**News Stories on the Facebook Platform: Millennials’ Perceived Credibility of Online News Sponsored by News and Non-News Companies**

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**Abstract**

This experimental study examined whether stories presented on Facebook that appeared to be from a news organization were rated as higher in perceived credibility than stories that appeared to be from a non-news organization. One-hundred-and-seven participants took part in the online study. One group saw stories that appeared to be from a news organization and another group saw the same stories that appeared to be from a non-news organization. Both groups rated the stories the same in terms of perceived credibility. The study also found that the higher the participants rated the stories in terms of perceived credibility, the higher they rated the organization’s perceived credibility. These findings point to potential implications for traditional journalistic outlets regarding their ability to be seen as credible, reliable online news sources – particularly through a social media platform like Facebook.

Key words:

online news

Facebook

credibility

public relations

**Introduction**

Growing numbers of young people are getting their news online. According to a 2016 Pew study of U.S. millennials, which placed millennials between the ages of 18 and 29, 84% of this group gets their news online (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). When they go online, young adults are increasingly moving beyond journalistic web sites toward getting their news through social media websites. Seventy-four percent of American 18-34 year olds reported getting their news from Facebook, and 67% reported getting their news from Twitter (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015). About half of this age group said Facebook and Twitter were “the most important” or “an important way” they receive the news (Barthel, et al., 2015). This finding was confirmed in a 2015 study by the American Press Institute (API) that showed millennials in the U.S. consume news differently from previous generations. According to the study, “This generation tends not to consume news in discrete sessions or by going directly to news providers” (API, 2015, para. 5). Instead, noted API, “news and information are woven into an often continuous but mindful way that millennials connect to the world generally, which mixes news with social connection, problem solving, social action, and entertainment” (2015, para. 5). According to Poindexter (2012) “…for millennials, anytime-anywhere accessibility, search-ability, share-ability, link ease and reliability, comment-ability, contribute-ability, and coolness may re-define what news is, and expectations of it” (p. 28). Data over the past six decades has indicated that the number one reason people report engaging with news is to keep up with what is going on, and this has not changed for millennials. What has changed is how millennials are exposed to news as compared to previous generations (Poindexter, 2012).

Still, 85% of millennials say keeping up with the news is at least somewhat important to them, and 69% say they get news daily (API, 2015). Since millennials indicate that news consumption is important, and that they often turn to social media as their news “portal,” one important question is what consideration, if any, do they give to the source of the news material that appear through a social media portal? For example, do these news consumers consider online news from a corporate source to be as credible as online news that is offered by a media outlet? This is an important question to explore as previous studies show mixed results when it comes to the perceived credibility of online information. While some studies show a propensity for young adults to judge traditional media sources as more credible than non-traditional sources (Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012; Gangadharbatla, Bright, & Logan, 2014; Swasy, Tandoc, Bhandari, & Davis, 2015) other studies show just the opposite, or that young adults do not tend to pay attention to the source of the information when making judgments about perceived credibility (Fisher, Magee, & Mohammed-Baksh, 2015; Netzley & Hemmer, 2012). Further complicating the picture is recent research revealing that, in general, users of online information may not be considering the source at all when evaluating information credibility, depending on what platform they access (Ma & Atkin, 2017).

These studies, however, do not explore how people judge news that is presented to them on social media when they believe it is coming from a traditional news media source as opposed to when it is presented by a non-news company. This experimental study addresses that gap. It also examines the impact the perceived credibility ratings of the stories have on the perceived credibility of the organizations providing the information.

