Word of Mouse: Credibility, Journalism and Emerging Social Media

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Word of Mouse:
Credibility, Journalism and Emerging Social Media

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On August 29, 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain announced that he had chosen Sarah Palin, the governor of Alaska, as his running mate. The surprising choice of the little-known Palin captured the nation's attention; her status as just the second woman ever to run on a major party ticket was but one among many reasons. Interest in America's long and hotly contested electoral campaign soon began to reach a fevered pitch.

Several days later, I received a message from a journalist and trusted friend via Facebook, the online social network. Her characteristically brief "Check this out!" introduction referred to the forwarded text of an email from Anne Kilkenny, a woman neither of us knew. Kilkenny resides in the small Alaskan city of Wasilla, and *her* message concerned a woman she knew well—Wasilla's former mayor Sarah Palin. "Dear friends," Kilkenny's email[1] began. "So many people have asked me about what I know about Sarah Palin in the last 2 days that I decided to write something up."

A homemaker and regular attendee at Wasilla City Council meetings, Kilkenny had witnessed first-hand much of Palin's meteoric political rise. She wrote in considerable detail about Palin's record during her six years as Wasilla's mayor, and included a reasonably balanced "Claim vs Fact" assessment ("gutsy: absolutely!") of Palin's personality and politics. The sharp, informative twenty-four hundred word missive was meant to help inform forty of Kilkenny's friends. But as the *Los Angeles Times* reported a month later,[2] "More than 13,700 email responses and half a million Google hits changed all that."

Kilkenny had told her friends to feel free to pass her email along—and they did, sending it to their friends, who in turn then redistributed it in a variety of ways,

including blogs, websites, and social networks such as Facebook. Moving at the speed of light, the now "viral" email soon landed on my computer desktop—and millions of others all over the globe. "Who is Sarah Palin?" the world wanted to know, and "Who is Anne Kilkenny?" Moreover, was she—and the information in her email—at all credible?

Before I could check, however, a second email about Sarah Palin also rocketed around the Internet and into millions of In Boxes—including mine. Forwarded by a different friend, this email[3] supplied a "list of books Palin tried to have banned" from the local library during her tenure as mayor of Wasilla. The information, if true, had the potential to harm Palin's vice-presidential candidacy almost before it began. But was it?

Two emails had been sent to me by two friends: each purported to deliver credible news vital to an informed democratic decision; each became an instant Internet sensation, rapidly replicated and exponentially amplified by new, so-called Web 2.0 social media, which combined to propel it into an ongoing national conversation. Considered together, they exemplify two clear trends. The first is that online emerging media—including "viral" emails, blogs, social networks like Facebook and MySpace, and other new platforms such as the video site YouTube and the micro-blogging Twitter service—are increasingly used by individuals and groups to filter and transmit news and information. The second is that it is now more difficult than ever to separate fact from fiction and "truth" from "spin" in any form of media, legacy or emerging.

We live in a media-saturated era, one in which news and information from a wide range of sources is readily available to most Americans for the first time in

history. This unparalleled information access, although empowering, is also disruptive and presents its own unique set of issues and challenges, both to journalists and to society as a whole. Facing a virtual tsunami of unfiltered information—powered by an ongoing technological revolution that has democratized tools of media production and distribution, created by an unprecedented amalgam of increasingly beleaguered professional journalists and newly besotted amateur 'citizen reporters,' and distributed via a wide variety of both traditional and new media—how can any of us be sure that the news and information we see and hear is true? Which reports and reporters can we trust and rely on to be credible? How can we find them amidst the clangor and the clutter of "TMI"—*too much* information?[4]

Although Eric Schmidt, Google's chairman and chief executive officer, recently denounced the Internet as a "cesspool of misinformation,"[5] examples of misinformation,[6] disinformation,[7] inaccurate reporting, fake news, phony news releases,[8] pay-for-play[9] punditry, and a host of other media malpractices are prevalent offline as well. As a result, public confidence in the news media as an institution has been declining for years. A 2008 Gallup poll,[10] for example, shows that fewer than one in four Americans have a "great deal or a lot" of confidence in either television news or newspapers—down from about one in three in 2004. A Zogby poll later in 2008[11] showed similarly widespread distrust; nearly three-fourths of those surveyed believe that the news they read and see is biased and not credible.

While still trusted more than Congress, (traditionally the nation's least trusted institution), the media are clearly beset by this growing lack of public confidence. This negative assessment of trust and credibility is shared by those on both the

right and left of the political spectrum, who seldom agree on much else. But journalism's trust issue is not just a problem for journalists. The breakdown in the relationship between journalists and the "people formerly known as the audience"[12] presents a serious social challenge. If we cannot ensure that we are receiving credible news and information, the ramifications for our democracy, which depends on an active, informed citizenry, are enormous.

Fortunately, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon in the rise of emerging media. Numerous public opinion surveys show that the use of new social media is rapidly expanding in all demographic groups[13]—although it is predictably highest among the "Digital Natives"[14] aged 18–29.[15] A recent Pew Research Center survey, for example, shows that Americans increasingly get their news from multiple sources. More than one-third use Internet-based sources such as websites, blogs and social networking sites, and only a minority rely entirely on traditional sources, including print, radio, television and cable news.[16] As the Project for Excellence in Journalism's "2008 State of the News Media" report[17] notes, "Americans are going online more frequently, spending more time there and relying more on search and links rather than brand-name destinations to navigate the Web," and, "The Web is becoming a more integral part of people's lives. Eight in 10 Americans 17 and older now say the Internet is a critical source of information—up from 66% in 2006." The survey shows that Americans increasingly identify the Internet as a more important source of information than television, radio and newspapers. Fully one-third of Americans now say the Internet is the "most essential medium."

Meanwhile, a new wave of research into emerging media, information delivery and web credibility is threatening to upend the conventional academic wisdom

that social networks tend less to persuasion and more to polarization, fragmentation and reinforcement of prior beliefs. Online social media networks, researchers suggest, possess certain unique characteristics that enable them to act as credibility filters, thus introducing elements of trust and persuasion to the delivery of news and information.

Miriam Metzger, associate professor at the Department of Communication at the University of California–Berkeley is one such researcher who believes[18] "social media can definitely play a role in trust filtering." Metzger, whose research centers on Internet credibility issues, says, "There is an interesting phenomenon going on, where under certain circumstances, new media can actually be perceived as *more* credible than traditional media." Metzger points to reporting about recent wildfires that threatened her neighborhood as one example. "During the fires here, the news and information accessible from local social media (such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs) were more relevant, reliable and current than that on local television, which was broadcasting outdated official press releases," she says. "The traditional media was not perceived as useful. Meanwhile, the new interactive media was getting people information they really wanted and needed, in real time."

Assistant professor Kelly Garrett at the School of Communication at The Ohio State University, whose own[19] social network research has convinced him "the filtering thesis sounds correct," echoes Metzger's remarks. Much of Garrett's recent work focuses on the issue of "selective exposure" [20]—whether or not people prefer to receive information that reinforces their opinions and to avoid information that challenges them. Garrett's findings have important implications, as the abstract of one of his studies notes, "for individuals'

exposure to cross-cutting political ideas in a contemporary news environment that affords an unprecedented level of choice."[21] His research shows that "there is no evidence that individuals abandon news stories that contain information with which they disagree."

