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Contemporary News Production and Consumption

Implications for Selective Exposure,
Group Polarization, and Credibility

ETHAN HARTSELL, MIRIAM J. METZGER,
and ANDREW J. FLANAGIN

Individuals currently have access to an unprecedented number of sources for news information obtained via digital media, including traditional news organizations, blogs, social networking sites, and microblogs.[1] This diverse media environment is characterized by a number of changes in news generation and coverage, media consumption, and perceptions about the credibility of news information.

The way news is produced has been fundamentally changed by the proliferation of digital networks and social media software. Rather than relying on monolithic news organizations to collect and communicate current events, individuals can now be active producers and disseminators of news content, through independent blogs, Twitter, CNN's iReport, and via many other means. In many cases, the traditional notion of authorship has become blurry. For example, rather than relying on a single, credentialed author to write a news article, groups of authors with no journalism credentials can work together using collaborative software like wikis or by re-posting and commenting on content and then linking to other sources or websites. Rather than relying on a single professional editor to fact-check and proof content, news articles can be reviewed and edited by thousands of readers empowered to give instant feedback.

Correspondingly, many independent blogs and collaborative news sites, appealing to partisan niches, have eschewed the traditional standard of objectivity in news reporting. This is exacerbated by similar changes in established

news organizations. As traditional print and television news outlets have waned in popularity, there is evidence that they are, to some extent, being replaced by sources that slant their news coverage (Abrahamson, 2006; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Coe et al., 2008). Consequently, a great deal of the news available today appears not to adhere to the traditional standards of news objectivity that guided news reporting for more than a century. Journalism thus appears to be shifting to some extent from objective news reportage to "news with a view," as exemplified by Fox News, MSNBC, and blogs like Red State and Liberal Oasis.

A number of criticisms have been levied against the new methods of news generation and presentation. Generally, detractors deride the decreased professionalism and lack of ethical standards in social media like blogs, microblogs, and wikis. Critics perceive social media as offering little more than poorly written, unedited, and biased analyses of news events. Skeptics also attack news subjectivity for confirmation bias. That is, they fear that when opinion-confirming news sources are readily available consumers will selectively expose themselves to like-minded sources and avoid outlets that convey an opposing ideology. Finally, many scholars are concerned that audience fragmentation and selective exposure will be detrimental to a democratic society. Specifically, citizens may become less knowledgeable about the complexities that surround important issues and become more rigid in their own beliefs, resulting in a highly-polarized nation.

In this chapter we consider these issues by describing changes in the media environment and examining the apparent shift toward increasingly subjective news presentation. To do so, we briefly review a historical move away from, and then back toward, a partisan press and its implications for the credibility of news information. We also assess how user-generated news (UGN) and selective exposure link to individuals' preferences for attitude-congruent information. Next, we examine the relationship between credibility and news bias, while articulating new theoretical avenues to understand this relation. Finally, we discuss the implications of increased subjectivity in news — especially what a rise in post-objective journalism means for both news credibility and concerns about increased societal polarization.

News Objectivity, Past and Present

Beginning in the 1790s with the creation of the first organized political parties, newspapers reported along partisan lines (Robertson, 2001). Similarly, from the late-18th to mid-19th centuries, newspapers routinely covered news about the parties they supported, favorably edited the speeches of candidates

they endorsed, and ignored news about members of opposing parties (Schud-son, 2001). Objective reporting only gained momentum toward the end of the 19th century, and became standard within the news industry in the 20th century.

Recent changes to the technological and social landscape, however, appear to signal a return to more partisan news coverage. A striking development within many mainstream news outlets is the presence of partisan reporting. Cable news especially has seen a trend toward becoming more partisan in recent years, with Fox News (by far the most popular cable news station) taking a conservative stance on issues and MSNBC offering a liberal alternative (Abrahamson, 2006; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Coe et al., 2008). These cable news providers have seen an increase in their viewership as well, while CNN, which values neutrality in reporting, has experienced a decrease in viewers since 2009 (Carter, 2010).[2] The trend toward partisan news is even more evident on the Internet, where the most popular blogs are often overtly liberal or conservative (Meraz, 2008).

