Chapter 7
The Social Determinants in the Process of Credibility Assessment and the Influence of Topic Areas

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on the process of truth representation in different topics of human knowledge to reach an understanding of differences in online credibility assessment. The author argues that new cultural trends for legitimizing second-hand information –as wisdom of crowds, self-sufficiency or gate-watching– may cause friction with symbolic cultural factors and social structures settled by historical processes. This makes the evaluation of credibility an issue under negotiation. Analysis of qualitative data into the areas of health, economy and tourism allow to propose a processual theoretical model of credibility assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Being informed outside the range of direct experience is a necessity for almost everybody in the globalized world. Many activities of daily life are conducted based on information available online, and, for many people, the World Wide Web has become the window to discover the planet. This window has introduced important novelties to the nature of information that impact people's information behavior and knowledge acquisition. Evaluating information provided by others has always been problemàtic because the data recipient may be intentionally or accidentally misled. Thus, second-hand information needs to be legitimized in order to overcome the initial distrust about what others say (Wilson, 1983). The notion of credibility contributes to that exercise of legitimation because it is closely connected to representations of truth in society.

Traditional rhetoric established that the ethos, or character of the speaker, was the determining factor in giving credit to a speech and, consequently, in reaching persuasion (Aristotle, trans. 1968). The rhetor had to convey intelligence, knowledge and moral virtuosity to gain a positive ethos. However, Aristotle and other rhetoricians of the Greek Classical Age developed their theories in a communication system where oral speech was the prevailing channel of communication; therefore, the rhetor and the audience were physically and directly connected, which is often not the case with computer-mediated communication. Contemporary rhetoricians emphasize that web technologies have blurred the connection between the rhetor and the audience, but they nevertheless still argue that those who want to act as rhetors online can establish their ethos by appealing to community identification and goodwill; moral character and virtue; intelligence and knowledge; and verbal and design competence (Frobish, 2013). Both verbal and design competence have risen in level of importance because of the ubiquity of computer-mediated communication and their ability to translate traditional ethos to the digital environment.

Despite rhetors being able to develop communicative strategies for persuading the audience of their positive ethos, each member of the audience ultimately takes responsibility for judging messages and deciding whether a rhetor deserves credibility or not. This has motivated scholars to investigate how individuals grant credibility to the plethora of information sources available on the Internet. Overall, research has applied and adapted theoretical developments from interpersonal communication to the digital environment (Choi & Stvilia, 2015). Credibility is treated as an epistemic tool to recognize the truth of information provided by others. On the other hand, it has been indicated that social structures and normative values have a strong influence on truth representation and also impact credibility judgments (Burbules, 2001; Wilson, 1983). Regarding this facet, it is relevant to point out that virtual communities have introduced new normative values about knowledge production, circulation, and legitimation (Bruns, 2005; Surowiecki, 2004). Those values would determine the moral virtuosity of digital ethos beyond the technical updates of rhetorical techniques. However, it lacks enough empirical and theoretical research to address how those new values interplay with the morality of traditional ethos. Do the values of digital ethos challenge the established cultural assumptions and social power relations on knowledge production and truth representation? Or are those values integrated with the collective cultural assumptions of our contemporary times? In order to reflect on these intriguing questions, this chapter explores how the ontology and axiology of different fields of knowledge construct a common representation of truth and, consequently, how that constructed common truth influences online credibility evaluation. The author will present an analysis of empirical data, operationalized through three different topic areas—health, economy, and tourism—that range from closed knowledge and semi-open knowledge to open knowledge, inspired by Patrick Wilson's (1983) distinction between knowledge and opinion. Findings support the emergence of a processual model, which will be discussed in relation to how the interplay between traditional and digital ethos influences credibility evaluation.

BACKGROUND

Conditions for Online Credibility Assessment

The role of social structures in judging information was clear before the Internet's advent. We depended on a range of intermediaries to gather information and ideas to interpret its truthfulness. Communication and sociology explained it by the theory of gatekeeping, which depicted how a few

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