

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB Communication Professors Study Credibility and Contemporary Media

Building on their earlier research that explored how people were using the Internet in the early days of its mass popularity, two professors at the University of California, Santa Barbara, have embarked on a project that examines how individuals seek information on the Internet and how they evaluate its credibility.

With a \$520,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew Flanagin and Miriam Metzger, associate professors of communication, are taking a threefold approach to this research project. They are examining people's understanding of credibility across the wide range of digital information resources that exist today; they are studying how and under what circumstances people are likely to carefully scrutinize the information they find; and they're looking at how socioeconomic and demographic characteristics affect usage behaviors and credibility assessments.

"In many cases, more responsibility is now being placed on the consumer to find credible information than on the producer to provide it," Flanagin said, noting that the contents of Internet sites are not subject to the same credibility standards that guide traditional mainstream media.

Metzger added that many organizations and businesses are seeking to reduce their operational costs by putting critical information on their Web sites or making the information available only through digital means. This in turn puts the onus on the consumer to determine the trustworthiness of Web content.

"People have been pushed toward technology," she said. "They are encouraged—sometimes even required—to manage things such as choosing between medical treatment options, deciding on retirement benefits and investment options, and booking airline reservations on their own without assistance from live agents, experts, or customer service representatives."

In their previous work, Metzger and Flanagin demonstrated that while consumers were, indeed, taking advantage of the new digital media, and even relying on it for news and information, they were doing very little to check the veracity of the information they found. Subsequent research showed that perceptions of credibility differ across Web site genres, with news organization sites rated highest and personal Web sites rated lowest in terms of message, sponsor, and overall site credibility. Credibility assessments appeared to be due more to Web site design, complexity, and depth of content than to familiarity with the site's sponsors. In addition, although people generally reported verifying the Web-based information, actual observation of their online behavior suggested that this is not the case.

"While it is true that the characteristics and realities of digital media may not have changed the basic skills needed for credibility assessment, they certainly have changed the need to assess credibility, the frequency with which to do so, and the strategies that may be useful and available to assess information and its source," said Flanagin.

In addition to the research project funded by the MacArthur Foundation, Metzger and Flanagin recently produced one volume in a series of books that comprise The MacArthur Series on Digital Media and Learning. The series, which explores issues related to digital technology that affect young people, will be published by MIT Press in the fall. The title of Metzger's and Flanagin's book is "Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility." Anna Everett, chair and professor of film and media studies at UCSB, is also contributing to the series. She is editing the volume titled "Race and Ethnicity."

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[Metzger's and Flanagin's Research](#)

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