The re-emergence of partisan news, coupled with greater opportunity for amateur news content production and dissemination via digital and social media forms, has several implications for the credibility of news information, and for how news consumers themselves determine credibility. For a long time, news credibility was equated to objectivity in news analysis and reporting. Absence of bias, professional fact-checking, and journalist credentials have traditionally comprised the benchmarks for credibility. However, the marked rise of both partisanship and UGN, coupled with recent changes in the news and media industries, are complicating and, in some cases, overturning traditional objectivity approaches as credibility markers. In this chapter, we examine whether people are adapting to these changes in news by altering their criteria for judging a news outlet's credibility.

User-Generated News: Characteristics and Credibility

The return of the partisan press represents only one of several recent changes in the ways news is generated and presented. In particular, consumers have more power in producing information than ever before (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). User-generated news, for example, includes sources like blogs (e.g., Drudge Report), microblogs (e.g., Twitter), and CNN's iReport, that are frequently associated with the shift from top-down to bottom-up information generation. UGN news sources also include news

aggregators like Yahoo! News and Google News, both of which use algorithms to rank stories according to their popularity. Wikipedia, the online collaborative encyclopedia, might also be characterized as a news source, as it is frequently updated to include current events. These sources belie objectivity in several ways.

The most salient example of UGN subjectivity is in *how* information about issues is presented. Many of the most popular blogs take positions at extreme ends of the political spectrum (Meraz, 2008), and bloggers tend to link to websites that share their personal biases, resulting in "echo chambers" that amplify their political ideologies (Garrett, 2009). Blogs are also subjective in *which* issues they choose to report. Institutional biases notwithstanding, traditional news sources endeavor to cover issues that are important and relevant to a great number of people, and to cover them "objectively" (e.g., presenting opposing sides of controversial issues) so as to capture the largest possible audience share while not alienating news consumers whose views fall on either side of an issue (Mindich, 1998). By contrast, many bloggers and microbloggers primarily discuss personally-important issues through a unique, idiosyncratic lens (McKenna, 2007).

Not surprisingly, UGN sources have been met with criticism and are considered by some to lack credibility. Critics contrast UGN sources with traditional journalism, which operates under established codes of ethics. For example, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (1996) states that journalists should not plagiarize, and should avoid conflicts of interest, identify sources whenever possible, and distinguish between reporting and commentary. Newspapers and magazines are seen as better written than blogs and other social media sources because of the extensive training reporters go through before entering the workforce. Moreover, traditional journalism articles are perceived as generally more trustworthy because of codes of ethics and accountability for misreporting, and more complete if there is a balance between fact-based accounts and cause-effect interpretive reporting (Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, & Soon, 2009; Keen, 2007; Usher, 2010).

Accordingly, many researchers, professional journalists, and news consumers dismiss the news value of blogs (Sweetser, 2007). Some argue that blogs offer a great deal of analysis without any actual reporting, relying instead on traditional news sources to break stories (Bardach, 2008). Others have been critical about the lack of professionalism of many blogs, arguing that bloggers-as-journalists are inferior writers and tend more toward the distortion of events in comparison to traditional journalists (Keen, 2007). Much of this fear is fueled by a sense that the transition to online reporting has resulted in a loosening of standards and an increase in carelessness in newsgathering (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

Potential Advantages of User-Generated News

In spite of these concerns, there are a number of potential benefits to be derived from increasingly user-generated, and often subjective, news accounts. For instance, in the case of international coverage, traditional news reporters from foreign outlets often lack relevant local expertise and are subject to official and institutional constraints (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2011). In the case of local coverage, traditional media tend to be more conservative in their treatment of controversial issues, often leaving out relevant information and showing deference to the government (Song, 2007). In contrast, UGN allows individuals to report openly about crises and controversial topics from multiple perspectives, relatively unfettered from government or institutional interference or influence. For example, Egyptians used Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to distribute reports of the 2011 uprising that occurred within that country (Preston, 2011).

Social media also benefits from the expertise of users, which comes from individuals who are "cognitive authorities in the sphere of their own experience, on matters they have been in a position to observe or undergo" (Wilson, 1983, p. 15). CNN's iReport.com, for instance, allows users to upload video, audio, pictures, and personal accounts of news events, as well as to provide links to other websites that contain relevant information. Stories are organized based on number of views, how often they have been shared among users, and how many comments have been made on them. Although individual contributions to sites like iReport are most certainly subjective, an aggregate of many user reports could potentially present a more complete account of an event than a single journalist could ever create.