**Social Media, Millennials, and News Consumption**

While millennials may not intend to encounter news when they are on social networking sites, it seems they often end up reading or interacting with news stories because “…social networks are exposing millennials to more news than they were initially seeking” (API, 2015, para. 9). A focus group study of millennials (Antunovic, Parsons, & Cooke, 2016, p. 10-13) found that they are exposed to news through “routine surveillance” (checking news on digital devices), “incidental consumption” (news that happens to “pop up” on social media), and “directed consumption” (gathering additional information about a news story based on either routine surveillance or incidental consumption). A 2017 report from the Reuters Institute found, in an international survey, that social media was the leading source of news for young millennials (18-24), with 33 percent indicating that it is their preferred platform for news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropolous, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017, p. 10). The API similarly tracked news consumption through Facebook. It found that, overall, 47 percent who use Facebook say that getting news is a main motivation for visiting the platform, and that reading news has become one of the significant activities they engage on Facebook. Fully “88 percent of millennials get news from Facebook regularly, for instance, and more than half of them do so daily” (API, 2015, para. 9). Most recently, an August 2018 survey by LendEdu revealed that 40 percent of millennials use Facebook as their sole news source (Brown, 2018), and a 2018 Pew Survey revealed that 26 percent of news consumers through Facebook are millennials (Matsa & Shearer, 2018).

Almost a third (28 percent) of 18-29 year olds say they are “very loyal” to their news sources (Mitchell, et al., 2016). In fact, 40 percent of millennials say they pay for at least one news-specific service, app, or digital subscription (API, 2015). However, just because they are getting their news online does not mean they trust what they are seeing. For example, only 10% of 18-29 year olds say they place a lot of trust in information they get from national news organizations (Mitchell, et al., 2016).

**Corporations Offering News Directly through Social Media**

Prior to the rise of the Internet, the public relations industry had customarily labeled the dissemination of client-related news as part of “media relations” and “publicity” – where information that benefits a client is positioned as news that the journalistic outlet would find useful or important and, therefore, relay to the public. By the late 2000s, the advent of social media, brought about more of a concerted effort by corporations to encapsulate their own news and then convey it directly through mediums like Facebook and Instagram. What traditionally had been thought of as media relations emerged into sophisticated online content creation that appears as news, transmitting information to audiences while often bypassing journalistic outlets. For example, the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA’s) *Tactics* magazine pointed out that the mattress company Casper hired “journalists in-house to launch an editorial site focused on the science of sleep, while simultaneously creating word-of-mouth marketing across traditional advertising and social media platforms” (Roy, 2016, p. 7). Public relations, however,offers clients more opportunities to broadcast the importance of their activities beyond their products and services. As numerous scholars have pointed out (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013; Heath, 2006; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011), public relations can help clients act in a sense-making role in society, affording, for example, corporations the opportunity to offer news that helps shape public understanding about the role of the corporation in society. As such, this study is concerned with how a corporation attempts through social media to convey news about itself that is not linked to explicit product, service, or brand aspects.

Additionally, the advent of social media has allowed companies to pursue strategies that go far beyond the simple transmission of potential news items to journalism outlets. Instead, corporations can pursue effectives social media messaging by featuring a) audience interactivity, b) a conversational style that is not overtly product-centered, and c) helpful information Barker, (Barker, Bormann, Roberts & Zahay, 2016). Allagui and Breslow (2016, p. 28) acknowledged that traditional media relations outreach to established news outlets will continue, but the opportunity to place news as stories on social media is “part of an entirely different media ecosystem” that is designed to generate sharing of a client’s news among, and within, various social media networks.

Curiously, despite these broader observations that point to the usefulness of social media as a way for corporations and, more broadly, non-journalistic organizations, to disseminate non-product or non-service related news directly to audiences (and engage with them on the same), little has appeared in the scholarly literature about how such institutions attempt to use social media to relay news. Early studies examined how non-profits (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009) and corporations (McCorkindale, 2010; Chewing, 2015) used Facebook to customarily re-purpose news and announcements from other sources. Waters and Williams (2011) found a similar dynamic in a study of U.S. government agencies’ use of Twitter – almost 75% of tweets associated with the agency merely offered readers a hyperlink to websites outside of Twitter (p. 357). Thoring (2011), however, found that book publishers in the United Kingdom had gradually expanded their use of Twitter to disseminate news, with the topics varying from information on new books, non-industry news, and even “interactive content such as competitions, games and votes” (p. 157). More recent studies have found that corporate news originating on social media attempts to be more engaging by offering news stories that contained emotional content that can also be connected to entertainment or education (Hannah & Lam, 2017) or offered news stories that were either prominent, immediate, or offered a human interest element (Manzanaro, Valor, & Paredes-Gázquez, 2018).

