

Preface

With the near ubiquity of smartphones, tablets, and laptops, acquiring and publishing online information has never been easier; however, increased access to consuming and producing digital information raises new challenges when establishing and evaluating online credibility. These challenges are important because they affect a broad range of meaning-making, both inside and outside of academia. We stand at an important moment in human history, a time when we have markedly increased access to an almost infinite amount of information—and not just access to consuming information that was molded by editorial elites and other gatekeepers, but access to producing and sharing information that suits any needs we might have, no matter how banal, impish, beneficial, or revolutionary those impulses are. Because the great hope of interconnected computers resides in openness, a technological utopianist vision where people can give voice to their own neglected viewpoints or subjugated stances, most societies err on the side of openness and freedom when it comes to producing and sharing information on the Web. Today, in an era where many phones are, in effect, more powerful computers than most people had access to a mere 15 years ago, the major challenge facing us now and in the conceivable future is not how to continue producing and sharing information, and not simply sifting through it, but discerning the qualities that make information trustworthy, usable, and deployable amongst the vast amounts of competing information available. This problem is not simply an academic one (though it is a problem across all disciplines) so much as it is a human one: As access to interconnected information proliferates and the ways people hope to use that ever-growing information evolve, it affects all people. For example, the events of the Arab Spring show that in the absence of what were traditionally seen as relatively reliable information sources, “unofficial” online sources deemed credible by a wide range of actors played a key role in successful uprisings; these developments also rippled out to affect those not directly involved—both people hoping to use such models for further democratic pressuring in a wide range of contexts and those seeking to prevent it.

Though this conundrum of too much information and what exactly to trust can be partly addressed through technical means such as tagging and, in certain contexts, traditional methods such as strict gatekeeping, the constantly evolving nature of digital information and the digitally-infused societies producing and assessing that information means that no fixed solution will be a panacea. However, this problem of trusting information is not simply an element of ubiquitous technology so much as it is an ongoing aspect of human nature, one that has been evident since the origins of debate and open societies. For that reason, we find ourselves returning to the ancient concept of *ethos* because of its flexibility and connection to persuasion in diverse contexts. Given the long tradition of rhetoric as a useful academic discipline, as well as the powerful concepts of *ethos* related to oratory that were developed by ancient scholars such as Aristotle and Isocrates and further developed over the centuries, *ethos* has grown to include many different conceptions relating to ethical communication and trust. Michael Hyde (2004),

for example, drawing on the “primordial” etymological origins of ethos, argued that we should see ethos more as a dwelling place that “define[s] the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop,” a view that helps us approach the importance of digital contexts for ethos. However, on the whole, many people tend to associate ethos with credibility based on establishing a trustworthy personal character, thus often using ethos as shorthand for credibility. Though current views of ethos might deviate from classical notions, both classical and emergent notions of ethos provide a powerful, flexible tool to consider nuances of credibility in digital contexts.

In editing this book, we encouraged authors to develop their own connections to ethos instead of us as editors force-feeding them particular definitions and approaches, in part because of the plasticity of ethos as a concept and—given the importance of ethos and credibility to digital information—in part because we wanted flexible approaches based on specific contexts. The goal of this book is to offer chapters written by scholars from across the disciplines and from across the world that provide approaches to evaluating the credibility of digital sources, specific advice for negotiating popular websites, and useful techniques for a wide variety of digital genres and contexts. We wanted diverse approaches to the problem of online credibility from different disciplines and from different countries so that unique local strategies with which we as readers may not be familiar could be adapted to shape, or to inspire, new approaches in our comfort zones.

This book provides a much-needed resource for anybody who conducts online research. In particular, the book serves as a handy reference for a variety of academic disciplines, since both faculty and students continue to utilize online sources in their research and the reliance on those types of sources appears to be waxing, not waning. Information literacy specialists would find the chapters which focus on particular types of popular Web spaces like LinkedIn, Wikipedia, World of Warcraft, and Facebook useful. Journalists and educators in the field of Mass Communication and Library Sciences would find the book useful in establishing protocols for approaching a wide variety of sources because of chapters that cover blogs, microblogs, diasporic news, astroturfing, and documentary games. Web designers and writers could use this book to establish a more credible online presence. Any instructors of courses that involve research, particularly composition courses, could profit from this book as well, and graduate students and academics of all stripes could utilize certain chapters to help establish their own methods for determining the credibility of a source they hope to use for research purposes.

The power of our age is interconnection, and we hope this collection pulls together different and distant voices that make a significant contribution to moving forward together as we meet the many challenges of digital information proliferation.

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REFERENCES

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