

Can you Teach a New Blog Old Tricks? How Blog Users Judge Credibility of Different

Types of Blogs for Information About the Iraq War

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The most talked about journalists during the early days of the Iraqi War were not renowned newspaper reporters or familiar faces from 24-hour cable news shows, but obscure war bloggers such as Salam Pax, an Iraqi living in Iraq, and military bloggers such as Lt. Smash, a reservist stationed in the Persian Gulf, as well as stateside armchair political pundits such as Sean-Paul Kelley (agonist.org).

But as the Iraqi War has shifted from efforts to oust Saddam Hussein to trying to maintain an uneasy peace, the blogosphere itself transformed as both news organizations and corporations recognized blogs as a way to engage their audience. The community of war bloggers, military bloggers and political bloggers had to vie for attention from blogs hosted by the media as well as by corporations and public relations agencies.

Researchers who have studied credibility of the Internet in general and blogs in particular have discovered that the both the type of information posted and the site sponsor () can affect credibility judgments. Although a few studies have specifically examined whether personal or media blogs are judged as more credible they have not systematically examined different types of blogs to determine the degree to which type of blog affects credibility judgments.

Problem statement

This study employed an online survey to examine the extent to which blog users judge different types of blogs as credible. More specifically, this study examines the extent to which blog users judge general information, media/journalism, war, military, political, corporate and personal blogs as credible and how they differ on individual credibility indicators (believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth). The study will also examine the degree to which reliance on blogs for war information predicts their credibility after controlling for demographic and political factors.

Source credibility has long been of keen interest to communication scholars who have studied how characteristics of the speakers affect the persuasiveness of a communication message. As Hovland and associates (1949; 1953) discovered more than 50 years ago, source credibility is primarily influenced by a source's perceived expertise (the degree to which audience members consider someone qualified to know the truth) and truthfulness (the degree to which the audience perceive a person as motivated to tell the truth) (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus & McCann, 2003). Highly credible sources typically have a greater influence on a receiver's attitudes and behaviors than less credible ones (Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978).

Researchers suggest credibility is not inherent in the source of the information but rather results from perceptions of the audience, who may take such factors as knowledge, education, intelligence, social status and professional achievements into account in assessing a source's expertise (McGuire, 1968). Similarly, source credibility is situational. Someone who is judged as a credible source for information on international diplomacy might not be considered credible on other topics such as how to fix a transmission.

Source Credibility and the Internet

Source credibility has been extended to studies of individual Websites, examining such factors as the quality of information on the site, site design and who is the sponsor of the site (Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Stanford, & Trauber 2003). For instance, researchers (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007a, 2007b; Metzger et al., 2003) have noted Website expertise may reflect the accuracy and completeness of the Website's information, its professionalism, the sponsor's reputation and the type of sponsor (e.g. an individual or an institution).

Trustworthiness may be influenced by its display of policy statements, amount of advertising, its professionalism and the firm or author reputation. Therefore, assessing source credibility is a complicated process that involves audience perceptions of the site author aspects of the message, the site's sponsor and the medium itself (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007a, 2007b; Johnson & Kaye,

1998, 2002; Kioussis, 2001; Metzger et. al, 2003a; Sundar & Nass, 2001).

For instance, Flanagin and Metzger have found that institutional Websites are perceived as more credible than commercial, advocacy and personal Websites (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007a, 2007b; Metzger, et al., 2003b). Flanagin & Metzger (2000) also found that news and reference information were rated as more credible than entertainment and commercial information. In particular, Websites created by trusted traditional news organizations such as *The New York Times* may be perceived as more credible than ones created by individuals or commercial organizations because news organizations are “established brands” that already have positive reputations and those reputations are transferred to their online product (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll & Casey, 2005; Finberg & Stone, 2002). Web information posted by individuals may not be subjected to the rigorous gatekeeping processes of traditional media and therefore is more likely to contain information that is outdated or inaccurate (Flanagin & Metzger 2000, 2007a, 2007b; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000). Users may perceive that commercial sites only reflect the particular commercial interests of its sponsor and therefore they are not rated as credible (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, 2007b). Similarly, studies of public relations practitioners suggest that sources affiliated with organizations are judged as significantly less credible than ones who are not because they believe the affiliated sources are simply parroting the company’s stance (Callison, 2001, 2004).

Source Credibility and Blogs

While studies have found that Internet users flock to traditional media sites for news and information, the different nature of blogs suggests that users may be more likely to rely on blogs posted by individuals than institutions for information about the Iraqi War, although what types of blogs are viewed as credible might depend on the context studied.

Blog use spiked after the beginning of the Iraqi War as a reaction from conservatives who believed the corporate-controlled, liberal media were presenting too harsh of a perspective of U.S. war efforts by concentrating on bombings and anti-war demonstrations (Hastings, 2003;

Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004; Reynolds, 2004). War blogs, on the other hand feature a variety of perspectives, and ran stories that were either unavailable or ignored by the mainstream media (Hastings, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2006; Kaye & Johnson, 2004).