Indeed, perhaps the most compelling benefit of UGN is its ability to harness the so-called "wisdom of the crowd" in creating information. Such crowd wisdom can be a superior form of news generation and distribution when it allows individuals to fill gaps in each others' knowledge and create more complete information (Chi, Pirolli, & Lam, 2007). Mistakes are also more likely to be caught in a timely manner through collective information generation techniques than through traditional news creation. Wikipedia and blog articles essentially have hundreds, if not thousands, of "editors" searching for errors, in contrast to traditional news sources, which rely on a few editors to check stories before they are published (Sunstein, 2007).

Of course, there are limits to the power of the wisdom of the crowd. Sunstein (2007) argued that collaboration works best when a group is comprised primarily of experts or those possessing requisite knowledge in some area, because then each member of the group has a better chance of being right than wrong. Surowiecki (2004) argued that collective knowledge gen-

eration is best when crowds are diverse, when group members are independent and not influenced by other group members, when the group is decentralized, and when an apparatus exists to aggregate their contributions. Some UGN sources, but certainly not all, fit these criteria.

Independence also allows bloggers to play a valuable role as a sort of Fifth Estate, policing both the government and traditional news institutions. In a survey of 140 blogs, McKenna and Pole (2008) found that 80 percent of bloggers reported on bias or omissions in the traditional media. Independent news producers are also not beholden to government sources of information. Blogs offer journalists and users alike the time and autonomy to cover in depth issues they passionately care about (Carpenter, 2010; Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007). Although this can lead to biased reporting, it also may expose scandals like Trent Lott's 2002 announcement of support for Strom Thurmond's decades-old, segregation-based presidential campaign, and "Rathergate" in 2004-2005.[3]

Perceptions of UGN Credibility

Determining a news source's "actual" credibility is quite difficult, if not impossible. Not only is credibility a subjective concept, but news from a traditional source such as *The New York Times* can be inaccurate, despite all of the safeguards in place to ensure its accuracy. On the other hand, information from a personal blog can be completely accurate despite the author's lack of professional training. As a result of the inherent complexity in determining credibility, little research exists that empirically examines whether UGN sources are actually more or less credible than traditional sources. However, scholars have tried to answer this question by looking at public *perceptions* of UGN credibility, and some interesting patterns have emerged from the data.

Generally speaking, news consumers perceive that blogs and other nontraditional online news sources are low-to-moderately credible (Metzger et al., 2011; Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010). In a survey of Internet users, for example, only about 30 percent of news consumers thought *Salon*, the *Huffington Post*, *Slate*, and the *Drudge Report* were believable news sources (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). Credibility ratings for traditional media outlets have been steadily declining easily since the 2000s, although mainstream media are still generally rated as higher in credibility than UGN sources (Pew Research Center, 2010). In surveys that ask respondents to compare the credibility of online and offline information directly, results have been more mixed, revealing wide variations in perceived credibility of online news sources

(Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, in press; Johnson & Kaye, 2010; Kiousis, 2001; Kohut, 1999; Mehrabi, Hassan, & Ali, 2009; Melican & Dixon, 2008; Online News Association, 2001; Schweiger, 2000).

The inconsistent results found in these studies suggest that news consumers' credibility perceptions may depend on several factors beyond simply whether information appears on the Internet or not. One factor is experience using online and UGN news sources. In a series of surveys of politically-interested Internet users, Johnson and Kaye (2004, 2009) found that people who heavily rely on blogs for news information find them more credible than mainstream sources, and that the more a person relies on blogs for news information, the more that person perceives that blogs are credible (Mehrabi, Hassan, & Ali, 2009; Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008).

Another factor is experience generating online news. Cassidy (2007) found that online journalists rated UGN as significantly more accurate, comprehensive, fair, and believable than print journalists, who rated online news as low in accuracy, comprehensiveness, fairness, and believability. Moreover, in a 2009 survey by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, professional (but offline) journalists indicated that the proliferation of online news sources has led to a loosening of journalistic standards, less diligence in reporting, and more superficial reporting. There is some evidence, however, that perceptions of blog credibility are changing. Messner and Distaso (2008) found a greater acceptance by traditional news media of blogs as legitimate sources for news stories. Recently, scholars have suggested that blogs may alter the way that people judge news credibility, supplanting traditional credibility markers including expertise, accuracy, and lack of bias with alternative credibility criteria such as interactivity, transparency, and source identification (Carroll & Richardson, 2011; Kang, 2010; Yang & Lim, 2009).

