
Credibility of Information: an Overview of the Concept in the Digital Age

Magdalena Shishenkova

GERiiCO Laboratory, University of Lille, France

Abstract

Purpose/thesis: The primary objective of this paper is to review the concept of credibility of information in the context of the digital environment and in the light of research over the last decade. Its purpose is to synthesize related concepts and trends in perceptions of credibility in interdisciplinary dialogue.

Approach/methods: A review of the relevant scholarly literature. The study sketches how the concept of credibility has emerged in philosophy, psychology, communication and information sciences.

Results and conclusions: A number of constructs associated to credibility have been identified and some related notions in information research in the last decade have been summarized. There is presented a short overview of elements of the digital context, that influence this notion. The author of the article suggests that recent research provides grounds for more than a communicative approach to authority construct and acknowledgment of diversity.

Originality/value: The article extends the dialogue by outlining the scope of the concept, its complexity, together with its multi-disciplinary value.

Keywords

Credibility of information. Digital content. Digital age. User perception.

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1. Introduction

Information credibility is a central consideration in information science when developing a collection or engaging in reference interaction. Whilst information professionals and scientists are trained in how to critically analyse information sources, non-professionals are not armed with the necessary tools to methodologically identify credible information. Nowadays, when digital collections tend to form as miscellaneous masses of information, communication platforms or open access repositories, the user is challenged with multiple issues to resolve. Amongst them are the credibility features of the information they obtain.

Digital, open access environment is defined as democratic by nature. Weinberger noticed, that “The Web (...) breaks the traditional publishing model” (Weinberger, 2002, X). Everyone, having or not having official recognition can express her/his viewpoint, and use and forecast information freely. The latter represents a challenge not only for the mass users, but it also invites information specialists and scientists of all disciplines to rethink the way they trust sources. The knowledge out there might be worthy of knowing according to Surowiecki, especially considering the argument that Google was built and it functions

upon it (Surowiecki, 2004, 16). So does Wikipedia. Collective intelligence can bring an important contribution to science and we cannot afford to ignore it for the sake of the benefits it can bring. The critical issues are, whom and how do we trust? Who and what do we consider credible? These are difficult questions, yet there are attempts to automate the process of selection. This is, for example, reflected in the latest work of Google towards refining search results on the basis of facts and truthfulness (Kottasova, 2015).

Making sense of the concept in the digital age can lead to a better understanding of how the environment influences users' behaviour and vice versa. It can also contribute to the improved management of data quality and the development of information literacy approaches.

In this context, in the present paper I will firstly discuss my motivation to explore the topic. Secondly, I will seek to make sense of the concept of information credibility. Then I will trace how the concept has evolved and been transformed over the last decade. Finally, drawing upon the latter, I will discuss the limitations of and directions for future work.

2. Motivation: Why credibility in digital age?

The attempt to understand the real world has always been the core intellectual preoccupation of science. Today science faces the urge to explore multiple phenomena in a world of human-driven changes. The Web is used extensively by many people and it is important to acknowledge that the collaborative media offers new and, at times, surprising insights about human thinking and actions. In the present time, not only science but also politics and marketing utilize certain instruments to extend the understanding about the user's information seeking behaviour. For example, there is big data at the tips of marketers' fingers to mathematically model expected purchases based on information users' behaviour data. Data only represents figures until it is interpreted in the light of human analysis and judgment. Both scientist and practitioners are still at the very beginning of analysis of big data beyond pure calculations. The starting point in this article is that in information science the concept of credibility in the digital world should be based on a better understanding of how our current reality of interaction in digital environment shapes our thinking in the area of which information is credible. My motivation to seek an understanding of credibility as a concept in the digital age has been inspired by several discussions in interdisciplinary space. Firstly, a number of authors have addressed the impact of the information found on the Web on everyday life. Research in the last decade suggests that the information found in the virtual medium has had a strong impact on real-life decisions such as finances and health (e.g. Betsch et al. 2012; Doty, 2015; Zhao et al. 2015). Individual choices of the source as well as the selected information not only matter, but strongly influence personal life. Therefore, it is important to understand how credibility is viewed by users in the context of the digital environment and to explore how the concept is shaped by the very presence of digital content. Another important catalyst for this article are the discussions both in the scientific and public space concerning the approaches to developing models facilitating choices of information. An example of such a tool is the work in the field of automated extraction of facts from Web pages. Among the many contributors to the topic are a number of Google scientists (Dong, 2015). Their work will certainly have important influence

on information users. How the scientists involved in the field see information credibility could potentially shape the virtual environment and become an essential underlying factor influencing users' information choices. Last, but not least, an inspiration for this paper is the intangible nature of the networked environment. On the Web many choices can dissipate our focus and question our beliefs. The latter, combined with the perplexed and subjective construct of credibility, offers in my view an opportunity to open further discussions in a world of human-driven changes.