Political and war bloggers do not adhere to traditional journalistic values of objectivity, fairness and balance, so they can bring in their own opinions, experiences and insights into their reports (Fallows & Rainie, 2004; Perlmutter, 2008; Reynolds, 2004). Bloggers, then, consider themselves viable alternatives to corporate-controlled journalists and present users with a different and superior product than that served by the traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004b).

While Internet users might be drawn to traditional media blogs because journalists have more training and access to news than individual bloggers, war and military blogs may be perceived as more credible sources for Iraqi war news because they are often posted by citizens in Iraq who directly observed the war, or by soldiers fighting the battle. These war and military bloggers may be perceived as having more expertise than the journalists covering the war because such blogs offer more than just war stories, but rather eyewitness accounts of the war and personal perspectives on events (Hebert, 2004). Further, because these bloggers often are on the front lines of battle they often present more varied and up-to-date news than traditional media. Consequently, journalists became one of the main readers of war and military blogs (Johnson & Kaye, 2004b, 2006; Kaye & Johnson, 2004).

Finally, many war, military and political blogs take clear positions on the war and allow blog users to post comments. People visit such blogs to discover other's opinions about the war as well as to gain a sense of community by being able to share their views about the war with like-minded individuals (Kaye, 2005; Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Perlmutter, 2008; Thompson, 2003).

Researchers also claim the standards used to judge blogs as credible are different from other online sources. The top bloggers, also known as the A-list bloggers, are those that are most

read, most linked to other blogs and are ones identified by the news media as agenda setters (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Therefore, while portal sites and those created by traditional news organizations will score highest among Internet users in general for credibility (Kohut & Keeter, 2008), blog users will identify political bloggers such as Arianna Huffington of *Huffington Post* and Markos Moulitsas Zúniga of *Daily Kos* as top sources for news and information, while war and military bloggers such as Christopher Albritton's *Back to Iraq* and Greyhawk's *Mudville Gazette* will be judged as the most credible for Iraqi War news.

Studies of blog users during the early stages of the Iraq War (Johnson & Kaye, 2004a) and during the 2004 presidential election (Johnson, Kaye, Bichard & Wong, 2007; Kim, 2006), found blogs were judged more credible than other online and traditional news sources. Blogs scored highest for depth and lowest on fairness, but scores for all credibility measures were higher for blogs than other sources (Kim 2006; Johnson et al., 2007).

Banning and Trammell (2006) found that as a whole Internet users judged blogs as only moderately credible (5.22 on a 10-point scale), although experienced Internet users rated blogs more credible than less experienced ones. Other studies have also found blogs ranked low for credibility among general Internet users (Consumer Reports Web Watch, 2005; Hostway, 2005). Research suggests that one reason Internet users as a whole may not consider blogs highly credible is that fewer than 4 in 10 have ever visited blogs (Pew Internet, 2007) and therefore they are unable to adequately judge their credibility.

Only one study could be found that has compared different types of blogs on degree of credibility. Banning and Sweetser (2007) had students read stories with the source listed as a personal blog, a media blog, an online newspaper or a traditional newspaper. All four sources were only rated as moderately credible and no significant differences in credibility ratings were found between them. However, what constituted a personal blog was not clearly defined by the researchers.

Blog Reliance and Credibility

Reliance on blogs has emerged as the strongest predictor of blog credibility (Banning & Trammell, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004a; Johnson et al, 2007; Kim, 2006). Studies indicate that individuals use various cues such as reputation and style of delivery to judge the credibility of a medium (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). More experienced blog users, then, may be more attracted to the personal, opinionated writing style found on blogs than would newer users (Johnson et al., 2007). Reliance on traditional online sources, however, has not been strongly linked to credibility of blogs, which may reflect the distrust blog users have of mainstream media (Graf, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004a; Johnson et al, 2007; Kim, 2006).

Characteristics of Blog Users

Blog users, like the Internet users as a whole, do not represent the America mainstream. Rather, blog users resemble early Internet users: young, well-educated males with high incomes (blogads, 2006; Eveland & Dylko, 2007; Graf, 2006; Johnson, et al., 2007; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Perlmutter, 2008). But demographics have not proven a strong predictor of blog credibility, just as they haven't proven strong predictors of Internet credibility once controlled for other factors (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000, 2002).

Not surprisingly, those who actively search out specialized sites such as political and war blogs report heavy interest in politics in general and the war in particular. Just as they are less trustful of the media, they also express less trust in government (Graf, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004a, 2007). While some studies indicate that bloggers in general are equally liberal and conservative (Eveland & Dylko, 2007; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007), those who seek out war blogs tend to be war supporters and therefore conservative (Johnson & Kaye, 2004b). Consequently, political interest, political knowledge, trust in government and ideology have all proved to be significant predictors of blog credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004a, 2007).

