Cass (2002), for example, found that voters respond more favorably to high-credibility candidates who use negative campaign ads than they do to low-credibility candidates who use them. Similarly, Yoon, Pinkleton, and Ko (2005) concluded that negative advertising is more effective in capturing votes for high-credibility candidates than for low-credibility ones. At the same time, however, they found that high-involvement voters experience greater cynicism when high-credibility candidates use attack advertising. Homer and Batra (1994)'s examination of the effects of negative ads on perceptions of candidates who are targeted in the ads found that they were more effective at reducing some aspects of the attacked candidate's credibility (i.e., their trustworthiness) than others (i.e., their expertise).

Other work in this domain has focused on the role that source credibility plays in influencing public opinion. Wanta and Hu (1994) found that highly credible media sources were better able than those with lower credibility to set the public's agenda. Druckman (2001) confirmed that political sources with higher credibility are more likely to have their frames accepted by message recipients as well. And Miller and Krosnick (2000) observed greater priming effects for high- versus low-credible news sources. Together, these studies show that source credibility can magnify the effects of agenda setting, framing, and priming on public opinion.

The Rise of Digital Media and the Evolution of Source Credibility

Recent technological changes have created a radically different information environment than the one that existed even a few decades ago. As digital network technologies have lowered the cost and complexity of producing and disseminating information, the nature of information providers has shifted. Rather than being delivered through a small number of sources, each with a substantial investment in the information production and delivery processes, information is increasingly provided by a wide range of sources, many of which can readily create and deliver information to large audiences worldwide. One consequence of this evolution in information production is an almost incomprehensibly vast number of information sources. Social software applications have extended this information and source fecundity even further, by connecting individuals directly to one another and by providing significant opportunities to share myriad types of information generated by users themselves.

While this explosion of information has created tremendous opportunities for communication and information sharing, it is also accompanied by significant challenges. In the traditional media environment there were typically a limited number of sources and high barriers for access to the public dissemination of information. In this environment of information scarcity, credible sources were often characterized by such features as formal positions indicating particular training and education or by jobs requiring specific, relevant experience. In this manner, credible sources were often recognizable by virtue of their outwardly observable and verifiable credentials, which were rooted in specific qualifications. The relative inaccessibility of these credentials ensured that the number of credible sources in most domains was small, and the difficulty in obtaining requisite skills, training, and positions perpetuated a system of elite expertise that endured over time. In this manner, source credibility has for the most part been the domain of a rather exclusive subset of individuals (e.g., doctors, experts, journalists, etc.).

Although this exclusive system of bestowing source credibility endures today in a number of domains, the evolution of networked information-sharing tools has significantly altered it in many cases. Digital media present new challenges and have in many ways magnified the burden of determining source credibility (Danielson, 2006; Fogg, 2003; Metzger et al., 2003; Rieh and Danielson, 2008). The combination of the vast quantity of and accessibility to digitally stored and transmitted information has prompted concerns about source credibility because, as Rieh and Danielson (2008) argue, this arrangement creates greater uncertainty regarding both who is responsible for information and whether it can be believed. Two important and related issues are the nature of gatekeeping in the digital media environment and the level of ambiguity surrounding both the source and context of information.

Several researchers have noted that digital media sometimes lack traditional authority indicators such as author identity and established reputation (Danielson, 2006; Fritch and Cromwell, 2002; Metzger, 2007), and yet source information is crucial to credibility because it is the primary basis upon which credibility judgments rest (Sundar, 2008). In some cases, source information is unavailable, masked, or entirely missing from a website, chat group, blog, wiki, and so forth. In other cases, it is provided, yet hard to interpret, such as when information is coproduced or repurposed from one site, channel, or application to another, or when information or news aggregators display information from multiple sources in a centralized location that may itself be perceived as the source. Indeed, Burbules (1998) has suggested that because information is presented in a similar format on websites, a psychological “leveling effect” is created that puts all information on the same level of accessibility and thus all sources on the same level of credibility.