In sum, many of the typical criticisms of UGN appear to overstate flaws in UGN sources while ignoring their ability to provide credible news information. These criticisms also make assumptions about the objectivity of traditional sources that do not always withstand scrutiny. Nonetheless, it is still true that most UGN sources, especially blogs, tend to report from a partisan perspective, which raises legitimate concerns about information credibility and news consumption behavior. If credibility is equated with objectivity, for example, there is cause for concern about the future production of credible (i.e., objective) news information. Moreover, the question remains whether individuals avail themselves of the diverse sources at their fingertips to receive balanced accounts of events, or whether they only rely on news outlets that report from consonant political attitudes and opinions. Thus, news ecology forces may be pushing toward reduced objectivity and increased partisanship not only on the supply side of the news industry, but on the demand side as well.

Selective Exposure to Attitude-Congruent Information

Selective exposure to attitude-congruent information (i.e., partisan selective exposure) predates the Internet. In the 1940s, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) found evidence that during presidential campaigns voters selectively attended to messages that supported their preferred candidate. Later in that decade, researchers found evidence of selective exposure to information on United States foreign policy (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947) and blood donation (Cartwright, 1949). However, research on partisan selective exposure in subsequent decades was less conclusive. For instance, Sears and Freedman (1967) reviewed two decades' worth of research on selective exposure and concluded that some studies supported the selective exposure hypothesis, while others showed that people had no preference for attitude-consistent or inconsistent information. They also found research that indicated some people preferred information that *disconfirmed* their beliefs (see also reviews by Cotton, 1985; Frey, 1986). These mix of findings caused some scholars to conclude that people do not actively seek out sources that confirm their beliefs (Kinder, 2003).

It is not surprising that scholars in the pre-digital age found little support for selective exposure, given that partisan sources were not nearly as prolific or as easily obtained as they are today. Today's media consumption environment, however, shows more consistent evidence of selective exposure. Two factors help make this so: (1) changes in the presentation of news toward more partisan coverage, and (2) increases in individuals' ability to use digitally-networked technologies to control their exposure to news sources and issues.

Selective Exposure in the Contemporary Media Environment

Indeed, selective exposure has been re-examined in the contemporary media context and, so far, support for it is robust. For example, Stroud (2008) found that 64 percent of Republicans consistently relied on at least one conservative news source, while only 26 percent of Democrats consistently used a conservative news source. Moreover, 76 percent of liberals relied on at least one liberal source, compared to 43 percent of conservatives. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) similarly found that when given a choice among five news sources (Fox News, CNN, BBC, NPR, and an unattributed source),

conservatives significantly preferred Fox News over any other, while liberal participants avoided Fox News (although they did not converge on any source more than the others). While these studies generally focused on traditional media, the authors suggested that changes in the media environment since the 1990s may be driving the recent positive findings for selective exposure to attitudinally-congruent information. Indeed, the selective exposure phenomenon may be even more pronounced online, where maintaining readership may be contingent on taking a side. The online news landscape is populated by a diverse array of bloggers, the most popular of whom take an aggressive stance at either the liberal or conservative end of the ideological spectrum (Meraz, 2008). Accordingly, there has been recent empirical support for the existence of selective exposure within the blog context. Johnson, Bichard, and Zhang (2009), for instance, found that blog readers have a tendency to visit blogs that share their political predispositions and avoid blogs that challenge them.

Both source bias and story bias appear to impact people's decisions when selecting a source of news information online, as well as how long they will consume the information. Garrett (2009) found that individuals were more likely to view online stories, and stick with them longer, if they think the accounts confirm their opinions, and experience a slight aversion to information that appears to disconfirm their opinions. Similarly, Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2009) found that people chose attitude-congruent sources of online news information significantly more often than counter-attitudinal sources when cued to story bias by article headlines, and spent more time reading attitude-congruent stories after choosing them.

Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey (2008) also found evidence for selective exposure to attitude-consistent information under conditions of abundant content choice. Under high-choice conditions (10 available sources compared to only a few), individuals preferred attitude-congruent information. Fischer, Jonas, Frey, and Schultz-Hardt (2005) also found that placing limits on the amount of information for which an individual can search heightens selective exposure. This study also reflects actual Internet search behavior, in that individuals typically have a limited amount of time and energy that they are willing to spend on information searches online.

