Introduction

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This volume addresses credibility in the digital media environment, with a particular emphasis on youth audiences, issues, and experiences. The focus is on how young people assess the objective and subjective components of the believability of sources and messages as they come to trust the veracity of what they read, see, or hear through digital media. In some cases, individuals are honing new skills, and invoking novel tools, for assessing information credibility. In other instances, the voice of the community is emerging as the coin of credibility, and self-regulation serves as evidence that the locus of knowledge ownership is moving to communities of users. In still other cases, institutional or corporate entities are emerging as arbiters of credibility. Overall, it is clear that as youth increasingly take advantage of media offering a diversity of information sources, but where the motivations, identity, and quality of those sources and information can be difficult to determine, the issue of credibility becomes crucially important to consider as we determine how best to teach children to navigate the vast ocean of information now available thorough digital technologies.

Although research on credibility and new media is burgeoning, extremely little of it focuses on youth (with the exception of college students), in spite of this population's exceptional immersion in digital technologies. To address this void, the chapters in this volume highlight the special problems and opportunities with regard to credibility that young people who have grown up with digital media face today. To do this, the authors endeavor to reach beyond the somewhat trite rhetoric that all digital information is untrustworthy, that all youth are inherently more vulnerable than adults, and that technological tools determine specific outcomes. Thus, a goal of the volume is to offer an appropriately sophisticated, balanced, and thus enduring view of youth, credibility, and digital media.

The book can be divided informally into five sections. First, Chapter 1 (Flanagin and Metzger) situates credibility by considering its intellectual heritage and its evolution in light of digital media. This discussion serves to position credibility as a contemporary topic of inquiry, particularly relevant for today's youth. Second, Chapters 2 (Eastin) and 3 (Rieh and

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Hilligoss) look specifically at two different youth populations, younger (children) and older (college students) youth. Questions about whether and how youth may differ from adult user populations are explored therein. Chapters 4 (Sundar) and 5 (Lankes) examine how digital media challenge some of our traditional assumptions about credibility assessment, including notions that credibility assessment is mostly a conscious, effortful process on the part of users, and that credibility is necessarily tied to authority and hierarchy. Chapter 6 (Eysenbach) offers an in-depth discussion of how users assess the credibility of one particularly important category of information, online health information. Finally, Chapters 7 (Harris) and 8 (Weingarten) respectively examine the educational and political issues surrounding credibility and digital media and offer recommendations for both policy and practice. Collectively, the chapters demonstrate that digital media technologies simultaneously empower and disempower youth as they strive to reach their informational goals. As a means by which to further frame the contribution of the volume overall, each chapter is next discussed in detail to highlight its particular contribution.

Chapter 1, by Andrew Flanagin and Miriam Metzger, defines credibility after situating it in relation to allied terms and concepts. Against this backdrop, the authors argue that understanding credibility is particularly complex—and consequential—in the digital media environment, especially for youth audiences, who have both advantages and disadvantages due to their relationship with contemporary technologies and their life experience. To sort out the new and emerging types of credibility and credibility assessment that are implicated in modern media tools, a categorization of credibility construction is offered that considers individuals as networked actors engaged with others, as opposed to isolated appraisers of credibility. This understanding is leveraged to explain why credibility is a worthy and important topic of inquiry, what is and is not new about credibility in the context of digital media, and the major thrusts of current credibility concerns for scholars, educators, and youth. The chapter concludes by considering the research, policy, and educational implications of credibility today and by making recommendations for practitioners of all kinds who are affected by youth, credibility, and digital media.

In Chapter 2, Matthew Eastin discusses children's cognitive development—or the evolution of their cognitive structures, abilities, and processes—and how it influences their ability to process information encountered online. By examining Piaget's stages of cognitive development, Eastin explores the information evaluations (e.g., assessment of various source cues) that children make when online. One conclusion is that the complex informational environments children must navigate online tax their cognitive capabilities in ways that are variously consequential, depending on their stage of cognitive development. In all cases, however, the Web constitutes a demanding information-processing environment that must be considered when trying to understand credibility assessment among youth audiences. Overall, Eastin argues that research needs to consider how evaluation shifts as children evolve from one developmental stage to another.

Chapter 3, by Soo Young Rieh and Brian Hilligoss, examines the relationship between information-seeking strategies and credibility judgments through an in-depth exploration of how college students identify credible information in everyday information-seeking tasks. The authors argue that credibility assessment is a process that takes place over time rather than a discrete evaluative event. Moreover, the context in which credibility assessment occurs is crucial to understand, because it affects both the level of effort as well as the strategies that people use to evaluate credibility. The authors also find that credibility assessment is best described as an iterative process whereby people make predictive judgments about the

value of information resources prior to taking information-seeking actions and evaluative judgments after accessing information. In turn, information verification or reevaluation may occur after information use. The college students in their study indicated that although credibility was an important consideration during information seeking, they often compromised information credibility for speed and convenience, especially when the information sought was less consequential.

