

The Medium Weighs the Message: How Source Medium Affects Credibility

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Abstract

The recent proliferation of low-cost wireless networking hardware has transformed competitive debate in recent years. As competitors increasingly turn to search engines and online encyclopedias for help in their preparation for rounds, we must ask how this information is received. This study investigates the question of whether International Public Debate Association judges feel some sources have more inherent credibility related to the medium in which they are transmitted.

1. Introduction

Although the ostensible reward of competitive debate is the development of public speaking skills, many debaters also take from the activity the ability to effectively gather relevant research on a topic of discussion. For years, research has meant long hours in libraries. It has meant analyzing and formatting evidence which is then filed systematically in portable containers for use at tournaments. The last few years have seen a dramatic shift in this practice. Drawn to its massive quantities of information and agile search capabilities, many International Public Debate Association teams have made the switch from traditional tubs of evidence to laptop computers with wireless network cards. As debaters begin citing Yahoo.com in their rounds, we must ask ourselves how judges will perceive this information.

The notion of source credibility has been well established. As early as the 1950s, Hovland and Weiss were researching how the source of a message determines how the receiver judges the validity of its contents. Based on the source, audiences would, for example, judge a film to be propagandistic or informative (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Business researchers are also aware that their credibility as bearers of a commercial message is a key factor in consumer response (Sternthal, 1978). Just as a salesman's credibility determines his or her ability to sell a potential customer on a new washing machine or automobile, debaters must create credibility as they offer a policy or value to an audience. This is why we seek out the best evidence available to certify our advocacy. We know that credibility is a significant factor in creating desired responses.

Though the IPDA suffers from a dearth of research at the moment, significant research on the subject of source medium credibility exists. Metzger, Flanagan, and Zwarun found that college students tend to use internet sources more than adults. This usage is also expected (by researchers and the students themselves) to increase. The survey also found that students assess a higher level of credibility to internet sources than do other members of the population (Metzger et al, 2003). Since college students are often competitors and judges in the IPDA, this research is aimed at examining how IPDA judges evaluate the relative credibility of standalone internet sources (those which have no tangible counterpart), companion internet sources (such as CNN.com), and traditional print sources. The following research questions were posed:

- RQ₁: How do judges view the credibility of printed material in comparison with online material?
- RQ₂: How do judges perceive the credibility of printed material in comparison with material found on its companion web site?
- RQ₃: How do judges perceive the credibility of companion sites in comparison with standalone sites?
- RQ₄: How to judges perceive the credibility of Wikipedia in comparison with other encyclopedias?

2. Method

2.1 Sample

Respondents were culled from judging pools at IPDA tournaments held at the University of West Florida and the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Ballot table representatives simply asked each judge to fill out a copy of the survey and return it at their leisure. The vast majority (30 of 34) of respondents were age 28 and younger. This is fairly typical for IPDA judging, which is usually performed by other students of the competing and host programs.

2.2 Survey

The survey consisted of six multiple choice questions. Each of the first three questions was tied to the first three research questions. Question four and five deal with RQ₅. Question six was a simple demographic.

2.2.1 Highest general source credibility

Respondents selected the source most likely to be credible from a list. Options included “Printed material such as the Wall Street Journal”, “Online material such as Yahoo.com”, and an option to indicate that such sources are equally credible.

2.2.2 Credibility of print versus companion online material

Respondents selected the phrase which best described the relationship between printed material and material found on a companion website. The example of the New York Times and NewYorkTime.com was given. Potential answers include: “The newspaper is much more credible than the website”; “The newspaper is slightly more credible than the website”; “The newspaper is equally as credible as the website”; “The newspaper is slightly less credible than the website”; “The newspaper is much less credible than the website”.

2.2.3 Credibility of companion online material versus standalone online material

Respondents were asked whether companion websites such as NewYorkTimes.com are more credible than standalone websites like Yahoo.com. Respondents could answer “Yes” or “No”.

2.2.4 Credibility of Wikipedia in comparison with traditional encyclopedias

Respondents who were familiar with Wikipedia selected the phrase which best described Wikipedia's credibility. Possible answers include: "Wikipedia is unreliable"; "Wikipedia is much less credible than a traditional encyclopedia"; "Wikipedia is slightly less credible than traditional a encyclopedia"; "Wikipedia is equally as credible as traditional encyclopedia".