Most strikingly, fears about the effect of partisan news on information consumption behaviors appear to be justified. While research on selective exposure to attitude-congruent sources found limited support for the phenomenon before the proliferation of ideologically-biased sources, research on selective exposure in the current media environment consistently supports the phenomenon. It appears that individuals have a strong preference for news sources that share their ideology and confirm their beliefs. Although this is

understandable in some ways, it is puzzling given that news consumers have traditionally determined credibility largely in terms of objectivity. We next consider the role that source credibility plays in selective exposure, as a means to extend the theoretical understanding of these phenomena.

The Selective Exposure Paradox: The Role of Source Credibility

To recap, we see that recent findings concerning selective exposure appear to contradict decades of research on source credibility. Once, news credibility was seen as based upon a source's expertise and trustworthiness — both indicated by the degree to which a news outlet, acting as an objective source, provided information in "balanced" or unbiased ways (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Bowers & Phillips, 1967; Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953; Whitehead, 1968). Yet, as discussed before, while individuals may believe that unbiased sources are more credible than unbalanced ones, they still seem to seek out attitude-consistent information over less biased sources. Several possible explanations exist for these apparently contradictory findings.

The first explanation is that selective exposure decisions are a simple matter of dissonance avoidance. Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT), for example, suggests that people are motivated to avoid information that is incongruent with their beliefs, attitudes, or behavior because it makes them feel uncomfortable (Festinger, 1957). Selective exposure to attitude-congruent information is one way to reduce or prevent dissonance (Cotton, 1985; Taber & Lodge, 2006), and so people may choose to attend to attitude-congruent news sources and information to avoid the discomfort brought about by dissonant information. In this case, the credibility of the source has little to do with exposure, as this explanation centers on dissonance prevention as the primary driver of news selection decisions. However, cognitive dissonance theory by itself cannot adequately explain selective exposure behavior observed in several studies. For example, CDT fails to account for a body of studies that find people do not necessarily avoid attitude-discrepant information (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Kobayashi & Ikeda, 2009). The theory predicts that if people were concerned with dissonance, they would actively avoid information that challenged their beliefs, and yet that is often not what is observed.

Instead, studies of bias perception in media coverage find that people notice and devote greater attention to information that is antagonistic to their point of view, as opposed to attitudinally-congruent information, and to feel that attitude-congruent information is more fair and valid (Gunther &

Schmitt, 2006; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Moreover, news consumers tend to attribute antagonistic biases even to *neutral* sources, especially when these news consumers are highly involved in the issue being covered (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Perloff, 1989). So, while selective exposure could result from a drive to reduce dissonance, it is more likely also due to people perceiving information that agrees with them as more impartial, and thus more credible. Put another way, this suggests that *people process biased information in biased ways*: They are quite keen to notice bias when the source or message contradicts their attitudes and they then use this as a strong *negative* credibility cue. At the same time, they are rather blind to bias when the source or message is congruent with their attitudes and, in this case, use attitude congruity as a *positive* credibility cue.

The idea that people may attribute higher levels of quality and fairness to biased, but like-minded sources was first suggested by Fischer et al. (2005), and support for this as an explanation of selective exposure comes from Kahan and colleagues' *cultural cognition thesis*. This perspective combines elements of Wildavsky's Cultural Theory of Preference Formation (1987) with research in psychology on cognitive heuristics (Kahan et al., 2009, 2010). Wildavsky's Cultural Theory of Preference Formation suggests that people filter information through their personal, cultural identities, and subsequently form opinions about that information. For example, when considering a proposed piece of legislation, people gauge the legislation's ramifications against their own values, consider the opinions of others who have similar values, and evaluate the values of the legislation's source. Kahan et al. (2010) argued that they do this because people tend to perceive like-minded sources as more honest, knowledgeable, and impartial than differently-minded sources.

Thus, individuals appear to find biased, yet attitude-congruent information more credible than neutral or opinion-challenging information because they perceive attitude-congruent information as (ironically) more impartial, and they are more likely to seek out and rely on like-minded sources as a result. As such, credibility offers a new theoretical explanation that is superior to those offered in the past to account for the somewhat paradoxical patterns of selective exposure observed in the literature. It also plays a more complex role in the selective exposure process than previously thought. As new media, including UGN, continue to bring news consumers greater choice and control over news content selection, some scholars fear that repeated exposure to attitude-congruent information over time will hamper knowledge of important issues, increase opinion rigidity, decrease willingness to compromise, and breed intolerance toward attitude-challenging ideas.