Informal Internet communications channels "are certainly expanding and becoming a more important part of the media diet," Garrett says.[22] "Twitter users report they are getting news from more eclectic groups than previously, for example. In the past, credentials were much more important. Now they are being supplanted by "crowdsourcing," or as in the case of Wikipedia, by a relatively small group of people with the skills they need and the time to do it.

"People want to make up their own ways of trust assessment," Garrett concludes. "Now at least there is an infrastructure to facilitate this. These outlets didn't even exist before." As a result, he is optimistic. "The evidence is mixed and more research is still needed," Garrett cautions. "But I believe we are en route to having a slightly more knowledgeable and engaged society."

Assistant professor Cliff Lampe of the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media at Michigan State University, collaborates on research with a team at MSU,[23] as well as, from time to time, with OSU's Kelly Garrett.[24] "Social networks represent a sea change for online interaction," says Lampe.[25] "Once, the Internet was a way to free yourself of earthly bounds. Now social networks such as Facebook facilitate a greater interplay of offline and online relationships." To Lampe, an offline relationship of trust between people increases the likelihood that information delivered by them online will prove to

be credible. "It works like this," he explains. "If someone I like—a trusted friend—sends it, I will tend to trust the information."

The unique value of online social networks such as Facebook, Lampe believes, is their ability to foster "looser but more extensive social connections, hence giving us more exposure to other viewpoints." Facebook, which he and a team of researchers at MSU have studied extensively, is "not useful for close friends and family, but for a larger, more dispersed set of connections, which create more diversity and change the social dynamic," says Lampe, "So it's not surprising that Facebook and other online social nets are being used more and more as news filters, with a beneficial impact on both political and social engagement."

BJ Fogg, director of research and design at Stanford University's Persuasive Technology Lab, began his academic career researching Web credibility and "computers as persuasive technology." (In his 2003 book *Persuasive Technology*,[26] he asserts, "Trustworthiness is a key factor in the credibility equation" and notes that perceived trustworthiness, when combined with perceived expertise, results in perceived credibility.) Of late, Fogg's interest includes emerging media, which he argues are revolutionizing information filtering and delivery.

"Previous theories about social networks are wrong," Fogg states forthrightly,[27] "because earlier researchers don't get what is happening online." He says that unlike face-to-face "offline" social networks, online social networks lend themselves to easy group formation. The resultant looser, more extensive social ties then lead to more diverse, and ultimately more trustworthy and credible news and information delivery. "More and more we will be looking at our Facebook 'feed' to see what friends have posted," says Fogg. "That will be how

we queue up what is important and credible—and I will do the same for my friends." Fogg continues:

> I'm not sure that "regular news" *ever* brought me greater diversity and credibility than my feed does now. But clearly in the future, more and more information will be socially filtered in some way. Right now the way that happens is through the feed. But that could change—some current research shows, for example, that the use of online video is super-persuasive, so maybe in the future people will simply go directly to YouTube to be persuaded. Maybe they're doing that in the present as well!

Fogg's credibility-and-persuasion prescription is not just a futuristic fantasy. "That's how I live my life now," he concludes. "I really do trust my feed, coming as it does through smart, interesting friends. Otherwise I wouldn't look at the content there—just as I never look at local television news now."

Paul Resnick, professor at the University of Michigan's School of Information, is another leading communications researcher. In a 2004 paper[28] that specifically explored social capital and information and communication technologies (ICTs), Resnick noted that weak ties, "those personal connections that involve less frequent interaction and less personal affection, are especially productive… because they provide bridges to broader reservoirs of information." In his prescient paper, Resnick listed the media as one of several "areas ripe for transformation," and said, "When choosing media…people are increasingly turning" to "word of mouse" to replace the "word of mouth" of friends. Resnick wrote, "The news industry may be poised for a major transformation if more and more people begin to rely on advice from distant acquaintances…to monitor the news and form opinions." (He also noted coincidentally that, "electoral politics

may also be poised for a major transformation" based on the use of emerging social media and networks, and even seemed to predict the successful 2008 Obama presidential campaign: "We could see a return to grassroots political organizing for both presidential and local campaigns rather than an old-style ward; organization, however…we should expect to see a looser network, with information sharing and mobilization of coordinated action mediated by ICTs.")

The conclusions of Resnick and other researchers now delving into this field appear to fly in the face of accepted notions about social networks, the Internet and how they fit together. Until recently, the consensus was that the Internet serves as an echo-chamber for reinforcing already-held beliefs, and as such only further polarizes an already partisan nation. Author and professor Cass Sunstein, the Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law at Harvard University, articulated this view in works such as *Republic.com*[29] and *Republic.com 2.0*,[30] wherein he concluded that, rather than helping to open minds and expose us to an unbiased array of unexpected viewpoints and useful information, the Internet actually causes us to become more close-minded.

Sunstein contends that we are witnessing an overall decline in the influence of "general interest intermediaries," and an increase in highly specialized arenas for information, such as highly partisan cable television channels, or websites that allow us to "personalize" the news we receive. In such a culture, he argues, we have the ability to see only what already interests us and to filter out any exposure to the different concerns and political opinions of fellow citizens, thus preventing a truly democratic conversation.

The solution, he posits, lies in government regulation that would mandate cyberspace "town halls," and require political websites to provide links to groups with opposing views. (Critics counter that most traditional media outlets, owned by an increasingly small number of corporate conglomerates, don't provide their audience with a very diverse range of views either.) For Sunstein, the TMI problem is a "nightmare" of limitless options for obtaining news and information—and, more significantly, the options for avoiding them. He argues that we carefully filter out opposing or alternative viewpoints to create an ideologically exclusive "Daily Me," while gravitating toward media that reinforce our views. The sense of personal empowerment that we gain fuels the "echo chamber" effect, replacing a sense of democratic unity with accelerating polarization.

The "polarization-not-persuasion" perspective on social networks was pioneered by Harvard professor Robert Putnam in his best-selling book *Bowling Alone*,[31] which traced the decline of social networks in late twentieth-century America, and thus of something known as "social capital." Per Putnam, social capital "refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance and trustworthiness."[32] Ultimately, Putnam says, one distinction "among the many different forms of social capital" is especially important: the fact that "some networks link people who are similar in crucial aspects and tend to be inward-looking—bonding social capital. Others encompass different types of people and tend to be outward-looking—bridging social capital."

Putnam was looking exclusively at face-to-face social networks, such as his now-famous bowling leagues, and he has had little to say about the emerging online social networks and how they may differ from their predecessors. (In the

conclusion to *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*,[33] he does allude to the possibility that social capital has not simply declined but may instead have shifted into new forms, and notes that contemporary trends in social capital are represented "less by a global slump in civic associationism than by a generational shift away from some sorts of associative activity…towards other sorts," such as Internet communications and "new social movements".)