RQ1: Will general information blogs, media/journalism blogs, war blogs, military blogs, political blogs, corporate blogs or personal blogs rate higher in believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth in terms of credibility for news and information?

RQ2: Will general information blogs, media/journalism blogs, war blogs, military blogs, political blogs, corporate blogs or personal blogs rate higher in credibility for news and information?

RQ3: How well will reliance on blogs, reliance on traditional and online newspapers, reliance on traditional and online broadcast news and traditional and online cable television news for war information predict credibility of each type of blog after controlling for demographic and political variables?

Method

To specifically reach blog users a survey was placed online from April 23 to May 22, 2007. A request to fill out the survey along with a link to the survey URL was posted on 70 general interest blogs, personal blogs, general information blogs, political blogs, media blogs, war blogs and military blogs of diverse ideologies² such as the conservative *Boortz News*, the middle-of-the-road *Moderate Voice*, and the progressive *Daily Kos*. Upon completion of the survey respondents were encouraged to “snowball” it to fellow blog readers by clicking on a link that automatically forwarded the survey³.

Blog Credibility

The study measures the credibility of seven different types of blogs: General Information; Media/Journalism; War; Military; Political; Corporate; and Personal.

A multidimensional construct consisting of believability, fairness, accuracy and depth of information (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Johnson & Kaye, 2000, 2002 2004a) measured the credibility of each blog type using a 1-5 point scale ranging from “1) not very believable/fair/accurate/in-depth to “5) very believable/fair/accurate/in-depth.”

Reliance on Online Sources for Information about General News and the Iraq War

Degree of reliance on blogs, online broadcast television, cable and newspaper sites, and traditionally delivered broadcast, cable and newspapers for information about the Iraq war was rated on a 5-point scale; “5) heavily rely,” “4) rely,” “3) sometimes rely,” “2) rarely rely,” “1)

never rely,” for each source.

Political Characteristics

Interest and Knowledge of General News and the Iraqi War. Respondents indicated their degree of interest and knowledge in general news and the war in Iraq on a 0 to 10 scale (no interest to extremely interested).

Political Party Ties and Ideology. A 0 to 10 scale (weak party ties to very strong party ties) was used to assess degree of association with a political party. Respondents were also asked to whether they consider themselves “5) very conservative,” “4) conservative,” “3) moderate,” “2) liberal,” or “1) very liberal.”

Iraqi War Attitudes. Respondents marked the level of their support for the Iraqi war and their perceptions of the media’s support on a 5-point scale that ranged from “5) highly supportive” to “1) not supportive at all.”

Trust and Self-Efficacy. Trust in the government and self-efficacy were measured by items previously used in the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan. Trust: "Most of our leaders are devoted to service," "Politicians never tell us what they really think," and "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think." Self-efficacy: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" and "Every vote counts in an election, including yours and mine." The response options for each attitude index ranged from " 1) strongly disagree" to "5) strongly agree." The polarity was reversed on the second and third statements of the trust index and the first efficacy item. Summated indices for the trust and for the self-efficacy items were then created. The reliability for the trust index is .74, and the efficacy index is .54⁴

Demographics

Respondents indicated their gender, age as of their last birthday and estimated their 2007 income. They also selected their highest level of education from among seven options that ranged from “less than high school,” to “Ph.D. degree” and “other.”

Data Analysis

First frequencies were run on the blog credibility and media reliance, interest and knowledge variables, personal and media support of the war, strength of party ties, political ideology, trust, self-efficacy and demographic variables: gender, age, education and income. Next, mean scores were calculated for each of the credibility measures: believability; accuracy; fairness; depth. The four measures were then combined into a credibility index for each blog type. Cronbach's alpha for each measure is as follows: General Information blogs .80, Journalism/Media blogs .85, Warblogs .89, Military blogs .90, Political blogs .84, Corporate blogs .86, and Personal blogs .82. Mean scores were then calculated for each credibility index.

Lastly, reliance, political characteristics, and demographics were the independent measures used in hierarchical regression to determine their predictive power on perceptions of credibility for each blog type. Demographics were entered as the first block. The second block consisted of the political variables (general news and Iraqi war knowledge and interest, personal and media attitudes towards the war, strength of party ties, political ideology, self-efficacy and trust). Reliance was entered into the last block. The variables were entered in ordered blocks to control for influence of reliance. Regressions were repeated seven times, each with a credibility index of different type of blog.

Results

The survey was completed by 1,989 respondents⁵. The demographic profile shows that slightly more than three-quarters (77.3%) of respondents are male and almost nine out of ten are white (89.5%). The respondents are highly educated with 89.7% reporting some college or higher, and they report an annual income of \$90,500 on average. Additionally, they average 47.7 years of age and have been accessing blogs for an average of 5.2 years. The respondents who completed this study's survey are demographically similar to blog readers reported by others⁶.