Technological features of the Internet also can create a kind of “context deficit” for digital information (Eysenbach, 2008). The hyperlinked structure of the Web compounds this problem by making it psychologically challenging for users to follow and evaluate various sources as they move from site to site. Research by Eysenbach and Kohler (2002), for example, showed a type of digital sleeper effect such that source and message information become confused or disassociated in users’ minds almost immediately after performing searches for medical information online. Various levels of source anonymity are also problematic since, under conditions of ambiguous authorship, information sources’ motivations are often unclear to users, undercutting the heuristic that relies on persuasive intent to ascertain information credibility (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000, 2007).

Collectively, these factors contribute to the difficulty of evaluating news or political information in online environments. In particular, they complicate determinations of source expertise and trustworthiness, which are the core elements of source credibility. For example, as digital media allow more individuals to reach large audiences, a source’s *expertise* may be difficult to determine and may derive less from his or her official credentials or

organizational affiliations, and more from the number of followers, ratings, “likes,” or inward links he or she has elicited. Evaluations of *trustworthiness* are complicated as well, as source identity itself is often elusive in online contexts. Moreover, the rise of narrowcasting has implications for source trustworthiness, since many news consumers today actually prefer sources that are biased toward their perspective because they see them as more credible than less congenial sources (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Kahan et al., 2010; Oyedele 2010). Given this shifting media landscape and evolving news consumption preferences, we next consider what is learned from research on source credibility in newly emerging political communication contexts.

Research Findings on Source Credibility and Online Political Communication

In recent decades, scholars have produced a substantial body of research on source credibility in online contexts, some of which is directly concerned with political communication. This research falls generally into three areas: studies examining the credibility of digital versus traditional media channels as sources of news and political information; research on the credibility of political information carried by social media and Web 2.0 applications; and analyses of the credibility of other types and sources of political information online, such as research on the perceived credibility of political issue-oriented and candidate websites.

Credibility of Digital versus Traditional Channels as Sources of News and Political Information

Cross-media comparisons have sought to assess the credibility of the Internet relative to other communication channels for political or news information. Early studies by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) and Kiousis (2001) found that newspapers were rated as significantly more credible as a source of news information than other media, including the Internet/Web, magazines, radio, and television (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Kiousis, 2001). Schweiger (2000) found similar results in Germany, where although the Web was viewed as a credible source of information, it was judged less credible than newspapers and television (Schweiger, 2000). Mashek (1997) found that users rated traditional media sources including newspapers and television as more fair and unbiased than their online equivalents for obtaining political information. Some research around that same period, however, found that Web-based news sources were perceived to be as credible as traditional sources (Online News Association, 2001; Kohut, 1999).

Later research produced more mixed results. Traditional news media have been found to be more credible in some cases (Mehrabi, Hassan, and Ali, 2009; Melican and Dixon, 2008), whereas in other instances online news sources were shown to be more credible (Abdulla et al., 2005). Johnson and Kaye (2010) found that among politically interested Internet users in 2004, online versions of candidate literature and cable and television news (e.g., CNN.com or cbsnews.com) were rated as more credible than their traditional counterparts, although online newspapers were rated equally credible as their print versions, and online news magazines, issue-oriented sources, and radio were rated as less so. As in their earlier studies, Johnson and Kaye (2010) also found that reliance on the Web predicts perceived credibility of a number of online sources of political information, and interestingly, that reliance on traditional media is a strong predictor of an individual’s perception of the credibility of online media.

Collectively, these studies suggest that credibility perceptions of online sources may be changing with time and may depend on a variety of factors, including the extent to which people rely heavily on the Web for news and political information and the degree to which they feel that information online is consistent with their own political perspectives. For example, individuals who felt that the Internet had more information about the Iraq war that was consistent with their own attitude about the conflict rated the Internet as more credible than did those who felt the Internet offered proportionally more counterattitudinal information (Choi, Watt, and Lynch, 2006). As the Internet continues to saturate people’s lives, however, differences in credibility ratings across media may recede as the distinctions among these channels disappear.

