Dimensions of Credibility: Review as a Documentary Practice

Helena Francke[1]

[1] University of Borås

Abstract

The poster explores documentary practices in web environments where credibility is constructed and agreed upon. Based on studies of open peer review processes in scholarly journals and of discussions of credibility in comments to a climate change blog, four dimensions of credibility assessment activities are identified: gatekeepers/open participation; formal credibility assessment/intrinsic plausibility; individual credibility assessment/collective credibility assessment; and experts/laymen. Within each dimension, various positions and tensions with regard to credibility are exemplified. It is concluded that whether or not participation in credibility assessments, or review, becomes a collective activity within a documentary practice depends on the interaction between the affordances of the inscription technologies, social affordances and institutional practices.

1   Introduction

Web technology facilitates making documents public and allowing people to communicate quickly and many-to-many around the documents. As a consequence of the ease of publishing, credibility assessments on the web often take place *after* rather than *before* a document has been made public. In the poster, some consequences of such changing conditions for the documentary practices in which credibility is constructed and agreed upon are explored. Four dimensions of credibility assessment activities are identified based on previous literature and on analysis of examples drawn from review practices in primarily two genres: scholarly journals and blogs. The primary examples come from open peer review initiatives in scholarly journals and from a study of participants' conversations in a blog. Within each dimension, various positions with regard to credibility are exemplified through these empirical studies.

2   Theoretical perspective

The perspective applied considers web credibility to be a product of historically situated interactions taking place within a set of activities performed by a particular group of people involving certain types of documents or other tools, i.e. as part of specific (documentary) practices (Frohmann, 2004).

3   Data collection and methodological considerations

The analysis comes out of the author's current and previous research (e.g. Francke, 2008; Francke & Sundin, 2010; Francke, 2012). The research involves qualitative, explorative studies of web documents and documentary activities, primarily with a focus on scholarly journals and on blogs.

The study of open peer review initiatives in scholarly journals was initiated in Francke (2008) and later expanded through analysis of pertinent examples chosen from the past few years. The blog data were collected as part of a larger study of blogging activities in which nine bloggers writing about environmental issues and current affairs participated. These are areas where conflicting views may exist and, as a result,

the credibility of the blogger and of her sources is likely important. Those parts of the blog texts that in some way concerned credibility or the use of sources were collected and analyzed thematically. The analysis made here is based mainly on discussions that took place in comments to one of the blogs. The bloggers gave their informed consent, but consent was not gathered from the (sometimes anonymous) people commenting on posts. For this reason, no direct quotes have been used in the poster.

4   Dimensions of credibility

Below, four dimensions of credibility assessment activities in web environments that have emerged through analysis are described with illustrating examples.

4.1   Gatekeepers ← → Open participation

Traditionally, people have relied strongly on gatekeepers to help decide not only which documents are relevant, but also which are credible. Gatekeepers historically include, for instance, editors, librarians, and reviewers. In a media environment where documents less frequently go through such gatekeepers before reaching the public, other trusted parties, such as bloggers, become gatekeepers. On a larger scale, Henry Jenkins (2006, pp. 17 f.) has pointed to this tension as characterizing much of the modern media environment:

> on the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels, and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. At the same time, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media […].

In the area of scholarly journal publishing, established publishers try to come across as attractive by portraying themselves as gatekeepers, not least through the system of rigorous peer review. But there are also journals which have tried to address frequent critiques raised towards the peer review system by trying to design a more transparent system. For instance, BioMed Central's *BMC Medicine* has implemented a system for open peer review, where the author knows the names of the reviewers and, if the article is accepted, all versions of the article are published along with the review comments and the authors' responses to these (BioMed Central, 2013). *Nature* tested a system where anyone could provide a review to a selected number of contributed articles (*Nature*, 2006). Furthermore, the *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* offered a combination of these two systems for a few years before they changed to a more traditional system. A more radical example is the journal *Philica* which accepts contributions in all different disciplines. The journal publishes the manuscripts as soon as they are submitted and puts them up for review by anyone who feels so inclined. The reviews are visible to everyone. However, the number of reviews is so far limited. Only one of the three established journals, *BMC Medicine*, which is also the one where the system is least open for anyone's participation, continues to implement the open peer review system. Based on these examples, one can argue that open participation in the assessment of quality has not become an integrated part of the documentary practices of the scholarly community.