Although these new forms may utilize ICTs and be more informal, fluid and personal than traditional social networks, Putnam believes they will probably be even less conducive to the pursuit of collective goals. In sum, he argues, while there is an overall decline in traditional forms of social capital across the globe, these declines are sometimes offset by an increase in new forms. The consequences of these trends are not clear, yet Putnam is far from optimistic, arguing that "at least in the United States, there is reason to suspect that some fundamental social and cultural preconditions for effective democracy may have been eroded in recent decades, the result of a gradual but widespread process of civic disengagement."

Putnam's belief is partially echoed by others beside Sunstein. In *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*,[34] Markus Prior argues that even though we live in an age of information abundance, Americans as a whole are actually less politically educated than before, in part because the Internet requires increased personalization and individual participation and stymies political news consumption. With our new wealth of specialized media outlets, people interested in politics can consume a constant diet of the type of coverage they

prefer. This can further serve to reinforce ideology and cause increased polarization and a hardening of political philosophy.

Prior also argues that there "are fewer moderate voters today not because they have been converted by increasingly partisan media, but because they have been lost to entertainment," since most people are increasingly tuning out "political" news and tuning in to soft news or entertainment programs. Even putting aside online social networks, the intense voter and viewer interest in this year's electoral campaign seems to belie even that aspect of Prior's argument.

In *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*,[35] Diana C. Mutz looks at the tension between participatory and deliberative democracies, which arises from the fact that if we engage in pure deliberation, it dampens political activism and zeal by forcing participants to listen respectfully and engage with those who hold opposing views. Her data shows that Americans differ from many other nationalities in that they interact far less often with people who have different political views. While fueling political activism, this may also contribute to the polarization of American politics. Mutz concludes that it is unlikely that a political culture can be both highly participatory while engaging at the same time in thoughtful deliberation.

Interestingly, Mutz suggests as a remedy encouraging loose or semi-distant networks between people with opposing political views for dialogue, because the stakes are lower than if engaging in debate with close friends or frequently seen acquaintances. This could encourage reasoned deliberation, she says, while at the same time creating enough distance to allow a participant to engage in political activism without fear of reproach from his or her immediate community.

Without alluding to them directly, Mutz seems to suggest that online social networks, with their unique loose but extensive ties, may help to resolve the ongoing tension between participatory and deliberative democracies.

Researchers such as Resnick, Lampe, Garrett, Fogg, et al., go further, believing that the connections forged and maintained online in social networks expand exposure to conflicting ideas and allow users to engage in civil dialogue that sometimes results in changed opinions and attitudes. "The claim that people isolate themselves is based on faulty assumptions," Garrett says. "The situation is far more complex.

"There is an 'echo chamber' possibility, but it's not *necessarily* so," explains Garrett.[36] "And it's certainly not causing the dire consequences seen by Sunstein. There *is* that risk, but as to his claim of a more balkanized society, there's no real evidence that this is so… It's a mistake to claim online news, or the Internet itself, are essentially either good or bad; that's too reductionist an argument. There is mixed evidence on both sides, but ultimately society will probably not become 'cyber-balkanized.'"

Web credibility researcher Eszter Hargittai, associate professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Northwestern University, agrees. "As for Sunstein's hypothesis, we certainly don't have conclusive information at all that would indicate growing isolation and balkanization over time," she says.[37] Hargittai is part of a team that studied Web links[38] among the writings of leading conservative and liberal bloggers.

The abstract to their study begins, "With the increasing spread of information technologies and their potential to filter content, some have argued that people will abandon the reading of dissenting political opinions in favor of material closely aligned with their own ideological position." Its conclusion? "Bloggers across the political spectrum…address each others' writings substantively, both in agreement and disagreement." In other words, "the fragmenting potential of information technologies"—at least as measured by Web links among bloggers— does not support the "selective exposure" argument.

Sunstein and Putnam were unavailable, but Putnam's colleague and co-researcher, Tom Sander, executive director of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, a program of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, did agree to comment. Whereas Sunstein decries the potential of cyber-balkanization and the resultant birth of micro-communities, Sander sees the situation as less black and white, and says that Putnam and he agree that online social networks, with their weaker, more extensive ties, "have a higher opportunity to create bridging social capital." But he also cautions against "romanticizing" online communities, warning, "Just calling something a community doesn't make it one. This all needs to be empirically tested."

Despite the relative paucity of research into the specifics of how online social networks actually operate, "There is no doubt that they can function as a social filters," Sander says.[39] "In this context, news travels faster. There is a low transaction cost and high speed of distribution. In principle, then, a social network for news could work…and in principle you could weight 'trust' from friends on your feed over time. There is nothing implicit in social capital/social

networking theory that says this *couldn't* happen. It all depends on the creation of bridging capital."

Yet many questions remain, according to Sander. "One problem with filters is that people often apply partisan lenses to them. Do we live in an era of partisan truth?" he wonders. "Or can we uncouple approval from facts? The simultaneous challenge and promise of online communities is that both the entry and the exit are so easy. The cost of being untrustworthy on the Internet can be low, because it is so easy to exit "the community."

"Social networks can make people more media literate, but ultimately the real challenge is the need for someone to vet the information somehow," says Sander. "Our younger cohorts are certainly using the technology of social networking more and more—that is empirically true—but what are the consequences of this use for social capital? Technology will have to be part of the solution to the credibility issue, but we are skeptical about the actuality of it at this moment."

Kelly Garrett agrees the "empirical question" is whether or not social networks will become more diverse by virtue of technologies like Facebook. "Yes, people will *hear* more diversity—but will they build more diverse social networks?" he asks. "Will it be back to the future over an electronic backyard fence? Because any collaborative filtering system is necessarily premised on having and wanting diverse views." The problem, as Robert Putnam once phrased it, "is that bridging social capital is harder to create than bonding social capital—after all, birds of a feather flock together."

At least they used to—until Web 2.0 came along, that is. The game-changing power of online social networks is that they greatly decrease the transactional cost of creating bridging social capital by facilitating the easy formation of groups and making it far more possible than ever before to stay in touch with more disparate people with more disparate viewpoints. In the world of emerging media, the old theories of social networks and social capital formation are now running headlong into network theory. Online communication pioneer Nicco Mele, who ran online operations in the groundbreaking Howard Dean presidential campaign of 2004, lists[40] the theory's "three basic laws" thus:

- Moore's Law—that processing power doubles every two years;

- Metcalf's Law—that the value of a network depends on number of users of system; and, (most important for this discussion);

- Reed's Law—that the value of a network is directly related to the ability to form groups within it.

In sum, says Mele, network theory, which has only been in existence for about twenty-five years, or as long as there have been computer-facilitated networks, dictates that "any relatively large group-forming network will inevitably create what is known as the 'network effect'"—the phenomenon whereby a service becomes more valuable as more people use it, thereby encouraging ever-increasing numbers of adopters. "So when social capital and community meet online, the result can be a large, group-forming social network that is extremely diverse, highly credible and very powerful," Mele explains.

Mele echoed BJ Fogg in describing his Facebook News Feed as "a personalized newspaper put out by my friends," and noted, "Half of the feed is politically-

connected information." He believes that "community, trust and persuasion are the keys to both political activism and media in the future," and adds, "Persuasion and trust are still largely not understood, but there are three trends that we *do* understand. The first is that we can always depend on a proliferation of emerging media forms over time; the second is that traditional media, especially television, are still dominant media forms; and the third is that a convergence of communication and community is rapidly approaching."