3. Making sense of the concept “information credibility”

3.1. *Theoretical framework: philosophy, psychology, communication science*

Credibility is an interdisciplinary concept. It is impossible to encompass everything said about it over time in variety of disciplines. However, I will attempt to situate the concept by briefly outlining some of the viewpoints on it.

We find interpretations of the credibility concept in the work of important philosophers even before epistemology was defined as a field (Goldman et al., 2015). The key questioning, related to credibility in the work of philosophers was related to the judgment of how we know that our knowledge is true and objective or how to distinguish truth from non-truth. Philosophy offers answers to the latter within different frameworks. Generally, these can be divided in three epochs: pre-modernism, modernism, and postmodernism. Pre-modernism regards the ultimate truth as held by God and thus only revealed to humans. Modernism encompasses the 17th to the 20th century and it emphasises reasoning, empiricism and methodology as the only path to truth (Locke, Hume, Descartes, Kant). Relativism regards the truth as a function of the experience of the message perceiver (Hume). The pragmatic approach to knowledge also falls into this time-frame (Peirce, Dewey). In optics of pragmatism, “trust” is contextual, and we trust an assumption/belief unless we have a positive reason to doubt it. On the democratic platform of Web 2.0 the subjective facet has strong foundations as everyone can share, comment, build and argue (Weinberger, 2002; Surowiecki, 2004). Credibility is also associated with power, influence and the source position in society or a professional domain (Foucault, Bourdieu). One can be prevented from knowing due to lack of education/access to knowledge (Flicker). In psychology credibility is often interpreted from a cognition perspective, but also as “believability” (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). The communication model of Shannon & Weaver (message-information-environment-receiver) remains an important framework when interpreting credibility in communication science. Communication studies focus on the media choices and perception of the source of the message, interpersonal transactions, authority and message (Rieh, 2014).

3.2. *Dimensions of credibility in information science: mapping the concept to related terms*

At the core of information and library science is the democratisation of knowledge through assuring access to numerous sources. The latter might not be obtainable in their completeness by the user for multiple reasons such as expense, limited editions, geographic

constraints, language, etc. Libraries by definition select, collect, systemise and make information available. According to Rieh, in information and library science the notion of credibility is heavily “centered on the notion of relevance” (Rieh 2010, XX). In the digital environment, the relevance is only one side of the coin as many of the library procedures and processes are not present. Balancing content, evaluating credibility and value of the sources is an essential process in libraries. In contrast, the digital world concentrates upon accumulating rather than collecting. Thus, the evaluation is left to the user to analyse.

Table 1. Concepts related to credibility

The level of the message	The level of authority/the source	The level of the information user	The level of media (features of a website, database, blog, or other digital platform)
Information quality ^{4, 10, 16, 19} Quality of argumentation ^{10, 16} Factuality ^{10, 16, 20} Quality of the language Information/data integrity ¹² Expression of first-hand experience (anecdotes) ³ Presentation errors ⁷ Believability ^{6, 10, 16} Accuracy ^{1, 10, 16} Coherence/internal consistency ⁵ Freedom from bias, objectivity ^{6, 13} Informativeness, depth ¹⁰ Authenticity ⁹ Currency, relevance ^{1, 4, 10, 15} Usefulness ^{7, 10, 16} Clarity ¹⁶ Structure ¹⁶ Specificity ¹⁶ Completeness ^{6, 16}	Authoritativeness ¹² Cognitive Authority vs Regulatory ^{1, 3, 11} Reliability ¹⁰ Competence ¹⁵ Experience (first-hand) ³ Expertise ^{7, 10, 14} Formal education; scholarliness ⁷ Objectivity ⁹ Officialness ¹⁰ Other characteristics, that may trigger stereotyping (ex. sex) ⁹ Reputation ¹⁰ Degree of formal recognition ² Trust ^{1, 6} Trustfulness, freedom from bias ^{6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14}	Knowledge ^{10, 12} Culture ^{10, 16} Expertise ^{10, 16} Experience ^{10, 16} Stereotypes (religion, political) ^{9, 17} Information need/purpose or research ^{10, 16} Other characteristics, that may trigger stereotyping (ex. sex) ¹⁷	Appearance (Design/interface/organization) ^{2, 13, 18} Accessibility ¹³ Safety ⁸ Information quality Information/data integrity ^{6, 10, 16, 18} Trustworthiness ¹⁴ Authority ^{3, 11} Formal recognition ² Reputation with regard to fact coverage Believability ⁹ Usefulness ^{10, 16} Impartiality/freedom from bias/neutrality/objectivity ^{10, 16} Popularity ¹⁵

