Preface

Eleven years ago, as Ph.D. students at Michigan Technological University, the editors of this collection found themselves frustrated by the “easy to memorize” lists students were offered to inoculate themselves from the dangers of false information. The list excluded many sites we found helpful on a day-to-day basis. As soon as the first article we wrote on the subject, “First Phase Information Literacy on a Fourth Generation Website: An Argument for a New Approach to Website Evaluation Criteria,” was published, the rise of Web 2.0 and social media began to take shape, and the simple checklist approach that had been ubiquitous, as we had predicted, soon revealed itself to be woefully inadequate. Thus began the first of many publications in which we explored the complex negotiations that take place when someone searches for information online, culminating in Online Credibility and Digital Ethos: Evaluating Computer-Mediated Communication (2012), which featured the work of 21 scholars from around the globe who examined a range of digital genres in order to shed light on the issue.

Fast-forward a few years, and what was true in 2012 is even more true now: The near-ubiquity of smartphones, tablets, and laptops, provides easy access to acquiring and publishing online information anywhere, anytime; however, with advances in information technology, new challenges arise for content providers in establishing credibility and for students, researchers, and consumers in developing effective ways of evaluating online credibility. For example, students and instructors in writing classes across the world face challenges in creating research projects that did not exist even a decade ago. These issues are not just affecting American universities; therefore, this book addresses an international audience by offering approaches to evaluating the credibility of digital sources, including specific advice that can be gleaned from popular websites and techniques useful for a wide variety of digital genres.

An international audience will find this book useful for a variety of academic disciplines because students continue to utilize online sources in their research. Information literacy specialists will find the chapters useful because each chapter focuses on a particular type of source. Journalists and educators in the field of Mass Communication and Library Sciences will find the book useful in establishing protocol for approaching a wide variety of sources. Cultural Studies researchers will find the information invaluable for evaluating and conducting online research. Web designers and writers could use this book to establish a more credible online presence. However, we feel that while a broad segment of graduate students and academics could utilize certain chapters to establish a method for determining the credibility of a source for research purposes, a main audience will be writing instructors who assign papers and projects that require extensive research. In addition, a variety of digital sites that many people visit regularly are explored thoroughly in case studies throughout this book, and strategies for assessing health and science sites, whose use is important to a wide swath of the planet, are also included.
Preface

Section 1, “Evaluating and Gathering Research,” offers a variety of methods for evaluating and conducting online research, focusing on the problems involved in finding trustworthy information. The chapters in this section focus on evaluating scientific arguments, connecting with information experts, cultivating a beneficial digital ethos in research documents, and evaluating what is often hidden—how websites use our data for research purposes.

In “Telling the Quants from the Quacks: Evaluating Statistical Arguments in Debates Online,” Candice Lanius of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, USA, transcends generic digital evaluation frameworks to provide a robust framework for assessing the quality of science information. She focuses on how statistics are used to present scientific data on climate change websites, and her work provides a valuable tool for constructing web evaluation strategies aimed at websites with a specific focus. We feel this chapter offers an important model for future researchers to follow going forward because the field needs more specific models that target particular types of information and audiences.

In “No Shortcuts to Credibility Evaluation: The Importance of Expertise and Information,” Jill R. Kavanaugh of the Center on Media and Child Health at Boston Children’s Hospital and Bartlomiej A. Lenart of the University of Alberta, Canada, further demonstrate the limitations of the generic checklist approach in an age of diverse information sources. They argue that we are overwhelmed by the vast amount of information at our fingertips, and the best way to deal with that deluge is to embrace information experts. They argue that even experts in their own fields would benefit from more exposure to information experts in order to keep pace with their fields efficiently; as a result, they advocate for information literacy instruction being handled by embedded librarians, and they examine a novel case of embedded librarianship in a hospital that can serve as a model for other institutions and corporations.

In “Knockin’ on Digital Doors: Dealing with Online [Dis]Credit in an Era of Digital Scientific,” Rosalina Pisco Costa of the University of Évora, Portugal, offers ways for researchers to increase their online ethos for the purposes of recruiting study participants online. She focuses on digital documents designed to recruit participants for both quantitative and qualitative purposes, paying particular attention to techniques that allow researchers to connect with others by entering through the context of everyday life, the chaos of busy lives, and the diversity of multicultural lives. Her advice in designing these documents, particular emails, is applicable not only to social science researchers but also all those who need to establish online contacts through “cold” digital communication.