Selective Exposure to News, Cyberbalkinzation, and News Credibility

Sunstein (2007) argued that the multiplicity of sources combined with increased control over issue exposure will lead to the "Daily Me": a personalized collection of news stories that filters out unwanted information. Potential negative consequences of the Daily Me include declines in political knowledge as individuals avoid reading about issues they perceive as uninteresting or unimportant, and more extreme political views as individuals expose themselves to only likeminded information. Some evidence for the Daily Me can be found in a recent survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2010), which found 67 percent of Americans report paying attention to only those subjects that interest them, while 31 percent of online news users prefer sources that share their own point of view.

Sunstein's fear that the public will be less aware of, or misinformed about, political issues appears warranted to some degree. Evidence suggests that democracy functions best when citizens are well-informed about multiple aspects of issues, as this helps them make educated voting decisions and strengthens the democratic dialogue (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Over the last several decades, research has revealed knowledge gaps among individuals who selectively expose. For example, Sweeney and Gruber (1984) found that Richard Nixon supporters were far less knowledgeable about the Watergate scandal than neutral parties and Nixon detractors. More recently, Nir (2011) found that individuals who sought out information that supported a preferred conclusion were more likely to hold misconceptions about their opinion's popularity, both on a national level and in small-scale discussion groups. This phenomenon has been described as the "false consensus effect," which is the tendency for individuals to overestimate the popularity of their own opinions, especially when presented with attitude-confirming information (Bosveld, Koomed, & van der Pligt, 1994).

Effects at the individual level are almost certainly reflected at the societal level. Putnam (2000) broadly described social fragmentation resulting from the fractured media environment as "cyberbalkanization." The Web allows people to only expose themselves to others who share their interests, whether political, spiritual, or physical. This fragmentation results in a decrease in social capital and shared cultural experience, which may in turn lead to social divisions based on political and cultural values. Recent research suggests that cyberbalkanization may be escalating. For instance, voters have become gradually less likely to vote for a member of the opposing party over the last 60 years (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006). And Stroud (2008) found that cable news viewers became more polarized over the course of the 2004 election.

News consumers' propensity toward selective exposure also has interesting implications for news producers, in terms of traditional news corporations as well as journalists. News organizations, especially those like the Tribune, the Hearst Corporation, the Washington Post Company, and the New York Times Company (whose revenue is generated mainly by newspapers), must look for ways to remain profitable in a changing news landscape. One option is to follow the lead of News Corporation (owner of Fox News, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Post*, among others) in targeting niche audiences through slanted news coverage. Another is to adapt their product to a digital world. However, this adaptation often enables selective exposure just as much as presenting slanted news does. For example, subscribers to the digital version of *The New York Times* can customize their homepage to only show certain areas of interest (i.e., national news, sports news, entertainment, etc.). Other news sites (cnn.com, msnbc.com) have features that rank news stories according to popularity, directing users' attention to stories that are entertaining but not necessarily essential. Additionally, by enabling news organizations to track which stories provide the biggest audiences, these features could jeopardize the coverage of issues that are boring but important or that are only followed by a small, fervent group of people.

Professional journalists are placed in an unenviable position by these developments. They cling to the ideals and ethical standards promoted in journalism school, arguing that a free and independent press should provide a voice to the voiceless, a check on the government, and tie communities together, while also deriding their corporate employers that dilute the ethical foundation of news (Usher, 2010). Thus, they face an uncomfortable choice: either work for "big media" and compromise their ideals, or maintain their ideals but venture into the less profitable, tumultuous world of online news. Either decision undermines the very notion of "professional" journalism. If journalists working for traditional media no longer follow codes of ethics, then what separates them from independent news bloggers other than the institutional backing behind their articles? And if a journalist must start an independent blog to uphold their ethical standards and cover issues they are passionate about, then why go to journalism school at all?

These trends present significant implications for the credibility of news. As discussed earlier, the resurgence of the partisan in news production and consumption is negatively affecting the credibility of news. However, people are also likely to *perceive* partisan news as quite credible if it conforms to their personal political views. To some degree, this apparent contradiction is a function of which dimensions of credibility are emphasized. Furthermore, if credibility is understood to mean unbiased, professionally-vetted information, then clearly the migration toward news information that is produced by indi-

viduals who are largely untrained in news production signals the erosion of news information credibility.