 In sum, the scholarly literature on non-news organizations using social media to act as a direct-to-news-consumer news provider is underdeveloped, especially regarding how an important news consumer group – millennials – perceive the credibility of news offered online by non-news organizations. This is a notable gap, because, as one observer put it, by 2012 it was very clear that the rise of social media has offered “a world where conversation and dialogue have largely supplanted top-down, one-way messaging” (Brown, 2013, p. 7). Alluding more specifically to the diminution of traditional journalism’s gatekeeping function, he said, “the intermediaries may have changed and broadened” leading to an even bigger role for the public relations practitioner’s ability to identify and situate news of value directly to individual audiences (Brown, 2012, p. 7).

As public relations practitioners step forward to help corporations develop more ways to provide what appears to be news online, this study is concerned with questions of the perceived credibility of the provider of online news, and moreover, how millennials see the relative credibility of both traditional news outlets and corporations as news providers on a social media platform.

**Perceived Credibility**

Some of the earliest work in the area of credibility research defined the credibility of a story as being synonymous with the believability of the story (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). How people come to ascribe credibility to people and/or organizations can be explained using the source credibility theory (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Hovland and Weiss (1951) first articulated this theory based on their findings that when a statement is made by someone perceived as a “high prestige” source there is a higher level of agreement with that source’s statement. In addition to source credibility, sponsor credibility is also important to examine. Sponsor credibility is defined as the believability of the company that sponsors, or initiates, the message (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). Building upon sponsor credibility, Lowry, Wilson, and Haig (2014) found that “when websites are successful in convincing users that the website sponsor is credible, users will be more trusting and more willing to transact with the company” (p. 84).

There are a number of markers people use when encountering online information to help them make a judgment as to whether it is credible. These factors include: whether or not the site appears to have a professional appearance, whether the credentials of the author are displayed, whether the information is correct and reliable, how easy the site is to navigate and whether it is interactive, whether users’ expectations upon visiting the site are satisfied, and if the information presented is objective (Fogg, 2002; Fritch & Cromwell, 2001, 2002; Kang, 2010; Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Martin & Johnson, 2010; Metzger, 2007; Metzger et. al, 2010; Sundar, 2008; Walthen & Burkell, 2002). Fogg and Tseng (1999) identified several different ways people approach and think about credibility. One of these approaches is surface credibility. This comes into play when someone processes information and makes judgments about that information based upon how it is designed. Studies by Fritch and Cromwell (2001, 2002) confirmed this online information evaluation approach. They found that users form a first impression of the author or organization simply by looking at the design and organization of the information on the site; websites are perceived as more credible if they are deemed to be well-designed by those evaluating them (Fogg et al., 2003; Robins & Holmes, 2008).

For years researchers have understood that people have limits regarding their ability to process information. According to Simon, this limitation, called “bounded rationality,” can lead to satisficing (1996). Satisficing is when people do not use all of their cognitive capacity to make decisions, but rather stop collecting and processing information when they have found a solution they feel is “good enough” to meet their needs. Similarly, according to the Limited Capacity Model of message processing**,** people have a limited ability to process messages. Because of this limited ability they have to select which parts of the message they will choose to pay attention to (Lang, 2000). In 2003, Fogg proposed the Prominence-Interpretation Theory, which suggests that when finding information on a website, users will notice something (prominence) and then make a judgement about it (interpretation). He argues that a credibility assessment cannot be made without these two elements.