Sources:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Beldad, A., et al., 2010 2. Bergson-Michelson, 2012 3. Doty, 2015 4. Metzger & Flanagan, 2013 5. Batini et al. In : Floridi et. al., 2014 6. Metzger & Flanagan, 2015 7. Metzger & Flanagan, 2013 8. Nielek et al. 2013 9. Rieh, 2009 10. Rieh, 2010 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Wilson quoted in Rieh, 2010 12. Choi & Stvilia, B., 2015 13. Lackaff & Cheong, 2008. 14. Rieh et al., 2014 15. Nurse et al., 2014 16. Rieh and Danielson, 2007 17. Savolainen, 2011 18. Flanagan & Metzger, 2007 19. Dong, 2015 |
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In the first place, although it is an intuitive concept, credibility is not a simple construct. Traditionally, in information and library science credibility is seen in relation to retrieval and the preservation of information. Therefore, it is described in terms such as relevance, accuracy, currency, objectivity, usefulness and reliability, etc. (Rieh, 2014). Being a multi-layer construct, the definition of credibility in literature is related to other notions, which are also referred to as dimensions (Choi, 2015) or “sub-factors” (Nurse et al., 2014). Table 1 summarises the related concepts as discussed in literature in the last decade. The proposed categorisation of the levels of credibility is based on the distinction that is elaborated in communication studies and which is influential for the information science as well the ones offered in the table below. The related terms are selected across sources predominantly from the information science literature, but some of them are used also in computer science and communication studies.

Several of the concepts in this summary represent cues for evaluation of credibility in the assessment process. Alternatively they represent characteristics of the authority, source, and message (Rieh & Danielson, 2007). Further, literature suggests that credibility is a subjective perception and the information user perspective has to be taken into consideration (Metzger & Flanagan, 2015; Rieh, 2010; Nielek et al., 2013). The understanding, experience, values, attitudes, culture and other characteristics of the user are crucial for the interpretation of facts.

It is evident, that there is no firm definition of the concept of credibility. However there are number of concepts that stand out. It is interesting for example, that authenticity is one of the pillars for determining the credibility of the message. The concept of credibility is heavily interrelated with its authorship. It is also associated with archival science in its endeavour to preserve unique documents where attribution is crucial. Authenticity is becoming a major concern for Google as well, in replacing popularity, together with the factual and accuracy dimensions:

we define the trustworthiness or accuracy of a Web source as the probability that it contains the correct value for a fact [...] assuming that it mentions any value for that fact (Dong et al., 2015).

4. Concept transformation in the context of digital environment over the last decade

The digital medium sets up a new framework for the notion of credibility. Authors often describe the concept as a function of trust and authority (Choi, 2015; Jiong & Rieh, 2014; Metzger & Flanagan, 2015; Rieh, 2010; Slavolainen, 2011). The Web challenges the judgment of authority and thus leaves the users with less or no basis for judgment. Yet, there is evidence that authority is still presumed to be an important element weighed upon the dichotomy expert – non-expert. According to Doty (2015), the interaction online implies establishing Cognitive authority of the Self and a Cognitive authority of Others. For example, users tend to claim recognition for their opinions by publishing comments such as “Being a nurse I find this article very disturbing. ...” (Doty, 2015, 4). The phrase “Being a nurse” aims to strengthen the health-related statement in the eye of the reader. However, in the virtual world there are limited cues to support such a declaration of competence. Therefore users find ways to handle the uncertainty and deal with it using a variety of strategies with