Mele's practical belief in the ultimate utility of the emerging media's tools and technology is supported by the still-growing corpus of academic research. A team at Michigan State University (including Cliff Lampe) has examined the use of Facebook by undergraduate students over the last three years, for example, using surveys, interviews and automated capture of the MSU Facebook site to try to understand how and why they use the social network.

"What we found surprised us," Lampe's colleague Nicole Ellison, assistant professor of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media, told the "Freakonomics" blog of the *New York Times*.[41] "Our survey included questions designed to assess students' 'social capital,' a concept that describes the benefits individuals receive from their relationships with others. Undergraduates who used Facebook intensively had higher bridging social capital scores than those who didn't."

The students found that Facebook helped them maintain or strengthen "bridging" social capital relationships with people they didn't know that well, but who could provide them with useful information and ideas. They used the site to look up old high school acquaintances, to find out information about

people in their classes or dorms that might be used to strike up a conversation, to get contact information for friends, and many other activities. Such tools, which enabled them to engage in online self-presentation and connect with others, "will be increasingly part of our social and professional landscape, as social network sites continue to be embraced by businesses, non-profits, civic groups, and political organizations that value the connections these tools support," Ellison told the *Times* blog.

In other work undertaken with fellow researcher Kelly Garrett, Ellison's colleague Cliff Lampe has shown that people who receive online information through social networks are more able to articulate opposing viewpoints. Lampe and Garrett's research seems to indicate that sites like Facebook, and other social networks such as Digg.com or Slashdot.org, ironically may function better as news-and-information filters than more specialized "social news networks" such as NewsTrust.net, which was created in a conscious attempt to "help people find and share quality journalism." Since sites like Digg and Slashdot are primarily technology-oriented community sites and decidedly *not* viewed as either "political" or "news" sites at their cores, the connections established through a shared interest in other, less-charged issues may make them seem a "safe third place—not home, not work," where it is paradoxically easier ("safer") to talk about politics or news, precisely because the network is not intrinsically political or journalistic in nature. "You are more likely to hear something you disagree with on Slashdot than a conventional liberal or conservative single position blog," explains Garrett. "There are more sources there that represent multiple viewpoints." Similarly, Facebook, with its stated emphasis on personality and relationships, ("Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your

life") may also be regarded as a safe place for the transmission of news and information between trusted friends.

Lampe and Garrett have extensively studied the NewsTrust site,[42] and suggest that it "may be the wrong model" precisely because its visitors are people who deeply care about news, information, journalism and politics. Members may hence come to the site intent on pushing a particular viewpoint—often political and partisan—and consciously or subconsciously be closed to opposing viewpoints. They may even go so far as to attempt to "game" the system in some manner in order to further the advocacy of their own ideas and beliefs. In theoretical terms, NewsTrust and similar news-oriented social networks may in fact suffer because their community members actually have tight, close connections—"bonding" social capital ties—rather than the looser, more extensive "bridging" ties at sites such as Slashdot,[43] Digg and Facebook, which collect people[44] who have broader interests, such as technology or personal relations, and who then sometimes share news and information about politics.

Judith Donath, associate professor at M.I.T.'s Media Lab and a faculty fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, told the *New York Times*[45] that in the "big picture," social networking technologies will "support and enable a new model of social life, in which people's social circles will consist of many more, but weaker, ties. Though we will continue to have some strong ties (i.e., family and close friends), demographic changes…are diminishing the role of social ties in everyday life. Weak ties (e.g., casual acquaintances, colleagues) may not be reliable for long-term support; their strength instead is in providing a wide range of perspectives, information, and opportunities." Donath's associate danah boyd [*sic*], Ph.D. candidate at the

School of Information, University of California–Berkeley, and fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, added, "Social media (including social network sites, blog tools, mobile technologies, etc.) offer mechanisms by which people can communicate, share information and hang out…social media provides a venue to build and maintain always-on intimate communities."

Donath believes, "As society becomes increasingly dynamic, with access to information playing a growing role, having many diverse connections will be key. Social networking technologies provide people with a low cost (in terms of time and effort) way of making and keeping social connections, enabling a social scenario in which people have huge numbers of diverse, but not very close, acquaintances.

"Does this make us better as a society? Perhaps not," she says. "We can imagine this being a selfish and media-driven world in which everyone vies for attention and no one takes responsibility for one another." But Donath posits as well that "we can also imagine this being a world in which people are far more accepting of diverse ways and beliefs, one in which people are willing to embrace the new and different."

In "Public Displays of Connection," a 2004 paper[46] they co-authored, Donath and Boyd noted, "In today's society, access to information is a key element of status and power and communication is instant, ubiquitous and mobile. Social networking sites… are a product of this emerging culture." They explain that the "public display of connections" on such sites is a signal that helps others in your network judge your reliability and trustworthiness. New communication

technology encourages us to "bridge disparate clusters," they argue, thus providing us "with access to new knowledge." Trading our previous offline privacy for more online "public displays of connections" enables others to determine our credibility—and by extension, that of news and information we may then share through the network.

The emerging media, the authors remind us, also make it less costly to maintain loose or "weak" social ties. Such ties ("the kinds that exist among people one knows in a specific and limited context") are "good sources of novel information…a person who has many weak yet heterogeneous ties has access to a wide range of information." In the future, Donath and Boyd noted, "the number of weak ties one can form and maintain may be able to increase substantially, because the type of communication that can be done more cheaply and easily with new technology is well suited for these ties. If this is true, it implies that the technologies that expand one's social network will primarily result in an increase in available information and opportunities—the benefits of a large, heterogeneous network." By virtue of being in such a network where one's identity, trustworthiness and reliability can be readily assessed, people may access more *credible* information as well.

"It is possible to imagine a scenario in which social networking software plays an increasingly important role in our lives," Donath and Boyd concluded—a prediction that has come to pass in just four years. "For instance, email is becoming increasingly unusable as spam fills inboxes, keeping one step ahead of filtering heuristics. Perhaps a social network based filter is the solution— email from your connections would always go through, and perhaps the next degree out."

Donath and Boyd's early but suggestive recognition of the emerging social media's filtering capabilities is now accepted by other academic researchers. But can that filtering function be adapted to help solve journalism's trust deficit and credibility dilemma? There is agreement that we need some sort of credibility/trust filter for news and information delivery—but predictably far less accord on what the best filter may be. Corporate executives like Google's Schmidt offer "brands" as their answer. "Brands are the solution, not the problem," Schmidt recently told a collection of top American magazine editors. "Brands are how you sort out the cesspool."[47]

Many executives in traditional media companies share Schmidt's belief in brand power. Richard Stengel, executive editor of *Time* magazine, is among them. At the October Time Warner "Politics 2008—The Media Summit on the Election of the President," Stengel remarked, "I actually think that in this blizzard-like universe of news usage, brands are actually more important and rising above the chaos because people don't have places they can trust and rest on."