However, if news credibility is not viewed as stringently yoked to objective accounts by trained professionals, other possibilities emerge. For example, if dimensions other than objectivity and institutionally-approved authority are privileged — such as independence from corporate news organizations, timeliness, authentic firsthand accounts, opportunities for cross-validation across numerous independent sources, and interactivity — then contemporary UGN accounts may in fact be viewed as more credible than traditional news reports (Carroll & Richardson, 2011). In this model, credible news information could legitimately emerge from people with high experiential credibility, though they lack traditional credentials, or from a diversity of sources who in the aggregate are likely to produce a trustworthy account of news events.

Moreover, when looking across the enormous amount of news information currently available from a vast array of personal and political perspectives about any particular issue or event — including traditional news organization accounts — the addition of UGN accounts provides a significantly more complete and credible analysis of current affairs. Compared to the handful of media conglomerates that have dominated traditional news production for the past century or so, the addition of a significant number of user-generated news reports can be seen as a tremendous boon to people's understanding of the world. Viewed this way, the complete "body" of news information now available eclipses that formerly known, which likely can enhance the overall credibility of news information today.

Finally, professional journalism (vetted, trained) and UGN accounts (experiential, biased) need not stand in contrast to one another. Not only do many news venues actively feature both perspectives (CNN's iReport is a prominent example), but users themselves have the option to seek out both types of reportage. The extent to which they do so, however, is an open research question. Selective exposure complicates the picture. Not only does it affect what content people pay attention to but also their selection of perceived credible sources from among the wide range of professional and UGN outlets.

Conclusion

The notion of an objective press dominated the U.S. mass media for over a century, but recent trends in news consumption and markets point toward new iterations of more subjective news. One instance of this trend discussed here is user-generated news, where news reports are produced by

independent individuals or groups of interested people, rather than by professional journalists affiliated with large media organizations. Although the user-generation of news presents problems with source credibility, there are some possible credibility advantages, including the benefits of the news purveyor's personal experience with issues and events, the aggregation of diverse voices and views, and independence from a news owner apparatus that can sometimes constrain mainstream reporters' ability to provide pertinent and relevant news accounts.

Accompanying these potential advantages of a more post-objective journalism, however, are serious concerns about news consumers' selective exposure to attitudinally-congruent information. In the digital media environment, where news consumers are faced with a plethora of options, individuals are more likely to selectively expose themselves to like-minded others and views consistent with their own opinions. They do so because they appear to find attitude-congruent information to be credible, which is surprising in light of its inherent bias. Source credibility research provides a new and superior theoretical explanation to account for the somewhat paradoxical patterns observed, suggesting that perceptions of source credibility assume a more complex role in the selective exposure process than previously thought. Such an explanation is important since exposure to information that largely fails to contradict individuals' pre-existing beliefs has the potential to lead to group polarization and the diminution of informed debate, which is the cornerstone of the Jeffersonian ideal of an informed populace and vibrant democracy. Thus, in the end, the recent evolution toward "news with a view" is accompanied both by tremendous opportunities and potentially significant costs, the ultimate balance of which remains to be determined.

Chapter Notes

1. A "microblog" is a truncated form of a blog; the format is commonly visible in online vehicles such as Twitter and Facebook.

2. The most popular cable news shows still trail behind traditional news programs like *NBC Nightly News* in terms of viewership (Bauder, 2011; Shea, 2010). People are not abandoning traditional news sources entirely. There is merely a downward trend in reliance on sources that use traditional, unbiased methods of reporting, and an uptick in use of biased sources.

3. Thurmond ran for president in 1948 on a segregation platform, carrying the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and South Carolina. At a celebration of Thurmond's 100th birthday, Lott, a Senator from Mississippi, said, "I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either" (Edsall, 2002, para. 2). Bloggers helped propel this event into the mainstream news. Additionally, during the 2004 presidential election, a report by Dan Rather on *60 Minutes* claimed that President George W. Bush received special treatment while in the National Guard in 1968. The report used documents showing that President

Bush had his flight status revoked for missing a physical as evidence. Bloggers questioned the authenticity of these documents, which were later found to be fake (Folkenflik, 2005). Months later, Rather resigned.

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