Credibility of Political Information in Social Media

Scholars have recently been investigating the special credibility problems posed both by political information carried via social media, including blogs, wikis, and news aggregators, and by political messaging between citizens using email, video sites, and online social networks.

Blogs.

Given their potential for bias relative to mainstream news, and the fact that they typically are not required to adhere to professional standards of reporting, a great deal of recent work has focused on the credibility of blogs. Among their users, political blogs are rated high in believability and depth of information but low on accuracy and fairness (Johnson et al., 2008). Several studies have compared the credibility of blogs to other sources of political information, with mixed results that become coherent when considering characteristics of the evaluator. Those who rely heavily on blogs for political information judge them to be highly credible, even more so than either traditional media sources or online sources of political information such as candidate and issue websites or political chat rooms (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008; Johnson and Kaye, 2009; see also Banning and Sweetser, 2007). However, studies that have used either representative samples or more broad student samples find that blogs are rated lower in credibility than traditional media (Meyer, Marchionni, and Thorson, 2010; Thorson, Vraga, and Ekdale, 2010; Metzger et al., 2011). Moreover, some studies find that reliance on traditional news media negatively predicts blog credibility (except for reliance on political talk radio, which is a positive predictor; Johnson and Kaye, 2004). Political involvement, political knowledge, and information-seeking motivations (Johnson and Kaye, 2004, 2009; Johnson et al., 2008; Kaye and Johnson, 2011) also positively predict users' perceptions of blog credibility.

With regard to source credibility in the blog context, Kaid and Postelnicu (2007) found that regardless of a blogger's own source credibility (i.e., a popular actor versus a senator blogging about the privatization of Social Security), students were very trusting of information in blogs and rated the two sources as equally credible. Indeed, public perceptions of the legitimacy of blogs as information sources may be changing. For example, Messner and Disasto (2008) found that traditional news media, including the major leading newspapers, are increasingly accepting blogs as credible sources for their news stories. Carroll and Richardson (2011) suggest that blogs are changing the criteria for judging credibility, such that expertise, accuracy, and lack of bias are being supplanted by alternative criteria including interactivity, transparency, and source identification. They suggest that a new paradigm for credibility evaluation in this context is required.

Wikipedia.

Although research to date has not focused on the credibility of *Wikipedia* for political information specifically, studies have shown that user-created entries in *Wikipedia* are about as accurate as well-regarded print encyclopedias such as *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Andrews, 2007; Giles, 2005; Williams, 2008), and entries from *Wikipedia* have been evaluated as credible, particularly by area experts (Chesney, 2006). This is true despite Internet users' concerns about the credibility of the information found there (Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders, 2010; Nofrina et al., 2009), which may be driving results of studies showing that people perceive the same information to be less credible if they think it comes from *Wikipedia* than if they think it comes from *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Flanagin and Metzger, 2011; Kubiszewski, Noordewier, and Costanza, 2011). Related to this, and to the information aggregation aspect of the wiki model, Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall (2007) found that source credibility was a powerful cue affecting participants' perception of the credibility of a news story located on a news aggregator website. Well-known and highly credible news sources trumped other credibility cues, including how recently the story was uploaded and the number of related articles.

YouTube.

In an experiment exposing young adults to television networks, candidate websites, YouTube's "YouChoose08" channel, and political candidate pages on Facebook, participants rated television news and political candidate websites more trustworthy and of higher quality than social media sources, including YouTube and Facebook (Towner and Dulio, 2011). Interestingly, however, viewers of YouTube felt greater cynicism toward the government, while those exposed to Facebook felt greater political self-efficacy. Also, those exposed to political information via the social media sources were more likely to vote.

Other research has focused on the content of YouTube videos to see how presentational differences of political issues affect perceptions of credibility. People exposed to one of three YouTube videos about health care that emphasized ethos (the speaker's credibility and expertise on the issue), logos (logical argument and statistical information), or pathos (humorous emotional appeal) reported that they found that the video appealing to ethos was the most credible, suggesting that "users resist being swayed by emotion or hard numbers and pay attention

to message source” (English, Sweetser, and Ancu, 2011, 1). Wallsten (2011) looked at the issue of credibility and politically oriented YouTube videos from another perspective and found that political bloggers avoid posting videos that challenge their ideological positions, choosing instead to link to videos that share their views. The choices that bloggers make, he concludes, play an important role in disseminating biased political information.