Paul Slavin, senior vice president of digital media at ABC News, agrees. "Brands are the answer to the credibility questions," Slavin says.[48] "ABC News is known worldwide, and most people feel we are balanced and fair, that we offer a vetted, careful environment for news and information." He believes that brands are already being used as a necessary filter to combat the TMI issue, and that our reliance on them will grow over time. "Brand power will only increase as noise level increases," Slavin explains. "It will all come back to tried and true brands. The fundamental understanding of and protection of our brand truly is our future."

Slavin, who has coordinated ABC News's exploration of and collaboration with the emerging media, said in a 2008 interview that ABC "started looking for relationships with social networks a year and a half ago. We looked at MySpace first, then Facebook." The motive, Slavin says, was simple: "We wanted to tap into their younger demo and expose them to our content." In the end, ABC decided to work with Facebook. "Facebook friends function as personal aggregators, and that can be very powerful," he believes. "We needed to figure out how to tap into that."

In November 2007, ABC entered into a formal partnership with Facebook, the first of its kind with a traditional media outlet. The agreement enabled Facebook users to follow ABC reporters electronically, view reports and video and participate in polls and debates. The companies also announced that they would collaborate to sponsor a presidential debate in New Hampshire on January 5, 2008. Facebook users around the world could connect and instantly discuss the debate as it occurred live on ABC.

The ABC Facebook page received a lot of traffic "when actively promoted by Facebook," says Slavin. "We had very good cooperation and coordination initially, and it resulted in 1.5 million downloads," Slavin recalls. Later the social network changed direction, however, and decided it didn't want "a strong relationship with just one media group like ABC. We had talked about more collaboration in the general election," Slavin says. "Our goal was to expand our audience to include people not coming to us for news already. The Facebook relationship can be very powerful *if* and *when* Facebook wants to do it and pushes it."

Why was ABC so interested in the online social networks? "If you're ABC News, your content can spread virally through all these friend networks," Steve Outing, interactive media columnist for *Editor & Publisher* magazine, explained to the *New York Times*.[49] Slavin says, "In terms of the election, it gave us another way to communicate and to generate interest and questions for town halls. Sure, we were looking for ways to connect with their audience of young people. We had already looked at YouTube—then they did a debate with CNN and got very hot." (YouTube's partnership with CNN for two debates during the primary season was perhaps the most high-profile emerging media/legacy media partnership during the 2008 presidential election cycle. Users were able to upload video questions for the candidates, which were then vetted by YouTube and CNN and played during the debates. CNN came under fire[50] during one debate, however, for unknowingly allowing a retired brigadier general who served on an advisory committee to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton to ask the candidates about gay men and lesbians in the military. The retired general had uploaded his question via YouTube.)

Paul Slavin says ABC News would "love to work with Facebook more," and that he is currently "looking to re-engage and expand the relationship." He still finds YouTube interesting, but "is not sure what we would get out of the relationship, since there is no money to be made—maybe marketing?" In conclusion, he notes, "Everybody is grappling with this now. This is the most interesting time I've ever experienced in news business. There's such an explosion of new technology that my main problem is that there are simply not enough hours in the day to deal with it all. Everyone is talking to everyone else, and we're all trying to figure this out."

Mark Lukasiewicz is another top network news executive who is grappling with the related issues of legacy media, emerging media and trust. Lukasiewicz, vice president for digital media at NBC News, takes issue with some of what Schmidt and Slavin say. "The Internet is a conveyor belt for information, not a repository of it," Lukasiewicz begins.[51] "You could call the telephone system a cesspool of misinformation as well! Let's not blame the messenger. The Net is no more of a cesspool than life in general.

"The question is: What tools do people have to determine what is true?" Lukasiewicz says. "In previous times, the medium itself conveyed some of that trust relationship. But now, since so much information comes through this new device of the Internet, it's become a lot harder to make those distinctions. Branding is part of what's necessary," he believes, "but the big challenge for mainstream media like us is that people today are less trusting of news brands— the war in Iraq had a great deal to do with that—and now this new ability of people to find and share information on their own feeds into that."

Lukasiewicz says that other, fundamental changes are also shaking the firmament of the legacy media. "After all, what conveys authority?" he asks. "*That* is what is changing….Today, for us in the mainstream media, being a singular provider—the *one brand*, offering everything *it and only it* produces—is actually a negative. People want to see a multiplicity of sources; they want you to be comprehensive. So if we link out, and offer content other than our own—even that of our competitors—it still enhances our own brand in the eyes of the consumer.

"I know there is more than one vision and more than one view point," says Lukasiewicz. "Multiple view points are what consumers want. So you build a trusted brand by sharing others' content. I know it sounds a bit paradoxical but…it works, even though in traditional media terms, linking to the competition once would have been seen as self-destructive."

Lukasiewicz thinks that some sort of hybrid social/brand filter may be the answer. "The brand that increasingly matters is the one called 'my friend,'" he says. "People don't *come* to Facebook for news content—but they *get* it there. So yes, NBC News wants to be your trusted friend. And I do that by being in all the places where you are—cell phone, online, in the back of a taxicab, on a screen in an airliner, on Facebook, you name it—when I do what I do. I want to be there for you, where and when you want it.

"All this is still rapidly evolving," Lukasiewicz concludes. "For credible coverage of major events, for example, people still turn to trusted news brands. But in the future, I really believe that if you can create a cross-platform home for your news delivery, you will also succeed in creating a trusted brand."

Online credibility researchers such as Eszter Hargittai also believe branding plays a filtering role, albeit in some combination with people's social networks. The Internet, as she notes,[52] "is a source of unprecedented amounts of content…both lauded for its breadth and critiqued for its sometimes free-for-all ethos." In this information-rich environment, "where traditional gatekeepers such as editors no longer evaluate material before it has the potential to reach large audiences," Hargittai believes "the ability to find trustworthy content online is an essential skill." In their attempts to do so, her research shows, "users

put considerable trust in the online equivalent of traditional gatekeepers: search engines."

This would *seem* to buttress Eric Schmidt's contention that we should put our trust in Google. After all, as Hargittai and her associates in a new study note, "search engine use is one of the most popular online activities second only to email."[53] According to the study, called "Trusting the Web: How Young Adults Evaluate Online Content," nearly half of all Americans using the Internet "turn to a search engine on a typical day"—the figure is even higher among the young adults she surveyed —and two thirds believe that "using search engines provides them with 'a fair and unbiased source of information.'" Search engines, and Google's is obviously pre-eminent, are a "crucial part of the puzzle of online credibility assessment…They have become the most prevalent tool for information seeking online with the potential to garner large influence…on what material users deem trustworthy."

While Hargittai's research showed that "brands were a ubiquitous element throughout our respondents' information-gathering process," it also revealed a frightening lack of knowledge (among the young at least) as to how brands such as Google actually operate in the information sphere. The study noted, for example, that only 38 percent of Internet users were aware that sponsors pay for their links to appear first on Google's search engine results page. "Our findings suggest that students rely greatly on search engine brands to guide them to what they then perceive as credible material simply due to the fact that the destination page rose to the top of the results listings of their beloved search engine." Google's branding is so powerful, in fact, that more than a third of the study's participants used its brand name as a verb, regularly responding "I'll google it"

when asked how they would complete an information-seeking task—despite the fact that the company admittedly performs no credibility verification whatsoever of the information links it offers, and features paid sponsored links more prominently than others.