The already challenging online information-seeking environment can be made even more daunting for users depending upon how they either encounter, or are referred to, information online. Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen (2019) found that users are far more likely to correctly identify the source of information if they discover it directly as opposed to being put in contact with the information via an online search or within social media. According to Sundar, because users have all of these messages streaming towards them, “…it is next to impossible for an average Internet user to have a well-defined sense of the credibility of various sources and message categories on the Web because of the multiplicity of sources embedded in the numerous layers of online dissemination of content” (2008, p. 74). Because of this, users are forced to rely on heuristics in order to make assessments regarding credibility. Sundar (2008) proposed the MAIN model to explain what affordances cue the cognitive heuristics when making credibility assessments. These affordances include: Modality (How the information is presented), Agency (who is presenting the information), Interactivity (how active a user can be), and Navigability (how easy it is to find information).

**Millennials and the Perceived Credibility of Online News**

Millennials are relying more and more on social media for news and information, but do they believe the information is credible? Scholars have found varying results. According to a study by Gangadharbatla, Bright, and Logan (2014) this generation believes traditional sources of news and information are more credible than non-traditional sources. Participants who answered their survey rated newspapers as the source with the highest credibility. In the same vein, a study of college-age students by Chung, Nam, and Stefanone (2012) found that young adults rated mainstream news sources highest when examining factors like perceived trustworthiness and expertise, while they rated independent online news sources lowest in terms of credibility.

Swasy, Tandoc, Bhandari, and Davis (2015) examined the perceived credibility of stories written by traditional versus citizen journalists and found that college students who took part in an experiment rated the stories they thought were written by traditional journalists as more credible than the stories they thought were written by citizen journalists. This study also found that stories written in a “straight news format” were rated as higher in terms of perceived credibility than articles written in an “opinionated format” (p. 231). More recently, a study of millennials in Sweden revealed that participants did not perceive the news they received through social media as “real news” because it was on Facebook instead of on a news organization’s website. Study participants also thought that, because the news stories were surrounded by other trivial, non-news posts on their Facebook news feed, the perceived credibility of the news stories was damaged (Sveningsson, 2016). Other scholarship, however, found that story credibility was not necessarily enhanced if it was presented by a journalistic outlet. A study of college students by Netzley and Hemmer (2012) found that college-age students did not rate the perceived credibility of a story they thought was written by a professional journalist any higher than a story they thought was written by a citizen journalist. In a study concerning online radio news stories, and the sources used within the stories, Fisher, Magee, and Mohammed-Baksh (2015) found that those between the ages of 18-22 “cared very little about who gave them information” (p. 318). Furthermore, that study found that professional U.S. journalists “…do not think the younger generation of news consumers, especially those getting information from social media sites, considers types of sources important” (Fisher, Magee, & Mohammed-Baksh, 2015, p. 308). Finally, revealing a gap in the scholarly literature, research is lacking on how millennials perceive the credibility of news stories presented by non-news organizations within social media platforms.

**Research Questions**

The lack of consensus in the current literature regarding whether information source influences perceived credibility of online stories has led to the study’s three main research questions.

RQ 1: Will millennials perceive news that appears to be from a traditional news organization or corporate entity to be more credible?

 In this study the traditional news organization was represented by a fake news organization Facebook page called *World Wide News*. The corporate entity in this study was represented by a fake Facebook page titled *Global Pictures*. Both Facebook pages were created by the researchers specifically for this study.

RQ 2: To what extent do millennials indicate that they perceive the stories on the Facebook platform to be credible?

In this study three stories were created by the researchers and posted on fake Facebook pages created by the researchers titled *World Wide News* and *Global Pictures*. Perceived credibility was measured in this study, as it has been in previous studies, using the constructs of believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness (Abdulla et al., 2005; Bucy, 2003; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, 2003; Fogg, 2002; Fritch & Cromwell, 2001, 2002; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009; Kang, 2010; Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Martin & Johnson, 2011; Metzger, 2007; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Meyer, 1988; Newhagen & Nass, 1989; Sundar, 2008; Walthen & Burkell, 2002). Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

RQ 3: To what extent will participants’ perceived credibility of the stories impact their perceived credibility of the organization?