The majority of respondents indicate low to moderate feelings of trust in the government. Four out of ten (39.8%) claim low to very low feelings of trust, 47.0% moderate levels, and only

13.2% marked high to very degrees of trust. Despite low to moderate trust, these blog users harbor strong feelings of self-efficacy. Just over one-half (51.0%) claim high levels of self-efficacy and 37.1% report moderate levels.

Other political attributes include strength of party ties and political ideology. The respondents are fairly evenly divided in terms of party allegiance. Slightly less than one-third (32.1%) claim weak party ties, 36% moderate levels, and 31.9% are strongly linked to a political party. Ideologically, respondents tend to conservative (57.7%) One-quarter (24.4%) are moderates and only 18% consider themselves very liberal/liberal.

More than eight out of ten respondents indicated a high interest in general news (82.7%) and in the war (80.9%). Less than 3% expressed low interest in either topic. Additionally, more than eight out ten credit blogs with increasing their knowledge of general news (88.9%) and of the war (82.6%). Less than 2% indicated their knowledge about either topic had decreased since they first started using blogs.

Credibility of Different Types of Blogs

The first research question investigates the perceptions of believability, fairness, accuracy and depth of each of the different types of blogs; general information, media/journalism, war, military, political, corporate and personal. Mean scores (range 1-5) indicate that military blogs, those written by military personnel on the front lines, are seen as the most believable (m=3.79), fair (m=3.46), accurate (m=3.63) and in-depth (m=3.81) than any other blog type. Conversely, corporate blogs, those hosted by a corporate entity, were consistently viewed as the least believable (m=2.40), fair (m=2.30), accurate (m=2.48) and in-depth (m=2.50) than any other blog type, Further, media/journalism blogs and personal blogs were rated low on believability (m=2.88 and m=2.93, respectively) and depth (m=2.87 and m=2.82, respectively). Media/journalism blogs were also rated as not very fair (m=2.50). General information blogs are viewed as just about as believable (m=3.35 and m=3.36, respectively) and accurate (m=3.21 and m=3.29, respectively) as war blogs and are judged as slightly fairer than war blogs (m=3.23 and

m=3.14, respectively) (Table 1).

The second research question examines the overall credibility of each blog type. The credibility indices (mean score range 4-20) show that again military blogs are the most credible (m=14.7) and corporate blogs the least credible (m=9.7). Warblogs, dedicated to news and analysis of the war, are judged as the second most credible source (m=13.5), followed by general information blogs (m=12.9), political blogs (12.0), personal blogs (m=11.1) and media/journalism blogs (11.0) (Table 1).

Predictors of Blog Credibility

This study also investigates the predictors of blog credibility of information found on each type of blog. This study focuses on the influence of reliance on online and traditional media for war information on blog credibility. In general, reliance on media-related Websites and traditionally delivered media explain between 11.1% and 46.5% of the perceptions of blog credibility war information. Reliance most strongly accounts for the variance of judgments of credibility of military blogs (46.5%) closely followed by warblogs (45.0%) and most weakly predicting credibility of personal blogs (11.1%) and corporate blogs (22.4%) (Table 2).

General Information Blogs. Credibility of these blogs is positively and significantly predicted by reliance on blogs ($\beta = .44$, $p < .000$) and negatively by reliance on cable television news ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .05$) for war information. Political characteristics are generally weak predictors of the credibility of war news and of current events found on general information blogs. Credibility is predicted by knowledge of general news ($\beta = .06$, $p < .05$), perceptions of the media's support of the war ($\beta = .09$, $p < .001$), general news interest ($\beta = .06$, $p < .05$), and negatively predicted by age ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .000$). Younger blog users who rely on blogs but not cable television for war news and who claim that blogs increased their knowledge of general issues see general information blogs as credible. Also those interested in general news and who feel the media support the war are to likely to deem war news found on general information blogs as credible. In general, reliance is a stronger predictor of credibility than political

attributes or demographics (Table 2).

Media/Journalism Blogs. The credibility of blogs that are hosted by media organizations is predicted by reliance on various online and traditional media for news about the war. Perceptions of credibility of war news found on media/journalism blogs is influenced by reliance on blogs ($\beta = .10, p < .000$), online cable television ($\beta = .12, p < .000$), online newspapers ($\beta = .10, p < .000$), over-the-air television ($\beta = .06, p < .05$) and printed newspapers ($\beta = .12, p < .000$). Online or offline media influence credibility strongly for media/journalism blogs but generally do not do so for other types (Table 2).

Other predictors of the credibility of information on media/journalism sites are low personal support of the war ($\beta = -.15, p < .000$) but perceptions that the media are war supporters ($\beta = .08, p < .000$). These individuals who deem media/journalism blogs as credible are also trusting of the government ($\beta = .18, p < .000$) and are young ($\beta = -.15, p < .000$).