The effect of branding is so powerful, especially among the young, that almost all (98 percent) participants in the study sample mentioned a name brand at some point. Google (85 percent) and Yahoo! (51 percent) were the most frequently mentioned brands, followed by several others, including Facebook and the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. "Known brands were essential signifiers of quality for respondents, and seem to serve as an important part of users' daily information-gathering routines," the study notes. "Mentions of corporate brands dominated students' reported habits, with 63 percent of all respondents mentioning a corporate brand as part of their routine search behavior."

These findings suggest to Hargittai's team that "while users may feel confident in their ability to find accurate and credible information online, that confidence may not be translating into an increased skill level in credibility assessment." Perhaps worse, "students' level of faith in their search engine of choice is so high that they do not feel the need to verify for themselves who authored the pages they view or what their qualifications might be."

Despite the claim of Google's chief executive, corporate branding alone is clearly not enough to solve the credibility dilemma. Moreover, while reliance on trusted brands may have provided a partial answer in the past, the power and reach of news media brands in particular is now diminishing. The world now "has many, many places to turn for information, misinformation, analysis, rants, etc.," *New*

York Times editor Bill Keller wrote,[54] decrying this trend in September 2008, when interest in the presidential campaign was at a peak, "We—the *Times,* the *Washington Post, Politico*, the news outlets that aim to be aggressive, serious and impartial—don't dominate the conversation the way we once did, and that's fine, except it means some excellent hard work gets a little muffled…I've been repeatedly surprised at the rich, important stories that fail to resonate the way they deserve."

Keller noted, "On one level, more people read the *Times,* albeit in digital form, than ever." Important *Times* articles about the campaign, he added, "did a brisk business as an email forward. But so did everything else anyone had to say that day about the campaign—whether it was true or false, reported or simply asserted, fact or opinion…. Everything is equal, everything is a tie and nothing, it seems, is important anymore.

"Nobody has felt this more acutely than the Newspapers and Magazines of Record in the United States," Keller concluded. "The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post, Time*: all over the world of 'quality' journalism, there is a feeling of decline.**"**

Keller is right—the old, self-defined world of "quality" journalism is in deep decline. Yet at the same time, engaged citizens continue to seek out true "quality" and credibility in a world that now "has many, many places to turn" for information and misinformation. It is unsurprising then that the use of social media for the delivery of news and information, although most quickly and widely adopted by the young, is rapidly increasing in all demographic groups. Ongoing research such as Hargittai's provides ample evidence that people

continue to rely on those in their networks when seeking various types of information, and that the emerging online social media can and do play a role in helping us access reliable, credible and trustworthy news we can use.

Much more research and empirical evidence is still needed, of course. One reason is that relatively few studies have yet to look at what users actually do to assess online credibility. As Hargittai notes, "While considerable prior research[55] has examined what users *claim* to do in order to find credible information online, research that compares *actual* and reported behavior is less common."

Ultimately, the basic question remains: Given the plethora of information now widely and readily available, are average citizens really interested enough and capable enough to decode that which is useful, credible, "quality information"— and that which is not? Even if interested and capable, will they take the time necessary to do so? Most careful observers agree that some filter or "shortcut" is needed to assist us in sifting through the overload of information.[56] As Miriam Metzger says,[57] "People know they 'should' critically analyze the information they obtain online, yet rarely have the time or energy to do it. Most current research shows people want to use shortcuts in determining trust and credibility. This is something known as known as 'credibility heuristics—a kind of information Verisign, if you will."

Metzger concludes that "only the truly motivated will actually do the work required….The rest of us need and want filters. Can social networks play this role? If so, will filtering best take place in already trusted environments like Facebook? It certainly makes good sense to me—in terms of credibility at least."

"People are always looking for trust shortcuts," agrees Kelly Garrett. "It's either brands, some sort of credential, or some sort of social network—but they are making up their own ways of trust assessment." BJ Fogg adds, "Brands can be shortcuts," but points out that they are losing prominence. "The mainstream media *had* a sort of trusted brand—but they've given up a lot of trust of late," Fogg notes. "The issue around brands is that different friends trust different brands. The challenge now is that there are no destination sites—so that undercuts the value of news brands. And lost trust equals a lost brand." Fogg believes that the legacy media "deserve what has happened to them—and once you lose credibility, it's very, very hard to regain. It's hard to change people's habits—especially the young—once that trust and that brand is damaged."

The 2008 electoral campaign provided a perfect prism for an examination of the rise of social media as a transmission belt for news and information—and an assessment of their utility as credibility and trust filters. In the weeks that followed John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin as his running mate, the daily ins and outs of the campaign seemed to electrify the nation. Public interest in the election soared, as measured by polls, voluntarism and overall political and civic engagement. Cable television ratings for politically oriented programming also skyrocketed[58]—as did voter reliance on new media tools.

Each candidate adopted the new social media technology for his own use as well. Barack Obama, who rode it to eventual victory, was far more adept, even going so far as to create his own social network, mimicking Facebook, and hiring Chris Hughes, one of Facebook's founders, to help oversee it. No other campaign put technology and the Internet at the heart of its operation on such a scale. In addition to using the new media to raise record amounts of money—3 million

donors made a total of 6.5 million donations online adding up to more than $500 million, mostly in increments of $100 or less—Obama employed it to bypass the legacy news media and to communicate directly and interactively with his growing chorus of supporters. "On MyBarackObama.com, or MyBO, Obama's own socnet, 2 million profiles were created," Jose Antonio Vargas wrote in a *Washington Post* campaign post-mortem.[59] "In addition, 200,000 offline events were planned, about 400,000 blog posts were written and more than 35,000 volunteer groups were created….Some 3 million calls were made in the final four days of the campaign using MyBO's virtual phone-banking platform.

"Obama has 5 million supporters in other socnets." Vargas reported. "He maintained a profile in more than 15 online communities, including BlackPlanet, a MySpace for African-Americans, and Eons, a Facebook for baby boomers. On Facebook, where about 3.2 million signed up as his supporters, a group called Students for Barack Obama was created in July 2007. It was so effective at energizing college-age voters that senior aides made it an official part of the campaign the following spring."

Many voters also used that same emerging media, its powerful social tools and its looser, more extensive social networks to communicate directly with their peers. Media platforms that hadn't even existed in the previous presidential election cycle four years earlier had already begun to play crucial roles in political campaigns and the delivery of information about them. YouTube, which only came into being in 2005, famously wrecked the presidential promise of Virginia Senator George Allen just a year later when it captured his "Macaca" moment.[60] Other non-professional "viral" videos uploaded to YouTube later had great impact on the campaigns as well, gaining such popularity that they were

then picked up and reported on by the legacy media. (Examples include a "mash-up" of Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney declaring his support for abortion and gay rights[61]—positions he later renounced—and a spoof[62] of the famous Apple Super Bowl Ad comparing Senator Hillary Clinton to the oppressive system described in George Orwell's "1984.")