Online social networks.

Garrett (2011) found that political information traveling through existing social networks via email is likely to be believed more than the same information found on Web pages, suggesting the utility of relying on social networks of known others as a means of information endorsement. Studying political rumors, he found that while the Internet “accelerates and widens rumor circulation,” it has no impact on recipient credulity, whereas political rumors emailed between friends or family are more likely to be believed. At the aggregate level, this can conceivably pose a threat to factual political knowledge.

Credibility of Other Types and Sources of Political Communication Online

Johnson and Kaye (2009) examined the perceived credibility of blogs, websites that provide information on political issues, electronic mailing lists/bulletin boards, and political chat rooms/instant messaging and found that blogs and political issue-oriented websites were perceived as most credible among these channels. In addition, across three election-year samples (1996, 2000, and 2004) in which they compared credibility ratings of six online sources (i.e., online counterparts of traditional newspapers, news magazines, television, radio, as well as online candidate literature and political issue-oriented websites), Johnson and Kaye (2010) found that political issue-oriented websites and online versions of traditional newspapers are consistently rated somewhat higher in credibility than the other online sources of political information, and candidate literature was deemed to be among the lowest in credibility, due in part to its potentially biased nature. Samples in both of these studies, however, were of politically interested Internet users and are thus not generalizable to the larger Internet population.

Current Perspectives on Source Credibility and Political Communication Online

Contemporary research on credibility examines how the online context creates both challenges and opportunities for identifying credible information, each of which can be considered in the context of how current research relates to political communication processes.

Challenges in Identifying Credible Political Information

Traditional approaches to evaluating credibility include checking the credentials of the information source, considering whether a source may be motivated to produce biased information, and verifying the currency and completeness of information (Metzger, 2007). Yet research shows that people rarely engage in such effortful information evaluation processes, instead relying on heuristic means of credibility assessment (Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders, 2010; Sundar, 2008). Metzger and colleagues, for example, found that reputation and social endorsement serve as positive credibility heuristics, whereas expectancy violations and perceived persuasive intent on the part of sources are negative credibility heuristics used by online information consumers.

Website design and navigation are important credibility heuristics (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007; Wathen and Burkell, 2002) that appear to apply to political information online as well. Chiagouris, Long, and Plank (2008), for example, found that after controlling for prior attitude toward CNN.com and MSNBC.com, ease of use and website design were most important to news consumers’ perceptions of the credibility of these news websites. In spite of recent inroads, however, a good deal more research is needed to understand what heuristics consumers of online information use, and how those heuristics influence their judgments of news and political information.

Opportunities for Identifying Credible Political Information

Digital networked technologies also offer significant opportunities to those seeking political information today. Most obviously, on even the most esoteric concerns, information consumers are currently presented with comprehensive information from a wide variety of sources. Given current Internet penetration rates, the vast

majority of Americans have the capacity to access political information online, particularly among the subpopulations that are most politically concerned, aware, and active. Search engines and other information-processing tools and mechanisms (e.g., threaded online discussions, keyword identification, etc.) help to make these information repositories manageable.

Not only is political information abundant online, but features of the Web environment can also enhance individuals' capacity to accurately ascertain the credibility of information and its sources. For example, mechanisms by which people can compare their assessments of information and sources to others' evaluations can help to verify or invalidate their own opinions. Various online discussion venues (e.g., discussion groups, listservs, and bulletin boards), for instance, provide readily available opportunities for information comparison across diverse sources. Also, a host of tools designed to harness the opinions and experiences of a wide range of individuals (e.g., social information filtering tools or ratings/recommendation systems) can be applied to political information to evaluate it more reliably. Indeed, research shows that the cross-validation of sources is a prominent strategy for determining source and information credibility online (Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders, 2010). To at least some extent, the ease with which cross-validation can be achieved online provides a means of guarding against people's tendency to verify sources and their information suboptimally (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007).