regard to reliability of information. There are a number of studies regarding the strategies and a summary of typologies of these, concerning credibility is offered by Rieh (2009) (see table 2). According to that research, users also tend to avoid complex cross-checking for their validation of information. While deciding which resource to trust, users pick the information that comes up first as a relevant result. The reason given is that the obtained information satisfies the minimum requirements necessary to meet a particular information need. In the decision making theory of Herbert Simon this phenomenon is known as “satisfying” (Goodrich et al, 2000). In communication and information sciences it is referred to as the heuristics (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

Table 2. Typologies of credibility

Tseng & Fogg typology	Flanagin & Metzger typology
Presumed credibility (based on general assumptions or stereotype) Reputed credibility (endorsement from people, media, source) Surface credibility (from simple inspection) Experienced credibility (based on first-hand experience)	Conferred credibility (recommended or produced by well-regarded entities) Tabulated credibility (influenced by other individual’s ratings or recommendations) Emergent credibility (arises from group and social engagement)

Source: (Rieh, 2009)

The digital environment is complex. Firstly, it offers a shared experience to which probably users would never have access to (in a library for example). In this sense the Internet is a place where “repressed testimony is at last being heard” (Doty, 2015, 7). This is a knowledge users may benefit from (see Surowiecki, 2004, XX). Secondly, according to Jeon and Rieh, in digital content there is a “lack of quality control mechanisms and a limited number of available cues” to assess information (Jeon & Rieh, 2014, 1). That implies a complex situation: a necessity both to judge the credibility of strangers who disseminate information and the reliability of their message while it is impossible to weigh the cognitive authority (Rieh et al, 2014). The digitized environment is a platform that allows equal possibility for each and every participant in the discourse to express oneself. It is egalitarian by nature. It is not yet stratified in the way that societies are. Although the user is independent while making decisions online, she/he is prone to certain biases. Scientists discuss number of phenomena on the Web such as echo chambers or reinforcing beliefs inside an “enclosed” system; networking while interacting for obtaining information online; and the bandwagon effect or the tendency to follow the beliefs of others (Weinberger, 2002; Pentland, 2014). Along the same lines, Lankes suggests that in the digital environment we observe a shift from “cognitive authority” to “reliability” (coherence across sources) (Lankes, 2008, 220). Lankes also supports Dervin (2011) in describing knowledge as created through conversation. The notion of “expertise” in its traditional sense is no longer applicable with the expansion of the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004). Thirdly, discussing Wikipedia, Garfinkel notices that “within this framework it is not about >>truth<<, but rather about >>verifiability<< and the >>neutral point of view<<” (Garfinkel, 2008). The results of research by Zhao et al. which focused on elderly population financial decisions suggested that access to “neutral” sources benefits decision-making even in the circumstances of uncertainty (Zhao et al., 2015).

Further, the ease of discovery of information in digital environment challenges the credibility notion in information science in the part of its relevancy. How fast and easy the users find information in linked environment becomes an essential feature of credibility. Weinberger (2015, XX) gives a useful example with regard to that, referring to the libraries “as [library] information becomes harder to find, it becomes less relevant”.

Thus, the users apply the heuristics strategy in order to “shortcut” through the information for the sake of efficacy (Metzger et al., 2010). In these terms, technology sets up a completely different framework with regard to the conceptualising credibility: the Web implies operational approaches to credibility. For example, the influential Google literacy lessons on the Web offer a paradigm for judgment based on “how much you find X believable/consistent with your beliefs” (Bergson-Michelson, 2012, 8:00”).

The linked environment is another aspect of digital content that contributes to the transformation of the notion of “credibility”. For example, Google PageRank algorithm is based extensively on linking potentiality of the Internet and, thus, until lately, it has been built upon the popularity of sources (Brabazon, 2006; Dong, 2015). However, Google has reconsidered its mechanism in the view of credibility. A Google Research team has estimated factuality as important when extracting information from the Web and they have recently made a strong contribution to the automatic evaluation of accuracy. Knowledge Based Trust (KBT) is a concept that contributes to the understanding of credibility in the digital age. KBT has been interpreted as correspondence of the data present on a Web page to the real-world facts (Dong, 2015). Even with imperfections of the developed probabilistic model, the work suggests that in the future ranking will no longer be matter of pure linking or popularity (Dong et al., 2015). Of course, this contribution only in part covers the complex notion of credibility. It is definitely a major shift on the Internet that is worthy of acknowledgment.