By spring 2008, YouTube had launched an entire Citizen News channel to highlight user-generated news content—and major news organizations such as CNN and ABC were increasingly reaching out to the company, along with other social media platforms such as MySpace and Facebook, seeking partnerships and access to their growing audiences. MySpace partnered with the Commission on Presidential Debates on an online town hall forum where citizens could discuss the debate, submit a question, watch the debate live and take issue quizzes, and the social network was cited during the broadcast of the debate by the moderator, CBS correspondent Bob Schieffer.

As Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a chronicler of presidential races for more than 40 years, told the *Washington Post*,[63] "In the past there was only a passive relationship between the producer and the audience. But the audience has also become the producer. That's very empowering—and a huge change.

"There's a dark side to this, of course," Jamieson continued. "Voters can only read and watch and interact with everything they agree with, creating a hyper-partisan and largely uninformed electorate. But there's also a bright side where an informed and engaged electorate can participate in discussions that are

relevant to the political process. Which way we'll eventually go, we'll have to see."

As the campaign unfolded, issues of persuasion and credibility continually arose, involving both the candidates and the media. Senator McCain's and Governor Palin's repeated use of allegedly untrue information and claims in the campaign—and media corrections of them—became a constant drumbeat. Palin's persistent claims about opposing Alaska's notorious "bridge to nowhere," for example, and journalists' reports that she actually had supported it, created ongoing friction between the media and the Republicans—as well as causing Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama to remark,[64] "You can't just make stuff up. You can't just recreate yourself, you can't just reinvent yourself. The American people aren't stupid."

As the race for the presidency progressed, credibility assessment of news and information rapidly became a cottage industry of sorts. News organizations created websites to check the veracity of claims made by the campaigns. The *St. Petersburg Times* and *Congressional Quarterly* created PolitiFact.com, the Washingtonpost.com began the Fact Checker, (which often looked at third-party and campaign ads circulated via YouTube, and awarded "Pinocchios" to candidates who bend the truth), and the George Polk Prize–winning blog *Talking Points Memo* turned its "Veracifier" page into one of the most-trafficked News & Politics pages of YouTube. Soon sites like PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org were drawn directly into the fray, even finding their assessments used—and misused—in campaign ads, such as one released September 10 by the McCain/Palin campaign, which FactCheck promptly charged "has altered our message in a fashion we consider less than honest."[65] Republican campaign

officials in turn claimed that Senator Obama had also made a number of false claims, and they complained that the media was biased in favor of the Democratic candidate and wasn't holding him to account.

Relations between the Republicans and the mainstream media deteriorated drastically as the McCain/Palin camp charged that "advocacy" on behalf of Barack Obama's candidacy was behind the media's charges of falsehoods and assault on the credibility of the claims being made by the GOP ticket. Finally, Steve Schmidt, the day-to-day manager of John McCain's campaign, went public, blasting the *New York Times* in particular as being "completely, totally 150 percent in the tank for the Democratic candidate."[66] Schmidt added that the *Times* had "cast aside its journalistic integrity to advocate for the defeat of John McCain." *Times* editor Bill Keller responded[67] by saying the paper was committed to covering the candidates fairly, and that "It's our job to ask hard questions, fact-check their statements and advertising, examine their programs, positions, biographies and advisors."

The Republican attack on the media was met in kind. *Newsweek* columnist and NBC News correspondent Jonathan Alter wrote, "We're seeing the emergence of a 'smear gap.' John McCain making stuff up about Barack Obama, and Obama trying to figure out how hard he should hit back." Alter added that, "McCain's campaign has been resorting to charges that are patently false….In the past, plainly deceptive ads were the province of the Republican National Committee or the Democratic National Committee or independent committees free to fling mud that didn't bear the fingerprints of candidates. But not this time. These smears come directly from the candidate." While castigating McCain for his "untrue charges" and "false spots," and urging him to "stop lying about his

opponent," Alter also noted, "One of the wonders of the Web is that it's now possible for neutral observers to determine the truth or falsity of various attacks, and to have that information instantly available to anyone."[68]

Have we now come full circle, as Alter suggests? With the legacy media under assault and reliance on the credibility of their trusted brands declining, will "the wonders of the Web" become the solution to journalism's trust dilemma? Despite ample evidence that online use is up—the 2008 State of the News Media report from Pew[69] shows that eight in ten American now see the Internet as "a critical source of information," and that how people use it, what they access and how often they do it is all quickly changing—legacy media, particularly television, remains dominant.[70]

According to the Pew study, one of the most notable recent Internet use transformations involves the death of the home page—and along with it "content the site can vouch for —usually already vetted." This is a direct result of the rise of the emerging media, with aggregators, blogs, social networks and other new media now driving two-thirds of all visitors to legacy news media sites. The change in distribution patterns for news and information is having a severe impact on news brands, which as we have seen are frequently cited by corporate executives as society's solution to its TMI credibility gap.

Few dispute that journalism and society as a whole now face a crisis of trust, or that a greater emphasis on helping citizens find credible information is necessary and would be a social good. Many agree as well that the new media are already having a revolutionary impact on a broad swath of American society—from politics and media to business, commerce and governance. As to the question of

whether the new media can supply at the least a partial solution to the trust/credibility problem, the jury is still out—although evidence increasingly points that way. Still, most informed observers caution that it would be a mistake to overstate the current impact of the Internet and its interactive social media forms in determining the "truth or falsity" of the news and information available in any medium. According to researchers on both sides of the question, further research is clearly necessary.

Cass Sunstein, for example, continues to worry about what he sees as "the convergence of views and the penchant for extremism" as we face as the poisonous spread of spurious information in a society that is growing ever more technological. "Much more thinking needs to be done both on the empirical side and in terms of the appropriate legal response," Sunstein recently remarked during a lecture[71] given in honor of his recent appointment as the Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. "We can see that in the Internet era in particular, false rumors are not only a source for many people— anonymous and less so—of unjustified injury and cruelty, but also pose serious problems for economic prosperity and democratic self-government as well."

Robert Putnam's colleague Tom Sander also believes many questions remain. "Is the Net more of a utility, like a mobile phone or a television, or is it a tool for social change?" he asks. "How inclusive are online social networks? They are a valuable means to spread reputational information—but do the people there have expertise? And if so, are they willing to share it?" Finally, to Sander, "The real question" is even more basic: Will credible information be spread via the Internet?

"That depends on the structure of the social networks there," he concludes. "Determining *that* is the challenge now facing researchers." Although he thinks "the Web is potentially the seed of the solution" to journalism's credibility problem, Sander also warns, "Collectively we need to do a lot more research."

Natalie Jomini, assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin's Department of Communication Studies, is another leading media researcher. She thinks "people's political beliefs motivate their media use pattern," although she says the jury is still out. In a 2007 paper,[72] Stroud revisited the concept of selective exposure and concluded, "Whether this is occurring…is a matter of debate." Stroud noted that "the mere opportunity to engage in selective exposure in the modern media environment…does not mean that people will necessarily seek out congenial media," and admitted, "Prior research…has produced inconsistent results." Stroud concluded by calling for more research to "investigate habitual media exposure patterns."

