# Chapter 14
# Does Credibility Count?
## Singaporean Students' Evaluation of Social Studies Web Sites

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## ABSTRACT

*Two studies investigated Singaporean junior college students' determinations of the credibility of social studies Web sites. In the first study, participants selected Web sites that they determined to provide objective and accurate representations of their topics, provided reasons for their selection, and described Web site authors' vested interests. They also selected Web sites that illustrated misrepresentations, explained why, and described authors' vested interests. Finally, they rated their own competence and confidence about different aspects of Web site information accuracy. Qualitative analyses of participants' written comments revealed a strong awareness of political vested interests of Web site authors, a topic that had not emerged in previous research. In the second study, analyses of students' responses to questionnaires about a more credible and a less credible Web site provided by their instructor indicated that students rated the more credible Web site higher. Students' ratings of their general confidence in evaluating Web sites on accuracy/truthfulness as well as their confidence in detecting misrepresentations in Web sites were used as criteria in a reduced multiple regression model. Results showed that students generally differed in their perception of the two Web sites. Implications for future research are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

How do college students and others decide whether information on Web sites is credible or not? What factors affect their determinations? Answering these questions is crucial not only for instructors and researchers interested in improving students' learning and research skills, but is also central to those invested in fostering an educated populace with effective technological literacy skills. As explained in an issue paper from the Educational Testing Services (ETS) (ETS, 2005):

*"There is a growing consensus among faculty, curriculum directors and library services staff that, despite coming of age with the Internet and other technology, today's college students might not have the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy skills — the ability to effectively research and communicate using technology — necessary to navigate and make good use of the overabundance of information available today. Just because someone can navigate to a Web site, or even knows how to construct Web sites, it does not mean that the person can identify reliable, authoritative resources from the Web or know how to best interpret and communicate a Web site's content via a well-supported argument. In other words, technological competence alone does not equal ICT literacy (p. 2)."*

The need for accurate Web site credibility determinations, and for education and research in this area is underscored by a preliminary study of more than 6,300 high school and college students, over 50% of whom could not accurately judge a Web site's degree of objectivity (ETS, 2006). Furthermore, at least at the high school level, teachers often assume it is the responsibility of *another* teacher (most often the English teacher) to provide instruction in these areas (Nguyen, 2000).

In order to begin to address these needs, the present paper provides a definition of credibility, reviews prior research addressing students' cred-ibility determinations, and presents two studies examining Singaporean students' credibility determinations related to social studies Web sites. Finally, instructional and research implications are described.

First, Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Stanford, and Tauber (2002) have provided a useful definition of credibility in the context of critical Web site information evaluation:

*"Credible information is believable information… People perceive credibility by evaluating multiple dimensions simultaneously. In general, these dimensions can be categorized into two key components: trustworthiness and expertise. The trustworthiness component refers to the goodness or morality of the sources and can be described with terms such as well intentioned, truthful, or unbiased. The expertise component refers to described with terms such as knowledgeable, reputable, or competent (p. 9)."*

In addition to these dimensions, various other factors have been associated with Web site credibility determinations. For example, research by Fogg et al. (2002) indicated that users delineated reasonable ways to evaluate credibility in commercial Web site contexts, including examining privacy policies. However, when users were confronted with actual Web site evaluation tasks, they relied most heavily on visual design features *not* on the other criteria that they had earlier reported. This finding also illustrates the somewhat slippery nature of people's credibility determinations

In another study, university-level computer science students made Web site accuracy or credibility determinations associated with computer science Web sites selected by the authors that were highly credible or very inaccurate (Crosby, Iding, Auernheimer, & Klemm, 2002). In contrast to other research (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) in which novice participants tended to inflate their own competence and experts tended to underestimate their competence, in this research more

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