In Chapter 4, S. Shyam Sundar argues that beyond explicit, considered assessments of sources and content, Web users are heavily affected by more subtle cues as they evaluate information online. Particularly for youth audiences, heuristics such as the "surface features" of the interface are important in credibility assessment, since these users are more prone than adults to attend to such elements. Specifically, the "technological affordances" of modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability influence credibility judgments by triggering cognitive heuristics that form impressions of information quality. Thus, Sundar argues that in addition to explicitly conscious efforts, structural and technological factors can profoundly influence credibility judgments by transmitting certain cues that trigger cognitive heuristics leading to impressions of the quality of information. In this manner, the chapter demonstrates that a great deal of automaticity governs youths' assessment of the credibility of information, and that users may rely heavily on cues to make snap judgments while in the midst of online activities rather than on the effortful consideration of the totality of information on any given subject or site. Overall, this work offers important insight for developing effective educational campaigns to teach young people how to discern credible information online.

R. David Lankes, in Chapter 5, looks at how digital media technologies provide means of determining credibility that formerly were not available to individuals. He argues that increased "information self-sufficiency," where consumers are expected or required to seek and assess information critical to their everyday activities, is now normative. As a result, effective credibility assessment is crucial: because information is now disconnected from its physical origin (e.g., people now buy products online without ever inspecting them physically beforehand), accurate and reliable information is essential for sound decisions. In addition, interactions that are increasingly mediated by software—which actually make potentially consequential decisions as users perform various tasks—place users at the mercy of these tools. Both factors suggest a paradox where consumers relying on digital information are simultaneously more independent in their personal lives but also increasingly dependent on digital information and tools. In the end, the separation of credibility from authority afforded by digital media technology necessitates a "reliability" approach to credibility assessment, rather than one founded primarily on authority. In light of this, Lankes explores the opportunities to leverage the special characteristics of digital media to create new methods of credibility assessment.

In Chapter 6, Gunther Eysenbach considers the role of Web technologies on the availability and consumption of health information. He notes that, contrary to some well-publicized surveys of individuals' health information-seeking behaviors, the actual incidence of health-related searches on the Internet is much lower than most estimates. Thus, although many people have sought health information online, virtually nobody does so frequently. The implication is that people, and especially young people, are largely unfamiliar with trusted health sources online, making credibility particularly germane when considering online health information. Eysenbach argues that as information consumers use these tools to participate more in their own health choices and decisions, humans and technologies act as new intermediaries—or "apomediaries"—that "stand by" and steer consumers to high-quality

information. He concludes by highlighting the credibility implications of this paradigm shift and demonstrating how it can empower health information seekers of all ages.

In Chapter 7, Frances Jacobson Harris, an educator and high school librarian, explores the many challenges that exist to teaching credibility assessment in the school environment. Challenges range from institutional barriers such as government regulation and school policies and procedures to dynamic challenges related to young people's cognitive development and the consequent difficulties of navigating a complex Web environment. The chapter also includes a critique of current practices for teaching kids credibility assessment and highlights some best practices for credibility education, including a discussion of ways to leverage what children are actually doing with digital media into an effective curriculum for training youth to assess the credibility of the information they receive via these media. A key contribution is Harris's contention that teaching youth to assess credibility effectively requires recognizing their special relationship to digital media by respecting their own experience and practices while providing appropriate instruction and guidance.

Finally, Fred Weingarten, in Chapter 8, notes that as concern about the credibility of information on the Internet grows, so do pressures for government attempts to mitigate the problem. He examines the potential roles of government in dealing with public concerns about information credibility on the Internet. Weingarten argues that public policy has been and will continue to be a political negotiation between a positive view of digital media as crucial infrastructure for education as well as the nation's economic and social well-being, and a negative view of an unregulated, hostile, and dangerous environment, especially for children. The chapter then discusses and compares "protective" policies that attempt to restrict access to content and "supportive" policies that focus on equipping users and intermediary institutions (such as schools and libraries) to meet their informational goals, arguing that more attention should be paid to developing policies that support both users and educators to find and evaluate the information they need.

By assembling a wide-ranging yet cohesive set of chapters, this volume addresses pressing research, policy, educational, and practical issues and sets an agenda for the continuation of this important work. Indeed, collectively, the chapters in this volume represent foundational pieces in a new area of inquiry that is interdisciplinary in scope, drawing from scholarship in communication, library and information science, social and cognitive psychology, sociology, education, and other fields to understand credibility issues in the digital media environment as they pertain to youth audiences. Interestingly, the chapters look backward—to glean what is known from existing and important work on credibility, information seeking, critical thinking, human cognition and development, and media literacy—as well as forward, to offer suggestions for future work in this domain.

In the end, this volume is about how those who are immersed in digital media produce, seek, share, and digest information and about the promise and perils offered in the contemporary media environment. As information is increasingly provided, assembled, filtered, and presented by sources either more removed from us personally, or that are mediated in ways not yet well understood, it is important to comprehend the effects on those most fully immersed in this environment. This volume is the first comprehensive treatment of digital media, youth, and credibility and, as such, offers an important step toward such an understanding.