Warblogs. Credibility of blogs that are devoted to news and analysis of the war are predicted only by reliance on blogs in general ($\beta = .25, p < .000$) and not by any other online or traditional news source for war news. Also affecting judgments of credibility are personal support of the war ($\beta = .31, p < .000$) coupled with perceptions that the media do not support the war ($\beta = -.20, p < .000$). Users who feel warblogs are credible are also young ($\beta = -.06, p < .001$), conservative ($\beta = .10, p < .001$) and are trusting of the government ($\beta = .07, p < .001$). They are also interested in the Iraqi war ($\beta = .07, p < .001$) and feel that connecting to warblogs has increased their knowledge of general news and information ($\beta = .07, p < .001$). In general, political attributes more strongly influence perceptions of credibility than does media reliance (Table 2).

Military Blogs. These blogs are typically written by military personnel and others who are on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Credibility of these eyewitness accounts is predicted only by reliance on blogs for war information ($\beta = .24, p < .000$) but not by reliance on any other online or traditional medium. Several political and demographic attributes account for

the judgments of credibility. Blog users who deem information found on military blogs as credible are young ($\beta = -.07, p < .001$), conservative ($\beta = .07, p < .001$), females ($\beta = .04, p < .05$) who are very interested in the war ($\beta = .06, p < .001$) and who attribute blog use to increased knowledge about the war ($\beta = .05, p < .05$). Moreover, they are highly supportive of the war ($\beta = .36, p < .000$) but feel that the media in general are not supportive ($\beta = -.18, p < .000$). Military blog users are also more supportive of the war than those who visit other types of blogs. Political attributes are the strongest block of predictors of the perceptions of credibility of military blogs than any other blog type (Table 2).

Political Blogs. Reliance on online and traditional media sources for war information is a poor predictor of the credibility of political blogs with only reliance on blogs having a strong influence ($\beta = .40, p < .000$). Individuals who believe political blogs are credible also believe that the media are supportive of the war ($\beta = .08, p < .001$) and that the government can be trusted ($\beta = .07, p < .001$). They are also strongly affiliated with a political party ($\beta = .07, p < .001$), are interested in news of the world around them ($\beta = .08, p < .001$) and believe that blogs have contributed to their knowledge of current events ($\beta = .06, p < .001$). As with those who deem military blogs credible, they tend to be young ($\beta = -.13, p < .000$) females ($\beta = .06, p < .05$).

Corporate Blogs. Blogs that are hosted by corporate entities and are generally devoted to supporting company practices and ideals are deemed credible by those who rely on blogs for war information ($\beta = .07, p < .000$). Those who judge corporate blogs as credible are young individuals ($\beta = -.12, p < .000$) with high incomes ($\beta = .07, p < .001$). Users who deem corporate blogs as credible are also conservative ($\beta = .17, p < .000$), highly supportive of the war ($\beta = .22, p < .000$), trusting of the government ($\beta = .14, p < .000$) and feel that have the power to bring about political change ($\beta = .06, p < .05$). Corporate blogs are the only blog type in which credibility is influenced by income and self-efficacy.

Personal Blogs. Individuals who view personal blogs as credible tend to rely on blogs ($\beta = .29, p < .000$) for information about the Iraq war but not on cable television news ($\beta = -.07,$

$p < .05$). These users tend to be young ($\beta = -.08, p < .001$) females ($\beta = .07, p < .05$) with low levels of education ($\beta = -.05, p < .05$). They exhibit an interest in general news and current events ($\beta = .07, p < .000$) but they are not interested in the war ($\beta = -.06, p < .000$) nor are they tied to a political party ($\beta = -.06, p < .05$). Personal blogs are the only blog type where in credibility is influenced by low interest in the war and in political partisanship and education.

Summary of Credibility

In general, reliance on blogs for war information and age are the only common predictors of perceptions of credibility of each blog type. More typically, the findings indicate that the predictors of credibility differ among the types of blogs, which indicates that blogs are not all the same nor do they serve the same purposes. Although reliance on online and offline media for war information is commonly a weak predictor of credibility of all blog types, this does not hold true for media/journalism blogs. Those who deem these blogs as credible are also highly reliant on most forms of online and traditional media for war information. Credibility of information found on war, military, and corporate blogs is predicted by support of the Iraqi war, whereas credibility of media/blogs is predicted by low support of the war. Also, those who deem war and military blogs as credible also believe that traditional media reports reflect low support for the war. However, individuals who rate general information blogs, media/media journalism blogs and political blogs as credible believe the media are supportive of the war. Also, conservatism tends to predict the credibility of information found on war, military and political blogs.

Discussion

While researchers have found that both the type of information posted (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000) and the site sponsor (Metzger et al, 2003b, Flanagin & Metzger, 2007b) can affect credibility judgments, they have not systematically examined different types of blogs to determine the degree to which the type of blog affects credibility.

This study examined the extent to which blog users judge general information,

media/journalism, war, military, political, corporate and personal blogs as credible and how they differ on individual credibility indicators (believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth). The study also explored the degree to which reliance on blogs for war information predicted their credibility after controlling for demographic and political factors.