Unanswered Questions

Open issues relevant to the production and consumption of credible online political information include (1) whether credibility may offer a theoretical explanation for selective exposure behavior that has been observed recently in online contexts; (2) the effects on political discussion and polarization when information consumers select sources based on attitude similarity; and (3) whether social media will help political information consumers navigate the sea of choices online, and, if so, the circumstances under which they are most likely to facilitate the creation and location of normatively useful political information. These issues are explored next.

Selective Exposure and Credibility

For three-quarters of a century scholars have documented the disposition of information consumers to selectively expose themselves to attitudinally consistent information sources, as opposed to seeking out a more balanced information diet that includes sources that contradict their preexisting attitudes. Though early work in this domain (Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944) demonstrated that people tend to expose themselves selectively to attitude-consistent information, subsequent reviews were less conclusive (Sears and Freedman, 1967). In some cases, scholars concluded that evidence of selective exposure to belief-confirming sources was not particularly compelling (Kinder, 2003). For a comprehensive synthesis, see Stroud in this volume.

Recent changes to the media environment, however, have prompted reassessment of the potential for selective exposure. The ability of political information consumers to easily select from among a tremendous variety of sources suggests that citizens have greater control than ever over the number and nature of political information sources they rely on, and thus greater opportunity to selectively expose themselves to attitudinally congruent information exclusively. Research supports this view, showing strong support for selective exposure online (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Johnson, Bichard, and Zhang, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2007, 2008), and an overarching tendency of people to seek out news and political information that supports their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. Moreover, selective exposure behavior is particularly pronounced under conditions of abundant information options (Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey, 2008), such as the environment of Web-based political information.

Seeking out attitudinally consistent sources, however, may come at the expense of information credibility. As people pursue attitudinally congruent information, information credibility is potentially jeopardized if they do so without attention to possible bias, the absence of which is a core component of credible information (Metzger et al., 2003). It is interesting, then, that although information consumers recognize the negative features of biased information, they still find attitude-consistent information to be more credible than counterattitudinal information (Kahan et al., 2010). In fact, not only do people tend to attribute higher levels of quality to biased but like-minded sources (Fischer et al., 2005; see also Meyer, Marchionni, and Thorson, 2010; Oyedemi 2010), but there is also evidence that they perceive attitude-consistent information as relatively *impartial* (Kahan et al., 2010). In the

context of political information, the outcome is that people may be prone to ignore traditional credibility cues regarding information or source bias in their pursuit of attitudinally consistent information.

In addition, perceived credibility tends to increase as similarity between source and receiver increases (O'Keefe, 2002) and is also known to increase selection and usage of particular channels or information sources (Wheeless, 1974). Therefore, people may selectively expose themselves to attitudinally consistent information because they find information from similarly minded sources to be more credible. In this way, selective exposure provides a method whereby people are likely to obtain what they perceive as credible information, via perceived commonalities with the source. This linkage between credibility and similarity suggests a possible theoretical mechanism to explain why people selectively expose themselves to like-minded sources. In the context of political information, the net effect is that people may use attitudinally consistent information as a heuristic credibility cue when it originates from sources they perceive as similar to them, regardless of other factors, including bias.

Political Debate and Polarization

Political debate informed by a diversity of opinions forms a cornerstone of democratic engagement. As processes of selective exposure become more prominent among individuals, so too does one-sided issue knowledge, increased opinion rigidity, and group-based differences that suppress open debate. Moreover, as attitudinally congruent sources are boosted in their perceived credibility (as discussed in the previous section), the quality of political information can suffer. When people turn to attitudinally consistent political information from like-minded sources rather than to more "objective" sources of news and political information, political debate can be stifled. Indeed, current perspectives on selective exposure in digital media environments predict heightened political polarization, gridlock, and voter apathy, as well as reduced effectiveness of political campaign communications, as voters become more costly to reach due to their dispersal across vast media channels and outlets for political information.