3. Findings

Percentages were calculated for all findings. Chi square tests were used to determine statistical significance. All findings were determined to be statistically significant at the .05 level.

With regard to the first research question, 55.9% of respondents felt that print material and online material are equally likely to be credible sources of information. Another 35.3% judged printed material is more likely to be credible. Only 3% believed online material was most likely to be credible.

When comparing the credibility of a print source and a companion online source, 70.6% of respondents saw no difference in credibility. Another 17.6% felt the paper was slightly more credible than the companion web site. And 11.8% felt the companion web site was slightly more credible than the newspaper. No respondents believed that the newspaper or the companion sight were much more credible than the other.

In the matter of companion web site and standalone web site credibility, 85.3% of respondents felt companion sites were more credible. The remaining 14.7% felt that companion sites were not any more credible than standalone sites.

In assessing Wikipedia's reliability, 42.4% of respondents felt that Wikipedia is less credible than a traditional encyclopedia. Another 33.3% judged Wikipedia to be entirely unreliable. And 24.2% judged Wikipedia to be equally as credible as a traditional encyclopedia.

4. Discussion

The first research question dealt with determining whether judges generally assign more credibility to print sources than online sources. Though the majority of respondents did not indicate a preference for one or the other, the next largest group of respondents preferred print sources. So while just over half of all judges would be equally satisfied with print or online sources, more than 90% of the judges would assign high levels of credibility to print sources.

The second research question determined whether judges believed companion web sites were as credible as their tangible print counterparts. The vast majority indicated that they judge the companion site as equal to the print version. Some (about 17%) prefer the print version, possibly due to the belief that errors are less likely to survive the print editorial process. On the other hand, another 11.8% gave a slight edge to the companion web site, perhaps because it is more likely to be updated with up-to-the-minute news.

The third research question asked whether judges believe that companion web sites are more credible than standalone web sites. Perhaps due to the prestige attached to established names or the belief that traditional news sources have better information, 85.3% of respondents indicated that companion sites are more credible than standalones.

The fourth research question investigated judge perceptions of Wikipedia. Clearly, judges do not trust Wikipedia. This may be due to recent public attention given to fraudulent claims made by former editor, Ryan Jordan, who was recently exposed as having lied about his education and background (Cohen, 2007). Some distrust may also be attributed to the common belief that anyone can write anything on Wikipedia.

Though the Internet has made the process of researching far more convenient, it is not yet clear that the information we are retrieving will be as salient in the minds of our judges. The results of this preliminary research suggest a few potential impacts for debaters. First, successful debaters will likely continue to prefer traditional print sources. Though slightly more than half of our judges are equally accepting of print and online sources, the safest bet is to search for print sources to cite in rounds. Second, when selecting between standalone and companion web sites, the companion web site would also appear to be more credible. Finally, Wikipedia is widely distrusted, despite its popularity.

These findings should in no way be interpreted as the final word on source medium perceptions of credibility. Research is, by far, the area in which the IPDA has most room for growth. These findings are based on only 34 responses from two tournaments in a long season held at a variety of public and private institutions. To insist that these findings represent a universal truth, even about our own association, would be irresponsible. With that said, these findings were drawn from two very typical IPDA tournaments and have been found to be statistically significant. It is this author's hope that they will serve as a springboard for further endeavors and may cause each debater to think carefully about the evidence he or she uses in debates.

5. Suggestions for Further Research

5.1 Replication

Given the small sample size of this study, replication attempts would be helpful in establishing the trustworthiness of these findings. They would also lend credence to the assumption that the UWF and UAM tournaments, where this sample was collected, were relatively normal in terms of judging.

5.2 Age Stratification

The survey used in this research included an age demographic question in hopes that significant variance in judge age would permit discussion of age as a predictor of credibility. Unfortunately, in this sample nearly every judge fit the same demographic category. The age categories were chosen such that members of each category would fit in the Baby Boomer, Generation X or Generation Y category. Future research could investigate the notion that people might assess credibility to sources originating from mediums that they grew up using. If such an attempt were successful, it would help debaters to better adapt to audience members.

6. References

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