Can we evaluate what we don’t see (or refuse to look at)? In “Who Is Tracking You? A Rhetorical Framework for Evaluating Surveillance & Privacy,” Estee Beck, of The University of Texas at Arlington, USA, tackles the issue of website policies regarding the tracking and sharing of user data. Beck argues that we must add a wholly unique aspect to current digital evaluation criteria: a website’s privacy and/or data use statement. Thus, instead of merely ignoring or instantly clicking “I agree” like so many users, Beck argues that these privacy statements should be of paramount concern when evaluating digital credibility because they alone truly reflect the ethos of a site’s creator.

Section 2, “Digital Ethos and Online Credibility in Medical Contexts,” addresses the increasing numbers of people who desire access to quality online health care information by offering advice for assessing a source’s ethos. As many people around the world may not have the physical proximity to, or the resources to visit, a quality health care provider, this section provides suggestions intended to help people navigate that environment. Conversely, the information may also be useful to health care providers who hope to communicate with patients online.

In “Ethos in E-Health: From Informational to Interactive Websites,” Abigail Bakke of Minnesota State University, Mankato, USA, examines three different types of e-health sites—government, corporate, and
patient-driven—and argues that e-health information is perceived as most credible when it is rooted in both traditional medical expertise and the patient community. She demonstrates that medical sites that do not include patients’ voices are viewed as untrustworthy, and her work makes many important points for consumers and designers of e-health information.

In “Adopting a Parasocial Connection to Overcome Professional Kakoethos in Online Health Information,” Andrew W. Cole of Waukesha County Technical College, USA, and Thomas A. Salek of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA, demonstrate that laypersons seeking e-health information are more apt to trust sources that include people sharing their personal medical stories instead of professional medical sources that privilege subjective science information and lack authentic personal experience with medical conditions. Coupled with Abigail Bakke’s chapter mentioned above, Cole and Salek help to further the importance of rhetorical identification for health information seekers and designers hoping to establish trust.

In “The Social Determinants in the Process of Credibility Assessment and the Influence of Topic Areas,” Lluïsa Llamero of Ramon Llull University, Spain, reflects on how trust is represented in different areas of human knowledge, including health. She contrasts traditional medical expertise rooted in symbolic cultural factors with the second-hand information patients feel more comfortable accessing. Through the analysis of qualitative data from health and other areas, she proposes a processual theoretical model of credibility assessment that has wide application.

In “Credible to Whom? The Curse of the Echo Chamber,” Nathan Rodriguez of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, USA, examines issues with online health information seekers who become trapped inside circles of like-minded people. Rodriguez demonstrates that this echo chamber can cause public health by looking at vaccine-hesitant discourse and how it perpetuates its digital ethos in its own spaces, as well as others. His chapter offers beneficial insights that can apply to a host of other controversial topics that are debated online.

Section 3, “Addressing Anonymity in Digital Realms,” tackles the problem of unattributed digital content. Much advice on evaluating online information hinges on determining the author of a source, then making judgments about the credibility of that author’s credentials. However, a vast amount of the digital information we encounter has no discernible author, much less an author whose background and credentials are readily available for evaluation. This section examines the benefits and drawbacks of anonymity with regard to establishing digital credibility, and it offers strategies for assessing information on sites where anonymity reigns.

In “Ethos Construction, Identification, and Authenticity in the Discourses of AWSA: The Arab Women’s Solidarity Association International,” Samaa Gamie of Lincoln University, USA, explores the affordances and constraints of anonymity on liberatory and revolutionary discourses by analyzing two iterations of an invitation-only international feminist website. In this case, anonymity had to be granted to users because lives were potentially at stake, and Gamie examines how anonymity impacts a site’s ethos by altering authenticity. Ultimately, Gamie questions whether anonymity allows for the critical examination of the hegemonic and the construction of suitable digital counter-discourse by thoroughly analyzing the ethos surrounding both AWSA website iterations.

In “Credibility and Crisis in Pseudonymous Communities,” Sarah Lefkowith of the University of Oxford, United Kingdom, focuses on how reddit users respond to emerging crises. All reddit users are anonymous, which makes assessing credibility in a crisis extremely complex because some users may, for example, post to the site stating they are involved with the crisis, yet many readers are unsure whether to trust them or not. Lefkowith conducted an extensive case study of crisis communication on reddit,
and her results offer not only incredibly useful techniques for assessing and cultivating credibility on Reddit, but also broader precepts that help to address anonymity on other sites.