Studies of the Web in general have found that users flock to sites posted by traditional news organizations (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007a, 2007b) because they are “established brands” whose reputations in the offline world are transferred to the online product (Abdulla et al., 2005; Finberg & Stone, 2002). Websites posted by individuals do not go through the rigorous editing process of media sites and thus are more likely to contain information that is either inaccurate or outdated (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, 2007a, 2007b; Johnson & Kaye, 2000).

Anecdotal evidence, however, suggested that in the blogosphere, political, war and military blogs may be judged as more credible than ones posted by media organizations. War and military blogs are often created by individuals and soldiers in Iraq fighting the war or observing its effects and therefore may offer the eyewitness accounts and personal perspectives on events in Iraq missing from many journalistic accounts (Hebert, 2004). Consequently, journalists themselves are some of the main readers of war and military blogs (Johnson & Kaye, 2004b, 2006; Kaye & Johnson, 2004). Indeed, this study found that military blogs were judged the most credible overall as well as the most credible on each of the individual measures. War blogs were rated the second most credible blogs overall, although third behind general information blogs in terms of fairness. War and military blogs were rated highest for depth, which supports earlier studies that indicate that depth may be the most important indicator of blog credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004a; Kim, 2006; Singer, 2006). Most war and military blogs focus exclusively on the war and therefore can cover war issues in more depth and offer different perspectives than is found in traditional media. Studies that have investigated why individuals rely on blogs for news and information during the Iraqi War indicate that a major attraction of blogs is that they provide war information missing from traditional media (Kaye,

2005).

All types of blogs rated low for fairness. While objectivity is a benchmark of traditional media, people seek out blogs because they clearly stake out positions on issues such as the war and because bloggers provide more insight than traditional media by adding their own perspectives and observations on the war reports (Fallows & Rainie, 2004; Perlmutter, 2008; Reynolds, 2004). Thus, users still connect to blogs even though they deem them as not very fair.

Blogs created by journalists and media organizations were rated among the lowest in overall credibility, below all sources except corporate blogs. Several scholars have suggested that the rise in blogs at the beginning of the Iraqi War reflected bloggers' dislike of a press that they perceived as having paid too much attention to the anti-war movement (Hastings, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004; Reynolds, 2004). While some important war bloggers such as Christopher Albritton and Kevin Sites are journalists or former journalists, many bloggers see their sites as a superior form of journalism (Regan, 2003; Singer, 2006). Because most bloggers do not rely on advertising, they believe they can feature perspectives and stories ignored by the traditional media. (Bruns, 2006; Wall, 2006). Indeed, bloggers see themselves as the opposite of traditional journalists: independent, unedited, opinionated and personal. As columnist Catherine Seipp (2002) put it: "Bloggers see the traditional media as The Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz manipulated by a snake-oil salesman behind the curtain."

Another indication of blog users' disgust with traditional media is its lack of a link between online media reliance and blog credibility. Reliance on cable TV news is actually negatively related to general information and personal blogs, which suggests that for blog users, the more personal and opinionated blogs are serving as a substitute for traditional media, a finding that supports an earlier study of blog use in the Iraq War (Johnson & Kaye, 2006). However, reliance on online cable TV, online broadcast news, online newspapers and traditional news all predicted credibility of media/journalism blogs, with all but reliance on broadcast news more strongly linked to media/journalism blog credibility than blog reliance. Previous studies of

the Internet in general have discovered that reliance on traditional media is the strongest predictor of Internet credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2000, 2002). Those who rely on traditional media are political animals who voraciously devour newspapers and newsmagazines, cable and broadcast television news and news from political sites. Blogs, then, provide an additional source to satisfy their political addiction (Johnson & Kaye, 2002).

Corporate blogs ranked lowest in credibility, which mirrors previous studies of Websites that suggest Internet users do not trust commercial sites because they believe they only reflect the interests of their sponsors (Callison, 2001, 2004; Metzger, 2000, 2007b).

Some researchers worry that the rise of more partisan news sources such as blogs will lead to selective exposure in which people only search out views congenial to their opinions and beliefs. Selective exposure could lead to individuals developing more polarized and fragmented views (Johnson, Bichard & Wang, 2008; Stroud, 2006, 2007), resulting in less tolerance of opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2002). Selective exposure runs counter to democratic theory that suggests that citizens should gather and critically evaluate a range of opinions before reaching decisions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Stroud, 2006).

This study offers some evidence that at least some war bloggers practice selective exposure. Support for the Iraqi war proved the strongest predictor of credibility of war, military and corporate blogs, and the belief that the media were biased against the war effort was among the best predictors. Furthermore, war, military and corporate blog users indicated that they were conservative and said they were more likely to visit blogs that expressed a conservative viewpoint. However, more than 8 in 10 respondents credited blogs with increasing their knowledge of the war, suggesting blog users are getting war information they cannot find in traditional media.