As Pippa Norris noted in *Social Capital, Community, and Content*,[73] "Whether the internet has the capability to supplement, restore or even replace [face-to-face] social contacts remains to be seen. As an evolving medium that is still diffusing through the population, it is still too early to predict the full consequences of this technology." Nevertheless, as Norris notes, "evidence among existing users allows us to explore whether those Americans who are most active in online groups felt the internet *widens* their experience of community (by helping them to connect with others who have different beliefs or backgrounds) or whether they feel it *deepens* their experience (by reinforcing and strengthening existing social networks). The analysis suggests that the internet generally serves both functions."

The new breed of researchers now examining emerging media say they are generally convinced of its efficacy in assisting in our search for credible news and information. Although academics such as Kelly Garrett, Cliff Lampe, Paul Resnick, Judith Donath, danah boyd, Miriam Metzger, et al., suggest Sunstein and the others may be wrong in their negative assessments, they also agree that the available research is far from definitive. As Lampe noted, "This is an amazingly rich field where almost nothing has been done." Metzger added, "It's a really interesting question, though there are not a lot of people publishing about this yet—at least in traditional academic outlets. We still need to do work about credibility in social networks—there is some evidence in both sides but not a lot has been done yet."

Given the importance of credible news and information delivery, coupled with the fact that research shows many people now rely on the Internet to provide accurate information without taking what Metzger terms "the requisite steps to ensure the veracity of the information they obtain," the need for more definitive data is pressing. As Metzger explains,[74] "The early thought on social networks was that people would self-select—so-called 'homophily'—but evidence now suggests that in seeking political information, it works the other way around….We don't really have an answer yet—but what you suggest seems right…it certainly passes the smell test."

Still, the question is complex, and the devil, Metzger says, is in the details. "In some cases, social networks may lead to polarization—but in others, it may not," she points out. "The key questions are: What are the bonding conditions? What precisely are the bridging conditions? What precise kind of networks actually facilitate, in terms of credibility? On sites like Facebook and Slashdot, the

communities already have basic relations of trust. You can find 'people like me' there, a sense of real community and trust. So in both cases the baseline level of trust is there first; thus people already feel secure in the environment."

In sum, says Metzger, "More and more researchers are working on this now. There is not much data yet, and that which exists is preliminary and mixed, but my feeling is that social networks as filters are very much happening already." And danah boyd adds, "Of course they are being used as filters—but how, why and at what costs are the research questions."

"How sophisticated are people about this?" asks Metzger. "Very, it turns out. They are already using media tools as trust filters in a sophisticated way." She says the burden of credibility evaluation has increased because of technology and the consequent flood of too much information—but paradoxically, technology also helps with the problem. "It's a double-edged sword," Metzger explains. "Technology changes the problem, making it more urgent and giving us a greater burden to verify, but it also provides new tools to grapple with credibility questions. This means the technology is opening up more possibilities for solutions—as well as simultaneously contributing to the problem. So the problem changes with each particular situation."

Despite the many lingering questions and the need for more study, BJ Fogg stands convinced, however. "Social networks are the Big New Channel," Fogg posits.[75] "People don't go to Facebook to 'get something done' but to browse in an interruptible and seducible way. When you find news there, you feel like it's a discovery—not something pushed at you—so the response is quite different. What Facebook has unleashed will not go away!"

Nor, as evidenced most recently and significantly in the 2008 race for the presidency of the United States of America, will our need for trustworthy news and information from all our media. Although still regarded by some as an information "cesspool" that spreads falsehoods and encourages polarization, the Internet and the new communications tools and social patterns it enables offer at least the promise of some relief from our TMI-induced credibility dilemma.

Meanwhile, the legacy media continues to be plagued by its own credibility problems. Shortly after Barack Obama was elected, it was revealed that a McCain policy adviser named Martin Eisenstadt, who had been quoted by such traditional media sources as NBC News, the *New Republic* and the *Los Angeles Times*, didn't exist.[76] Although he had been widely cited as the source of leaks from within the Republican campaign claiming that Governor Sarah Palin "did not know that Africa was a continent," it turned out upon further examination that the man the *New York Times* subsequently dubbed the "Senior Fellow at the Institute of Nonexistence"[77] was a figment of the fertile imaginations of "a pair of obscure filmmakers" who had created the fictional Martin Eisenstadt to help them pitch a TV show. "Martin Eisenstadt doesn't exist," the *Times* reported. "His blog does, but it's a put-on. The think tank where he is a senior fellow—the Harding Institute for Freedom and Democracy—is just a website. The TV clips of him on YouTube are fakes."

The filmmakers told the *Times* "the blame lies not with them but with shoddiness in the traditional news media and especially the blogosphere. "With the 24-hour news cycle they rush into anything they can find," said one. The other argued that Eisenstadt "was no more of a joke than half the bloggers or political commentators on the Internet or television." An MSNBC spokesman explained

the network's misreporting by saying someone in the newsroom received the Palin item in an email from a colleague and assumed it had been checked out. "It had not been vetted," he said. The media fell for the fake material, the *Times* reported, "despite ample warnings online about Eisenstadt, including the work of one blogger who spent months chasing the illusion around cyberspace, trying to debunk it."

Around the same time, a carefully constructed spoof version of the *New York Times* was widely distributed—and largely accepted as the real thing. According to the group that claimed responsibility, more than a million copies were distributed around the country. *Editor & Publisher* explained[78]: "The banner headline announced, "Iraq War Ends," and other stories "revealed" that *Times* columnist Tom Friedman had resigned, college tuition was made free everywhere, bike paths widened and so on. It's set in the future: next July." Yet few could tell, at least on first glance, that the entire edition was a hoax.

In a subsequent press release,[79] the group claimed, "In an elaborate operation six months in the planning, 1.2 million papers were printed at six different presses and driven to prearranged pickup locations, where thousands of volunteers stood ready to pass them out on the street." The spoof—intended to promote a progressive political agenda—even had a mirror website, which closely resembled the *Times* site.

Finally—remember those two emails I received in September at the height of interest in the then-unknown Sarah Palin? I was immediately suspicious of claims made in the one that detailed Palin's supposed penchant for book banning, given its provenance. The sender was well known in our social circle as

a shoot-from-the-lip liberal rather prone to exaggeration—and sure enough, the information in it turned out to be false. Palin hadn't in fact banned *any* books. Moreover, several on the list hadn't even been published at the time of their supposed banning, a fact my untrustworthy friend typically hadn't bothered to check. Soon Internet researchers revealed the list to be a simple compilation of "Books Banned at One Time or Another in the United States." [80]

The Anne Kilkenny email, however, proved quite valuable—providing information unavailable to the thousands of journalists gathered at the time in Minnesota to cover Palin's impending nomination at the Republican National Convention. Ironically, the email had even treated the subject of Sarah Palin and library books. "While Sarah was Mayor of Wasilla she tried to fire our highly respected City Librarian because the Librarian refused to consider removing from the library some books that Sarah wanted removed," Kilkenny had written. "City residents rallied to the defense of the City Librarian and against Palin's attempt at out-and-out censorship, so Palin backed down and withdrew her termination letter." Like the rest of the news in Anne Kilkenny's email, her information about Wasilla's library books turned out to be credible—just as I thought it would be, since it had been forwarded by a trusted Facebook friend.

Endnotes

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