Perceived sponsor credibility was assessed using a validated 5-item Sponsor Credibility scale that included questions about credibility, integrity, reputation, successfulness, and trustworthiness (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003; Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009). Sponsor credibility is defined as the perceived credibility of the entity responsible for the site (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

**Methodology**

A pre-test of the study materials was done using the think aloud protocol (Ericsson & Simon, 1993).  A convenience sample of six millennials (four females and two males between the ages of 18 and 22) were asked to review the study materials and talk out loud—providing their thoughts regarding the study materials as they navigated through them—with one of the researchers taking notes and asking clarifying questions. Three were shown the Global Pictures materials and three were shown the World Wide News materials.  It took about 30 minutes for the participants to navigate through the materials using this protocol. The participants did not have any trouble navigating through the materials.  After reading through all of the study materials, the participants were asked what type of organization World Wide News was and all three responded that it was a news organization/news company.  The three who navigated through the Global Pictures materials were asked what type of organization they thought it was and all three responded that it was a public relations firm/promotional company of some sort.  Following this pre-test, the researchers felt confident that participants in the larger study would understand that World Wide News was a news organization and that Global Pictures was a corporate entity. The think aloud protocol is suitable for the aims of this pre-test because the researchers wanted to gain information on both the design of the survey, as well as whether participants viewed World Wide News and Global Pictures as a news source and a non-news organization, respectively. This protocol has been shown to be effective when used to evaluate different types of survey materials (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Sudman, Bradburn, & Schwarz, 1996; Willis, 2004). It was important to understand the cognitive process the participants were using when navigating through the materials. Six participants were used because, first, this falls within the accepted range (Nielsen, 2000; Virzi, 1992), and second, after conducting pre-tests with all of the participants none of them expressed any confusion regarding World Wide News as being a news source and Global Pictures as being a corporate entity.

Undergraduate students were recruited as participants from two universities, one in the northeastern, and one in the southeastern, United States. One-hundred-and-seven participants took part in the online study. Fifty-seven percent were female, and 43% were male. Fifty-four percent were white, 32% black, 6% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 7% other. Twelve percent were 18 years old, 25% were 19 years old, 29% were 20 years old, 11% were 21 years old, and 22% were 22 years of age or older.

Participants were randomly assigned into one of two groups. One group (56 participants) was emailed a link to stories that appeared on the Worldwide News Facebook page. The other group (51 participants) were emailed a link to the stories that appeared on the Global Pictures Facebook page. Both the Worldwide News and the Global Pictures Facebook pages were created by the researchers and based upon a commonly-used Facebook page layout that already exists for news outlets and corporations. The three articles were taken from the websites of two companies in the U.S, and slightly modified to a) not identify the actual company, and b) assure that all articles were approximately the same length, with no variation in the text. Care was taken to make sure the pages were designed in the same way, including having the same number of likes and shares for each of the stories. Figures 1 and 2 show the Facebook homepages created by the researchers. Participants read the stories and then answered an online survey regarding the perceived credibility of each story, as well as the credibility of the company they thought wrote the stories (either Worldwide News or Global Pictures). Figure 3 shows an example of one of the stories.

 **Reliability of Scales Used**

Three different scales were used in the study to assess a number of constructs that included perceived story credibility, perceived sponsor credibility, and propensity to trust. All of the scales had Cronbach’s alphas of .73 or higher, which suggests they were reliable (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Nunnally, 1978). See Table 1 for Cronbach’s alpha values.