Blog reliance and age were the only consistent predictors of blog credibility with credibility stronger among those who rely heavily on blogs and younger users. The results for age run counter to earlier studies that found that age and other demographic variables did not

predict blog credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004a; Johnson et al., 2007; Kim, 2006). Blog reliance, on the other hand, has proven a consistent predictor of blog credibility (Banning & Trammell, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004a; Johnson et al, 2007; Kim, 2006). Heavier users are likely to be savvy about which blogs to visit and which ones to ignore and therefore visit blogs that they know provide information they deem credible.

Other than age and reliance, the demographic and political portraits of the different types of blogs were considerably different. For instance, education and income only predicted personal and corporate blogs, respectively and efficacy was only linked to corporate blogs. Military blog credibility was predicted by knowledge of the Iraq War while war blogs were significantly related to general news knowledge. Those who judged media/journalist blogs as credible probably deviated most from other types of bloggers. Those who relied on media and journalism blogs opposed the war and saw the media as supporting the war effort. Online media sites were only positively related to credibility among media and journalism blog users.

The different profiles of the different types of blog users might explain why different studies have produced different portraits of who is on the blogosphere. For instance, while this study and earlier blog research on blog use in the Iraqi War (Johnson & Kaye, 2004b, 2007 Kaye & Johnson, 2004) suggested users were overwhelmingly conservative, studies of the 2004 election showed users were more balanced between the Democrats and Republicans (Eveland & Dylko, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007). Also, while studies of political blogs suggest users are overwhelmingly male (blogads, 2006; Eveland & Dylko, 2007; Graf, 2006; Johnson, et. al., 2007), personal bloggers tend to be women (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2006.) Care must be taken, then, to try typecast members of the blogosphere as the typical blog visitor may differ greatly depending on what type of blog and blog content you are examining.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

The respondents to this study were a self-selected group of those who visit blogs for war information. Therefore, results from this study cannot be generalized to all Internet users or even

all blog users. The Internet does not provide a reliable mechanism to randomly sample the entire Internet population of groups of Internet users such as blog users (Kaye & Johnson, 1999). When random samples are not possible, non-probability sampling is appropriate for posting an online survey (Babbie, 1990). Potential respondents were contacted through announcements posted on a variety of different types of blogs. Purposive sampling techniques can generate results that may prove representative of a subset of users, but are not necessarily representative of the larger population (Babbie, 1990). As earlier noted, the demographic portrait of blog users in this study proved to be similar to other political blog studies (blogads, 2006; Graf, 2006).

This study examined credibility among several different types of blogs for Iraqi War information. Future studies should examine credibility of blogs under different environments. For instance, blogs became an important tool for candidates during the 2004 campaign (Bichard, 2006; Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006) and candidates are continuing to explore ways to connect with voters online in the 2008 campaign (Kohut & Keeter, 2008). During the election, blog users may be more likely to rely on more traditional blogs such as ones posted by the candidates and media organizations. Such a study of the 2008 presidential election would provide further evidence about how credibility can differ depending on type of blog examined and situation in which blogs are examined.

Notes

1. General information/citizen blogs are one in which citizens play in active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. Media/journalism blogs encompass those that report news and opinion and those that are about journalism. Bloggers are usually, but not always, journalists. A warblog is concerned with terrorism, war and conflict, often with a pro-military stance. A military blog (milblog) is a blog written by members or veterans of any branch of the U.S armed services, posting directly from the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. A political blog primarily comments on politics, and they often have a clearly stated political bias. A corporate blog is published and used by an organization to reach its organizational goals. Finally, a personal blog is one in which people write on their day-to-day experiences, social commentary, complaints, poems, prose, illicit thoughts and any content that might be found in a traditional paper diary or journal.

2. Links to the survey were posted on the following blogs: A Family in Baghdad, A Family in Iraq, Ace of Spades HQ, Ann Althouse, AOL, Appalachian Scribe, Betsey's Page, Blogometer, Boortz News, Brian's Blog, Center for Citizen Media, Citizen Journalism, CNN, Crooks & Liars, Daily Kos, Dan Gillmor, DC Metblogs, Democratic Underground, Fark, Firedoglake, Hassenpfeffer, Highclearing, Hotline Blogometer, brianhornback.blogspot, edwardwillett.blogspot, journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink, Nofishnonuts, Secrets In Baghdad, Joanne Jacobs, Newshounds, www.wakeupamericans-spree.blogspot, Huffington Post, Hullabaloo, Infomaniac, Instapolit, Instapundit, Jay Rosen's Press Think, Jesus General, Journalism.co.uk, Khalid Jarrar, Knox News, No Silence Here, KnoxViews, Mike the Mad Biologist, Mindy McAdams, Moderate Voice, MoveOn.org, NewsHounds, NewsBusters, NewsDissector, Obsidian Wings, Oraculations, Outside the Beltway, Poliblogger, Political Mavens-Sтивен Taylor, Politics in the Zeros, PowerLine, Power of Narrative, Poynter.org/Romenesko, Pressthink.org, Raw Story, Skippy the Bush Kangaroo, Slate, Teaching Online Journalism (UNC), Tell Me a Secret, tojou.blogspot, Unqualified Offerings, Wake Up America.