In “Don’t Tell Us You’re Handsome...Post Your Great Photo and Let It Stand”: Creating and Enforcing Credibility in Online Dating, Shana Kopaczewski of Indiana State University, USA, examines the role anonymity plays in online dating. Through an analysis of more than 200 exchanges on one dating website, she asserts that credibility in online dating is determined by how the website structures and shares its profiles, and she argues that users establish the norms of credibility by demonizing dishonesty. This chapter provides helpful techniques for consumers and producers of user-generated content.

In “Revenge of Cecil the Lion: Credibility in Third-Party Review Sites,” Alison N. Novak of Rowan University, USA, analyzes the effects of co-opting third-party review sites in order to promulgate personal agendas and causes for which the sites were not originally intended. She focuses on analyzing how advocates co-opted Yelp after Dr. Walter Palmer killed Cecil the lion and altered the ethos of site, which has important ethos ramifications for sites that allow user-generated reviews and other content.

Section 4, “Reconciling Individual and Group Ethos,” examines the different impacts that individual ethos can have on how we access, assess, share, and build online information. The chapters in this section all focus on different digital sites and genres, but each one sheds light on the importance of negotiating the relationship between individual and group ethos by illustrating the specific benefits and drawbacks of acknowledging—or effacing—individual ethos in different contexts.

In “Surf’s Up: Communicative Aspects of Online Trust-Building Among Couchsurfing Hosts,” Maura Cherney of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA, Daniel Cocheze Davis of Illinois State University, USA, and Sandra Metts of Illinois State University, USA, focus on discerning how trust is formed through digital environments. Through their analysis of communication between couchsurfing guests and hosts, they argue that the most important credibility cues occurred in request messages and references, with less reliance placed on photos and textual profile information. Their findings are significant for a wide swath of digital realms where people connect to buy, sell, share, and trade; in addition, their findings are important for those who maintain static websites that incorporate Web 2.0 elements—such as many universities.

In “Modal Ethos: Scumbag Steve and the Establishing of Ethos in Memetic Agents,” Jonathan S. Carter of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA, provides a close analysis of one of the world’s most famous memes to show the intricate ways in which ethos attaches to memes. Carter argues that memes become their own powerful agents of ethos, which allows networked participants to evoke the meme in a range of contexts that are often quite removed from the meme’s original intended meaning. This chapter represents another powerful means of challenging the checklist approach, which relies on relatively static conceptions of meaning and ethos that memes transcend.

In “The Rise of the Modern Sports Article: Examining the Factors That Can Influence the Credibility of Online Sports News,” Sean Sadri, Old Dominion University, USA, shares research that demonstrates the impact of individual ethos on consuming different types of online content. Through an analysis of fans exposed to different sports articles, Sadri shows how individual ethos helps to determine how different styles, sources, levels of fan identification, and antagonistic comments are perceived by the reader. Additionally, this study demonstrates how different kinds of digital content connect with readers (or not). This chapter offers a valuable rhetorical lesson in illustrating the effect that motivated ethos has on connecting with audiences and achieving purpose in the digital age.

In “Breastfeeding, Authority, and Genre: Women’s Ethos in Wikipedia and Blogs,” Allison A. Lukowski of Christian Brothers University, USA, and Erika M. Sparby of Northern Illinois University,
USA, argue that sites discussing breastfeeding tend to ignore personal narrative in favor of quantifiable data. While this data may help physicians, it does little to inform the women who struggle with the challenges mothers face when breastfeeding. By examining how sites such as Wikipedia enforce generic gatekeeping practices that limit ethos appeals, the chapter makes an important argument that sites should follow inclusive practices that harness divergent information styles because doing so is important for their audience and therefore increases credibility.

While there are a handful of academic articles and popular books on select topics listed above (e.g., Building Online Credibility by Anonymous, Ultimate Guide to Building Online Credibility for Infopreneurs by Partha Sarkel, and Persuasion On-Line and Communicability: The Destruction of Credibility in the Virtual Community and Cognitive Models by Francisco V. Cipolla-Ficarra), this collection is unique in that it offers theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative research on the topic from a variety of angles, a wide range of disciplines, and with a global perspective. Multiple online sources are discussed in depth, as well as a wide variety of approaches to establishing and evaluating online credibility. As the amount of online information proliferates, the number of digital genres used to carry meaning grows as well; as a result, the issues surrounding digital ethos and online credibility grow more complex and demonstrate the need for this and future books addressing these important issues. The strategies and ideas this book provide will help its audience make sense of the complexity found within current digital realms and also create a strong base for future research.