4.2   Formal credibility assessment ← → Intrinsic plausibility

In Patrick Wilson's analysis in *Second-hand Knowledge* (1983) of how we determine who or what is a cognitive authority to us, he suggests that when it comes to evaluating documents as potential cognitive authorities, we take our departure in the documentary practices of a document's genesis and use. This includes how well regarded the author of the document is, the various activities through which the document is produced, distributed and evaluated, and how well the values and beliefs expressed agree with our own – the document's intrinsic plausibility.

Even in social media, credibility is often associated with formally published sources. An example, mirroring web credibility guidelines addressed to students, is the concern that sources should have been

formally assessed, which is expressed in Wikipedia's policies on Verifiability and No original research (Wikipedia, 2013a; 2013b; see also Sundin, 2011). In comments to posts in one of the climate change blogs analyzed, factors having to do with a document's author and production history (Wilson, 1983) were also prominent. A number of discussions in the comments focused on the credibility of peer reviewed scholarly articles and of newspaper articles. Individual authors and groups of authors, scientific and journalistic conduct, publishers, and quality control systems were drawn upon in the comments as supporting or limiting the trustworthiness of the documents discussed.

Furthermore, the blog participants relied strongly on what they found intrinsically plausible, in particular whether or not the views – epistemological or political – on climate change represented in the document were shared by the reader. Kaye and Johnson (2011) have shown that political values are an important factor in how blog readers attribute credibility to various types of blogs. The important role played by intrinsic plausibility when these blog readers assessed the credibility of articles concerned with a highly contested political topic supports those findings. What were constructed as general understandings within the practice of the blog strongly shaped and co-constructed which sources were viewed as credible and which arguments were considered to be valid.

4.3   Individual credibility assessment ← → Collective credibility assessment

The blog participants often collaborated in the commenting field to determine what made a source more or less credible; credibility was not – or not solely – something which was considered predetermined by previous reputation (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). The negotiations between blog participants served to affirm or perpetuate already held beliefs within the community and to convince somebody with opposing views.

It could thus be argued that what we see in the example of the blog discussion, just as in the talk pages of Wikipedia, approaches collective credibility assessment. However, unlike the collective assessment in tabulated credibility (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008), where peer ratings provide a metric of credibility, this is a case of qualitative, discursive credibility assessment. Through the interaction taking place, the assessment also differs from the separate peer reviews published in *BMC Medicine*, or prepared for traditional scholarly journals, which make up a collection of individual assessments rather collective assessments.

4.4   Experts ← → Laymen

Another aspect of the discussion in the blog comments is that the participants relate to and partly question the idea of 'experts' and non-experts or laymen. It is important to point out that the blog comments analyzed here took place on a site which gathered a mix of expertise: participants included both those who could be considered experts, with academic and/or other professional merits in relevant areas, and people whose knowledge in the area was less institutionalized, and also those who were merely 'curious'. Occasionally, the difference could be difficult to determine and participants experienced a need to clarify, as when somebody used an academic title and was challenged to state whether the title was in a relevant academic discipline. In this case, the problem was primarily a matter of assessing the credibility of particular participants in the discussion, so that their contribution to the collaborative credibility assessment of a document could be evaluated.

5   Concluding discussion

The four dimensions presented illustrate the complexities involved in assessing credibility on the web but also some cultural tools that are being applied. Furthermore, the examples illustrate some of the power relations at play in coming to grips with credibility. For instance, the "material texture" (Foucault, 2002, p. 115) of the blogging software used in the main example allows for comments and questions to be posed *and* read by any reader, and the discussion moves to a public arena where blog participants with varying

subject knowledge both draw on and question the practices of scientists and journalists – traditional gatekeepers or experts. Thus, an activity such as peer review, which could be argued to have been a site for mainly 'intra-practice' genre discussions, is increasingly changed from the outside (Bazerman, 1988, p. 308) by the technological affordances and associated genre practices of the blog, and by the fact that scholarly journals and newspapers are often available online and can be hyperlinked to.

However, as the examples above show, technical affordances are not enough to introduce change; if the values, beliefs and motivations of the discourse community do not support change, it will have difficulties gaining ground (Kling & McKim, 2000). Whether or not participation in credibility assessments, or review, becomes a collective activity within a documentary practice depends on the interaction between the affordances of the inscription technologies, social affordances and institutional practices.

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