Finally, features of media/source such as visual representation have an important role in perceiving a message as being reliable (Metzger et al., 2010; Lankes, 2008; Nurse et al., 2014). If in the past the visual features of an encyclopaedia were of less importance to judging its credibility, unless probably the weight of a volume, today the design matters.

The credibility in digital environment differs from the credibility in traditional systems in certain aspects. More specifically, the concept is more dynamic, time-sensitive and open to dialogue. It is subjective, relative and situational, it is a function of user’s knowledge, goal of the search and other people’s judgments in the networked environment (Rieh, 2010).

5. Conclusion

A person or a medium is judged credible because the information coming from her/him/it is unbiased, balanced (neutral), relevant to the topic researched, independent and soundly grounded on facts. Recent research suggests that in the digital world the credibility of the message has gained prevalence over the “authority of the source”. As authority features are often harder to be determined, because of the substantial limits of the environment, they no longer can be leading credibility factors. Personal testimonials are easy to access and dialog between users is a standard. Attribution of the message still matters yet the role of the users’ personal experience is now more important than ever. In addition, elements

of the message and its structure are emerging as more relevant to users' judgments. Dialogue and communicative approach to information is therefore becoming a standard in credibility determination as it is a prerequisite set by the networked environment. In this context future research in information science can focus individual strategies to credibility assessment through communicative approach (Dervin, 2011). In the upcoming research on information quality, researchers can concentrate on how the digital environment sharpens users' sensitivity for science-based evidence and facts-based argumentations. Complexity of the credibility construct implies constant acknowledgment of diversity and therefore a cross-cultural orientation of future research is suggested.

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Wiarygodność informacji w epoce cyfrowej: przegląd wybranych koncepcji

Abstrakt

Cel/teza: Podstawowym celem artykułu jest prezentacja wybranych koncepcji wiarygodności informacji w odniesieniu do środowiska cyfrowego z ostatnich dziesięciu lat. Dodatkowym celem badań była próba syntetycznego ujęcia pojęć związanych z zagadnieniem wiarygodności informacji w ujęciu interdyscyplinarnym.

Koncepcja/metody badań: W badaniach zastosowano metodę analizy i krytyki piśmiennictwa. Uwzględniono również próby interpretacji pojęcia wiarygodności informacji w ujęciu filozoficznym, psychologicznym oraz z punktu widzenia nauki o komunikacji oraz informacji naukowej.

Wyniki i wnioski: W artykule wskazano na kilka konstruktów pojęciowych związanych z pojęciem wiarygodności oraz scharakteryzowano próby ich interpretacji w kontekście badań nad informacją w ostatnich dziesięciu latach. Przedstawiono również zagadnienie wpływu środowiska cyfrowego na postrzeganie zjawiska wiarygodności informacji. W artykule stwierdzono, że dotychczasowe wyniki badań dają podstawę do dalszych dociekań nad zjawiskiem wiarygodności informacji wykraczających poza ujęcie komunikacyjne.

Oryginalność/wartość poznawcza: Zaprezentowane wyniki badań stanowią głos w dyskursie naukowym, którego przedmiotem jest zagadnienie wiarygodności informacji poprzez charakterystykę jego zakresu pojęciowego i wewnętrznej złożoności oraz jego multidyscyplinarny charakter.

Słowa kluczowe

Wiarygodność informacji. Treści cyfrowe. Epoka cyfrowa. Percepcja użytkownika informacji.

MAGDALENA SHISHENKOVA holds Master of Information Science degree from University of Montreal, Canada and works as a Clinical Research Associate. She is a doctoral candidate at the University of Lille. Her interests are in the field of knowledge organization and credibility of information.

Contact to the Author:

magdalena.shichenkova@etu.univlille3.fr

GERiiCO Laboratory

Université de Lille 3

Domaine universitaire du «Pont de Bois», BP 60149, 59653 – Villeneuve d'Ascq Cédex, France