3. At the time of data collection only about one-third of Internet users connected to blogs. Any attempt at random sampling this small group of Internet users would result in a large non-qualification rate. This method of convenience sampling was appropriate for specifically reaching a narrow group of blog users (Babbie, 1990).

4. The survey's first question asked respondents to enter their e-mail addresses; all but 17 (99.1%) complied. The respondents' e-mail addresses together with a computer generated ID (programmed to appear on every completed survey) were used to delete duplicated surveys. Additionally, after sending the completed survey a Web page would immediately appear thanking the respondents for their participation and verifying that the survey had been sent so respondents would not retransmit the survey.

5. The efficacy index is below the normal .70 standard for internal reliability. However, low reliability scores are not unusual for an index of only two items. One of the main ways to ensure reliability is to use measures that have proven reliable in previous research (Babbie, 1990). Therefore, the authors combined

the two items into an index because these two items from the National Election Studies have proven reliable in past studies.

6. The demographics of the blog readers who responded to this study and the types of Weblogs they visit closely mirror the profiles of blog readers reported by others (blogads, 2006; Graf, 2006).

TABLE 1

Perceptions of Believability, Fairness, Accuracy and Depth of Blogs
Mean Scores (Scale 1-5)

<u>Type of Blog</u>	<i>Believability</i>	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>Accuracy</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Credibility Index (4-20)</i>
General Information	3.35	3.23	3.21	3.13	12.9 (n=1838) $\alpha=.80$
Media Journalism	2.88	2.50	2.79	2.87	11.0 (n=1806) $\alpha=.85$
Warblogs	3.36	3.14	3.29	3.63	13.5 (n=1796) $\alpha=.89$
Military	3.79	3.46	3.63	3.81	14.7 (n=1799) $\alpha=.90$
Political	3.09	2.61	2.86	3.44	12.0 (n=1811) $\alpha=.84$
Corporate	2.40	2.30	2.48	2.50	9.7 (n=1775) $\alpha=.86$
Personal	2.93	2.68	2.73	2.82	11.1 (n=1794) $\alpha=.82$

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Blog Credibility for Iraqi War Information

	Types of Blogs						
	Gen'l Info.	Media/Journ.	War	Military	Political	Corporate	Personal
<u>Predictor Variables</u>							
Gender	.04	-.02	.02	.04*	.06*	.00	.07*
Age	-.10***	-.15***	-.06**	-.07**	-.13***	-.12***	-.08**
Education	-.01	-.04	-.00	-.00	.02	-.02	-.05*
Income	.02	.00	.03	-.00	.03	.07**	.00
R2	.012	.053	.013	.005	.025	.025	.020
Gen'l News Knowledge	.06*	.02	.07**	.00	.06*	.01	.02
Iraqi War Knowledge	-.01	.02	.01	.05*	-.00	-.05	-.04
Personal War Attitude	.05	-.15***	.31***	.36***	.04	.22***	-.04
Media War Attitude	.09**	.08*	-.20***	-.18***	.08**	-.05	.04
Gen'l News Interest	.06*	.03	.03	.03	.08**	.02	.07*
Iraqi War Interest	-.01	-.05	.07**	.06**	-.02	-.00	-.06*
Strength of Party Ties	-.01	-.04	-.00	-.02	.07**	.01	-.06*
Political Ideology	-.01	-.00	.10**	.07**	.04	.17***	.01
Trust	.01	.18***	.07**	.01	.07**	.14***	.04
Efficacy	.01	.00	-.02	.00	.04	.06*	.00
R2	.097	.231	.405	.420	.130	.213	.039
R2 Change	.085	.178	.392	.415	.105	.188	.019
Rely on Blogs	.44***	.10***	.25***	.24***	.40***	.07**	.29***
Rely on Online TV	-.03	.04	-.00	-.04	-.01	.04	.03
Rely on Online Cable TV	-.01	.12***	.04	.02	-.03	.02	-.01
Rely on Online Newspapers	-.02	.13***	-.02	-.01	.02	-.01	-.04
Rely on Broadcast TV	.01	.06*	.00	.02	.00	.04	-.00
Rely on Cable TV	-.07*	.00	.00	.00	.04	-.00	-.07*
Rely on Newspapers	-.02	.12***	.00	-.03	-.01	.04	.00

R2	.255	.315	.450	.465	.244	.224	.111
R2 Change	.159	.084	.045	.046	.114	.011	.072
Adjusted R	.245	.305	.442	.458	.233	.212	.098

Sig. of Change	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.006	.000
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*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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