A detailed list of questions that comprised each of the scales can be found in the appendix.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

**Propensity to Trust**

The participants’ propensity to trust was measured using a validated 3-item propensity to trust scale (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; McKnight, Kacmar, & Choudhury, 2004). Propensity to trust is important to consider because previous studies show that it has an impact on perceived credibility ratings; the more trusting someone is, the more likely they are to rate something as credible (Collins, 2006; Gefen, 2000; Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; McKnight, Cummings, and Chervany, 1998; McKnight, Kacmar, & Choudhury, 2004). In this study there was no significant difference found between the groups regarding propensity to trust, which means that any credibility rating differences found between the groups were not due simply to the fact that one group had more trusting people in it than the other.

**Explanation of Statistical Tests Used**

Non-parametric statistics, such as the Mann-Whitney U, and the Spearman rank correlation coefficient were used to analyze the data. These tests were chosen because after performing a histogram on the data, it was found that the data were not normally distributed, which pointed to the use of non-parametric statistics. There were also a number of tests for correlations performed. All scales used in this study had seven points. A significance level of .05 was used for all analysis.

**Findings**

After reading each story, participants were asked to assess perceived story credibility. They were asked how believable, accurate, trustworthy, biased, and complete they found the story to be using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). A composite perceived credibility score was determined for each participant by adding the scores together for the 5 perceived credibility questions, therefore scores could range between 0 and 35 for each participant on each story. The scores for each story were then added together to form a composite total perceived credibility score for the participants, which could range between 0 and 105.

A Mann-Whitney U performed on the data showed there was no significant difference regarding the perceived credibility of the stories between the group that saw news stories presented on the Worldwide News Facebook page, as compared to the group that saw the same stories on the Global Pictures Facebook page. The mean perceived credibility rating for the Worldwide News stories was M = 66.48, SD = 14.02, N = 56. The mean perceived credibility rating for the Global Pictures stories was M = 68.33, SD = 15.94, N = 51.

 When examining each of the three stories individually, no significant difference was found in terms of perceived credibility, regardless of whether the story appeared to be from Worldwide News or Global Pictures. See Table 2 for means and standard deviations for each of the three stories.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

When it came to what extent millennials indicated that they perceived the stories on the Facebook platform to be credible, the mean perceived credibility rating for the stories presented in the study was M = 22.45, SD = 6.43 out of a possible maximum of 35. This indicates that the participants found the stories to be credible, but not necessarily highly credible.

*Organizational Credibility*

After reading the stories, participants were asked to assess the perceived sponsor (organizational) credibility. They were asked whether either Global Pictures or Worldwide News is a company with high integrity, has a positive reputation, is credible, successful, and trustworthy using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). A composite perceived credibility score was determined for each participant by adding the scores together for the 5 perceived credibility questions, therefore scores could range between 0 and 35 for each participant on each story. The scores for each story were then added together to form a composite total perceived credibility score for the participants, which could range between 0 and 35. The mean perceived sponsor credibility score for the group that saw the Worldwide News stories was M = 22.11, SD = 6.92. The mean perceived credibility score for the group that saw the Global Pictures stories was M = 23.47, SD = 6.33. A Mann-Whitney U showed there was no significant difference between the groups in terms of the perceived credibility of the organization. When the perceived sponsor credibility scores for the two groups were averaged together the mean was M = 22.76, SD = 6.65, N = 107, which means they perceived the organization to be credible, but not necessarily highly credible.

 When it came to organizational credibility, the higher the participants rated the stories in terms of perceived credibility, the higher they rated the organization in terms of perceived credibility, r = .81, p < .00.

*Open Ended Responses to the Organizations*

Participants were asked, in an open-ended question at the end of the study, what impressions they had of World Wide News or Global Pictures.  Some of the comments they made after reading the Global Pictures Stories were:

“It seems to be very friendly and positive, and the media team knows how to write Facebook posts that draw people in and make them give a hoot about what they're reading.”

“A corporation trying to make itself sound better.”