Not only does research suggest prominent knowledge gaps among those who selectively expose themselves to attitudinally consistent information (Nir, 2011; Sweeney and Gruber, 1984; Ramsey et al., 2010), but selective exposure can also result in group polarization. Stroud (2010), for example, found evidence that repeated selective exposure to attitude-consistent information resulted in increased polarization over time, and Huckfeldt and colleagues (2004) show that attitude-confirming information in one's social network results in being more critical of out-group members with dissimilar opinions (see also Sunstein, 2001, 2009). At the societal level, this type of attitude can result in "cyberbalkanization," or social segregation that results from a number of self-interested subgroups, each of which promotes its own interests to the exclusion of other groups' views (Putnam, 2000; Sunstein, 2001). This phenomenon has raised concerns that Americans are becoming increasingly polarized along ideological lines (see Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). Overall, selective exposure means that people are less likely to experience opinion diversity, thereby potentially constraining the opportunity for informed political debate and opinion formation, as well as for compromise among opposing political groups.

The Role of Social Media and Web 2.0 Tools

When the domain of political information reaches beyond factual accounts of a politician's political platform, voting records, or views about a particular issue, it can begin to implicate citizens in new and diverse ways that are potentially enhanced by social media and Web 2.0 tools. Under conditions in which knowledge is esoteric, is diffused among many individuals, and depends on specific, situational understandings, it is often the case that the most reliable information is gleaned not from a traditional source that has been imbued with authority by virtue of position or status, but rather from a diversity of individuals lacking special training, credentials, or reputation. Indeed, not only are such circumstances common, but given the power of social media, they are increasingly supported by precisely the kinds of tools required to harness the knowledge of those with the most relevant, timely, and important information. These shifts in the provision of information imply updated notions about the location and evaluation of what information and sources are most credible.

For example, the actual impact of public policy decisions is best assessed by evaluating the diversity of effects they have on citizens, who are indeed the only credible sources of such information. Although public opinion polling has traditionally been used for this purpose, social media and Web 2.0 tools serve the same function, for example by providing venues to share experiences, opinions, and messages using tools like social network sites,

microblogging, credentialing tools, and wikis. Although such social media tools lack the representativeness of polling, their output is derived from self-engaged participation rather than solicitation, which it could be argued serves to gauge prevailing sentiment relatively accurately, particularly when aided by such diagnostic tools as trend analyses across topic, geography, and time.

Furthermore, specific instances of information sharing occurring via social media constitute both communication about political topics and instances of political communication itself. Grassroots sociopolitical issues that “go viral” through shared emails and other communication channels, or instances of political activism that take place in both geographic and virtual spaces, are examples of cases in which social software tools facilitate *experiential authority*, or the generation of credible political information by virtue of specific, lived experience. In such instances, rather than mass media or traditional political channels, individuals are the “cognitive authorities” on political matters (Wilson, 1983) and use social media tools to aggregate and publicize their views and vantage points. Sometimes these political acts occur with the aid of traditional mechanisms such as formal organizations that facilitate them, but increasingly they can and do arise absent the structures historically required for their formation, given the affordances of contemporary technologies (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012).

Conclusion

The rich research heritage on source credibility is in many ways fundamentally linked to processes of political communication and the provision of political information. Networked digital technologies have recently complicated the assessment of source credibility, however, by modifying the receiver’s ability to determine source expertise and trustworthiness, which are the foundations upon which credibility evaluations have traditionally rested. Research has begun to address source credibility in online contexts by examining the credibility of digital versus traditional channels, the nature of political information conveyed by social media, and the dynamics of political information online. Nonetheless, important research concerns remain, including the link between credibility and selective exposure to attitudinally consistent information, the potential group polarization that might result, and the role of social media in seeking and delivering credible political information. These concerns suggest both challenges and opportunities as consumers of political information navigate the rich and varied contemporary information environment in search of the knowledge to help them become informed members of a politically engaged citizenry.

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