

Chapter 2

No Shortcuts to Credibility Evaluation: The Importance of Expertise and Information Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that as the online informational landscape continues to expand, shortcuts to source credibility evaluation, in particular the revered checklist approach, falls short of its intended goal, and this method cannot replace the acquisition of a more formally acquired and comprehensive information literacy skill set. By examining the current standard of checklist criteria, the authors identify problems with this approach. Such shortcuts are not necessarily effective for online source credibility assessment, and the authors contend that in cases of high-stakes informational needs, they cannot adequately replace the expertise of information professionals, nor displace the need for proper and continuous information literacy education.

INTRODUCTION

While even Aristotle recognized the value of credible information and the problem of source credibility evaluation, the Internet era has made possible an information revolution that brings new urgency to the question of how to promote information literacy. Living in a world as digital citizens, there is no choice but to navigate and reevaluate this ever growing information landscape; however, as predatory sources set informational snares, the navigation of our vast informational world is becoming increasingly difficult without a robust credibility assessment toolkit at our disposal.

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No Shortcuts to Credibility Evaluation

This chapter argues that as the informational landscape continues to expand, shortcuts to source credibility assessment designed to aid information seekers in dependably judging the credibility of a source or the content of a website cannot replace the acquisition of a more comprehensive set of information literacy competencies, especially since source credibility evaluation is just one of the several interrelated components of information literacy. Not all content requires thorough evaluation; in fact, research shows that information seekers do not assess source credibility for all content equally, and source credibility evaluation is most crucial during searches for high-stakes information, where misinformation can be most damaging, as, for example, when sifting through sources offering health-related content. The authors contend that shortcuts are not effective for online source credibility assessment, and shortcuts such as checklists cannot adequately replace the expertise of information professionals, nor displace the need for comprehensive lifelong information literacy education.

BACKGROUND: CONCEPTUALIZING CREDIBILITY

In the context of information quality, credibility is often understood in terms of the believability of some information in virtue of the perceived trustworthiness of its source (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1963). Miriam J. Metzger (2007) argued that credibility is “a multifaceted concept with two primary dimensions: expertise and trustworthiness” (p. 2078).

Source trustworthiness, however, when not conjoined with expertise (see Ericsson et al. [1993] for an account of expertise acquisition), need not be a necessary component of credibility. From an epistemological perspective:

One need not demonstrate trustworthiness to secure credibility. One can, for example, secure it externally, by providing evidence that one has reason for being truthful even though the reason functions independently of one's goodwill. One can say to another: “I know that you don't trust me, but you nonetheless have reason to believe what I say; if what I say is false, I will suffer the consequences. (Strudler, 2009, p. 142)

What this suggests is that, logically speaking, the relation between Metzger's two primary dimensions of credibility places expertise at the center of the concept of credibility, with trustworthiness as an emergent property realized in the presence of expertise. Unfortunately, research has shown that credibility is not always evaluated in this manner, which is part of the bigger problem. In fact, studies have found that people are rarely conscientious enough to expend the required energy to evaluate the source credibility of the information they find online (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Scholz-Crane, 1998).

Such things as website design and the perceived character, rather than expertise, of the source play into the trust and persuasion of the average information seeker. Although such studies have been conducted in the context of online credibility, this is not a new phenomenon by any means. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, for example, in his *Rhetoric*, pointed to three means of persuasion, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* (McKeon, 1941, p. I.3, 1358a1337ff), which, in our context, can be understood as three sources of credibility evaluation. *Ethos* pertains to the perceived character of the speaker, *pathos* to the emotional state of the receiver, and *logos* to the logical organization of the content or the argument itself.

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