“Global pictures is a company that everyone would want to be involved with. It has positive intentions and looks like it continues to grow.”

Some of the comments participants made after reading the World Wide News stories were:

“They try to provide good, sound journalism.”

“It seems like this news company gives good details and accurate information”

“It seems like a good place to get world news that you wouldn't really see on tv.”

Out of the 64 comments made, there were not any in which participants expressed confusion about the company that produced the materials or what they had read.

**Discussion**

Results of this study show that millennials do not perceive news that comes from a traditional news organization on the Facebook platform as more credible than news that appears to be from a corporate entity on that same platform. Previous studies show mixed results when examining news provided by traditional and non-traditional sources. This study’s results support the findings of Fisher, Magee, and Mohammed-Baksh (2015) that show the source does not factor into the formation of the decision regarding the perceived credibility of the news, or the news provider. That is, in this study, participants rated both of the organizations providing the news information as credible, and the higher the participants rated the stories in terms of perceived credibility, the higher they rated the organization in terms of perceived credibility. The results of this study underscore the importance of making sure content on the site is perceived as credible by users, so that credibility can transfer to the organization communicating the message.

Additionally, an important contextual factor that could impact perceived story credibility for millennials is that many consume news as simply a merged part of their online activities. They do not seek out news on a specific news provider’s page, instead the news is simply integrated into a social media feed, where it is consumed (Antunovic, Parsons, & Cooke, 2016; API, 2015; Poindexter, 2012; Sveningsson, 2016). This lack of loyalty to a particular news organization or brand may mean that they see all news providers as being roughly the same, or they simply do not care who the provider of the news is. It could also be, as the study by Sveningsson (2016) suggests, that the mixing of news with non-news items in social media feeds may serve to trivialize the news items. This could, in turn, cause all of the news and non-news items to assume the same level of importance and perceived credibility in users’ minds. Perhaps the reason the sites were rated the same in terms of perceived credibility is because only 10 percent of 18-29 year olds significantly trust information released by national news organizations (Mitchell, et al., 2016). If so, this appears to be part of a persistent trend. In the fall of 2018, the Knight Foundation and Gallup found that only 41 percent of Americans had either a great deal or a fair amount of trust in news media (Knight Foundation, 2018). This inherent distrust in national news organizations is bound to have an impact on perceived story credibility; indeed, this study appears to signal that millennials do not assign any degree of enhanced credibility to stories offered by a journalistic social media feed as opposed to a non-journalistic, corporate entity social media feed.

This lack of distinction between news and non-news organizations should be troubling for those working in the news arena, as it means that people are not looking closely at news sources and may become more susceptible to biased messaging from corporations. This could lead to incomplete information on many issues and topics. News providers may have to work harder at making themselves distinct from public relations entities in a way that the audience finds meaningful. Brown (2012) pointed out, as the gatekeeping function of the media continues to erode, public relations practitioners could exert a much larger influence on the inroads they are making on identifying and situating news directly to audiences online, bypassing journalistic outlets entirely.

However, these results also offer a potential opportunity for modern journalism: this study found that the higher the participants rated the stories in terms of perceived credibility, the more positively they rated the news provider’s credibility. Social media presents a unique opportunity for organizations—whether journalistic, or non-journalistic—to communicate with their audiences and to be viewed as a positive part of the community, and many companies are seizing this opportunity (Roy, 2016). A larger lesson for journalism in an era where audiences increasingly receive news through social media, and are sometimes less discriminating about source credibility, is for news operations to invest time and attention into creating stories on the Facebook platform that are factually correct and visually appealing. Today’s journalism competes within an ecology of news content providers (some journalistic, many not) who are willing to meet young news consumers where they already are, a dynamic that is fraught with complications. While these consumers sift through corporate news, marketing pitches, propaganda, and traditional news all within a social media platform, this study finds that there is room for offering reliable news that resonates with audiences.

