Chapter 15

Whose News Can You Trust?
A Framework for Evaluating the Credibility of Online News Sources for Diaspora Populations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes a framework for analyzing the credibility of online news sites, allowing diaspora populations to evaluate the credibility of online news about their home countries. A definition of credibility is established as a theoretical framework for analysis, and a framework of seven elements is developed based on the following elements: accuracy, authority, believability, quality of message construction, peer review, comparison, and corroboration. Later, those elements are applied to a variety of online news sources available to the Zimbabwean diaspora that serves as a case study for explaining the framework. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the framework in relation to some contextual circumstances of diaspora populations and presents some limitations of the framework as diaspora populations might actually apply the different elements.

INTRODUCTION

Metzger (2007) suggested people need to "know when and how to exercise" (p. 2089) the skills needed to evaluate credibility of information on the Internet. No matter what framework a user applies to evaluate the credibility of online news, it is important to realize that user motivation is key (Metzger, 2007). As a responsible global citizen, users of online news need to make an effort to seek out online sources of news that are cred-

ible, recognizing the "negative consequences of misinformation online" (Metzger, 2007, p. 2089). Fritch (2003) argued living "in an information-rich, networked world" (p. 327) requires all users to take individual responsibility for making assessments about the credibility of the information they consume.

It can be argued that populations living in a diaspora may have added motivation to seek credible news about their home countries given their concerns about identity maintenance and

challenges to that identity maintenance as they live and work in host countries and cultures. In addition, diaspora populations are motivated to seek connections to home, and some of those connections are kept up through the consumption of news. "Under conditions of high motivation, online information seekers will likely pay more attention to information quality cues and perform more rigorous information evaluation than when motivation is lower" (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010, p. 416).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) argued that the Internet is a medium that increases the need for people to apply judgments to the news that they consume and that a journalist's role is to help the audience make sense of all the information available online. The aim of the digital literacy movement is, in part to, "assist Internet users in developing the skills needed to critically evaluate online information" (Metzger, 2007, p. 2079). Drawing on findings in the literature, this chapter proposes a framework to help diaspora populations evaluate the credibility of online news about their home countries. Online sources available to those in the Zimbabwean diaspora are used as case study examples to which the framework is applied.

The framework suggests a set of criteria that defines credibility that diaspora populations might use to analyze the credibility of online news about their home countries. These questions, based around the framework, will be explored:

- Is this true? (Accuracy)
- Does this source seem qualified? (Authority)
- Does this news report seem like it is reporting something that could happen? (Believability)
- Does the report show evidence of professionalism and is it free of obvious errors in form? (Quality of Message Construction)
- What are other users saying about this site? (Peer Review)

- Does this source live up to the standards set by other credible sites? (Comparison)
- Can this information be found on other sites too? (Corroboration)

The objectives of the chapter are to establish criteria for defining credibility, to apply those variables to online news sources available to those living in the Zimbabwean diaspora, and to explain the utility of those ideas for other diaspora populations in making decisions about the credibility of online news about their home countries.

Defining Credibility Online

Chiagouris, Long and Plank (2008) pointed out that "although news may be reported accurately through a website news source, the news will not automatically be perceived by consumers as credible" (p. 544). Simply reporting news accurately will not ensure that audiences perceive that news as credible. While we speak of something being credible–having or lacking credibility–that evaluation lies in the minds of the audience, and does not actually reside in the thing being evaluated. Of course, various elements of a news source impact an audience's evaluations of credibility, but credibility lies in the mind of the user of an online news source, not in the source itself. As Rottenberg (2003) argued, credibility is the *audience's belief* about the knowledge, dependability and good intention of the source. So, conceptualizing credibility as *existing in the minds of the audience* is an important first step in exploring the concept of credibility.

In order to develop a framework of credibility for applying to online news sites, it is necessary to define what is meant by credibility. An audience's perceptions of credibility "are the result of multiple dimensions of assessment…" (Robins, Holmes & Stansbury, 2010, p. 14). Chiagouris, Long and Plank (2008) suggested that from an audience perspective "credibility issues arise from

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