 Limitations of this study include that a majority of the study participants fall into the wave II millennial category, those born between 1992 and 1999 (Poindexter, 2012). Had Wave I millennials, those born between 1983 and 1991, also been included, this may have had an impact on the results. Also, all participants were recruited from U.S. universities in two regions of the U.S., so the results may not be representative of millennial opinions across other regions of the U.S. or outside of the U.S. Future researchers may wish to include participants from non-U.S. universities. Another limitation is that the researchers created both World Wide News, as well as Global Pictures. Although care was taken to make sure World Wide News was perceived to be a news organization, and Global Pictures as a non-news entity, it is possible that some of the participants did not view them as such, which may have impacted the results. Also, while care was taken to create fake Facebook accounts that looked real, it is possible that some participants may have realized they were viewing fake accounts, which could have also skewed the study results. This skewing of results is a concern in all experimental studies where materials are created and manipulated. However, it should be noted that in the pre-test, as well as the open- ended comment portion of the study, none of the participants mentioned anything about viewing the accounts as fake or that they were confused as to the type of organizations World Wide News and Global Pictures were.

**Conclusion**

This study finds that, when the same news stories are viewed on Facebook, participants did not perceive news that appeared to be from a traditional news organization as any more credible than news that appeared to be from a corporate entity. The participants did rate both of the organizations as credible, and the higher the participants rated the stories in terms of perceived credibility, the higher they rated the organization in terms of perceived credibility. These findings highlight that when millennials view news on Facebook they may not be paying close attention to the source of the information. Researchers (Fogg, 2003; Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Lang, 2000; Simon, 1996; Sundar, 2008) provided, collectively, theories and models that demonstrated how individuals use shortcuts to gauge the credibility of online information. Since then, the use of such shortcuts has only become intensified; for example, a study of college students’ use of their laptops revealed that only 25 percent of students kept an online screen open for more than a minute (Yeykelis, Cummings & Reeves, 2014). Such quick scanning provides important context for the challenge traditional news sites have in establishing their distinct credibility. A 2017 Reuters Institute survey of 2,000 online news consumers in the UK, for example, found that less than half (47%) could recall the news organization’s name when they read a news item through social media (Newman, et al., 2017, p. 9). Overall, journalistic outlets face the prospect that their claim of being notable for providing credible news will be blunted by Americans’ quick scanning of news on digital devices, an increasingly looming reality as more than half (51 %) of all Americans now say they use social media for news in any given week (Newman, et. al, 2017, p. 101). The practice of native advertising in journalism may also serve to muddy the waters for the audience. Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill (2016) found that native advertising raises ethical concerns as the audience may be unaware that what they are reading is paid content, not an editorial news story. An interesting area for further research may be to further examine the impact native advertising has on the perceived credibility of news organizations, whether appearing within social media or another news delivery platform.

In this emerging reality of news consumption, news organizations are called to find ways to make sure they are offering compelling, accurate, and verified stories online that also signal quickly to those reading their stories on Facebook that the information is coming from a credible source. In doing so, journalistic organizations can better the odds of offering stories that will keep their readers for more than 60 seconds, increasing the odds of establishing and enhancing their credibility as news organizations.

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**Appendix**

**Scales Used in the Study**

**Perceived Story Credibility**

How believable did you find the story to be?

How accurate did you find the story to be?

How trustworthy did you find the story to be?

How biased did you find the story to be?

How complete did you find the story to be?

**Perceived Sponsor Credibility**

Global Pictures/Worldwide News is a credible company.

Global Pictures/Worldwide News is a company with high integrity.

I consider Global Pictures/Worldwide News to have a positive reputation.

Global Pictures/Worldwide News is a successful company.

Global Pictures/Worldwide News is trustworthy.

**Propensity to Trust**

I usually trust people until they give me a reason not to trust them.

I generally give people the benefit of the doubt when I first meet them.

My typical approach is to trust new acquaintances until they prove I should not trust them.