

# Credibility

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## Credibility

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Communication, Information Science, Epistemology

### 1. Core Definition

**Credibility** fundamentally refers to the believability and reliability of information, particularly when that information is received from external sources. It encompasses the extent to which a source is perceived as trustworthy and possessing expertise on a given subject. A source or message is deemed credible when it inspires confidence and is considered worthy of belief. This assessment is crucial in various contexts, from daily decision-making to academic research, as it directly influences the acceptance and utility of information. The evaluation of credibility is not merely an objective process but often involves subjective interpretations based on prior knowledge, biases, and the specific context in which information is encountered.

The assessment of credibility necessitates a critical evaluation of several factors associated with the information provider. As highlighted by early communication research, a source's perceived trustworthiness and expertise are paramount in determining its persuasive power and, consequently, its credibility. For instance, scientific findings published in a peer-reviewed academic journal are generally accorded higher credibility than information found on an unregulated internet forum. This disparity arises because journal authors are typically recognized experts whose work has undergone rigorous scrutiny by academic peers, ensuring a certain standard of scientific support and methodological soundness. Conversely, anyone can disseminate information online with minimal or no corroboration, making the assessment of credibility a more challenging and vital task in the digital age.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "credibility" originates from the Latin word "credibilis," meaning "worthy of belief," which itself stems from "credere," to believe. Historically, the concept of credibility has been central to rhetoric and philosophy, dating back to ancient Greece. Aristotle, in his treatise *Rhetoric*, identified "ethos" as one of the three modes of persuasion, alongside "pathos" (emotion) and "logos" (logic). Ethos specifically refers to the credibility or character of the speaker, emphasizing that an audience is more likely to be persuaded by someone they perceive as knowledgeable, virtuous, and benevolent. This early recognition underscores the enduring importance of a source's character and perceived qualities in influencing belief and acceptance of information.

In modern times, particularly in the 20th century, the study of credibility evolved significantly within the fields of communication and social psychology. Researchers like Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University conducted seminal work in the 1950s, systematically investigating source credibility as a key factor in attitude change and persuasion. Their research operationalized

credibility into measurable components, primarily focusing on perceived expertise and trustworthiness. This foundational work laid the groundwork for contemporary understandings, extending the concept from face-to-face communication to mass media and, more recently, to the complex digital information environment. The advent of the internet and social media has further amplified the challenges and complexities of assessing credibility, as individuals are constantly exposed to a vast and diverse array of information sources with varying degrees of reliability.

### 3. Key Characteristics

**Expertise:** This refers to the perceived knowledge, skill, and experience a source possesses regarding a particular subject. A source with high expertise is seen as authoritative and well-informed. For example, a medical doctor discussing public health policy is generally perceived to have higher expertise on that topic than a celebrity without relevant qualifications.

**Trustworthiness:** This characteristic reflects the perceived honesty, integrity, and benevolence of the source. A trustworthy source is believed to be free from manipulative intent, objective, and genuinely concerned with the audience's best interests. This involves assessing if the source has ulterior motives or biases that might distort the information presented.

**Objectivity:** While often intertwined with trustworthiness, objectivity specifically refers to the source's ability to present information fairly, without undue bias or personal opinion. An objective source strives for a balanced portrayal, acknowledging different perspectives and presenting facts impartially.

**Accuracy:** This relates to the factual correctness and verifiability of the information provided. Accurate information is free from errors, inconsistencies, and misrepresentations. While a source may be trustworthy, a lack of accuracy in its content can undermine its overall credibility.

**Reliability:** Reliability pertains to the consistency and dependability of a source over time. A reliable source consistently provides credible information, suggesting a sustained commitment to quality and truthfulness. This characteristic often builds through repeated positive experiences with a source.

### 4. Significance and Impact

The significance of credibility permeates nearly every aspect of human communication and information consumption. In a world saturated with information, the ability to discern credible sources from non-credible ones is paramount for informed decision-making, effective learning, and the maintenance of a well-functioning society. High-credibility sources facilitate persuasion, foster public trust in institutions such as scientific bodies and news organizations, and enable individuals to form accurate perceptions of reality. Without a baseline of credibility, the marketplace of ideas

would devolve into chaos, making it impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood, or expert opinion from baseless conjecture. This has profound implications for democratic processes, public health initiatives, and economic stability.

The impact of declining or challenged credibility is equally profound. When trust in established sources erodes, individuals may become more susceptible to misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the digital age, where the ease of content creation and dissemination allows for the rapid spread of unverified or intentionally false narratives. The erosion of credibility can lead to societal fragmentation, decreased civic engagement, and a reluctance to accept expert consensus on critical issues, as seen in debates surrounding climate change or public health measures. Therefore, understanding, evaluating, and fostering credibility remains a cornerstone for navigating complex information landscapes and promoting a well-informed citizenry.

## 5. Debates and Criticisms

While the importance of credibility is widely accepted, its assessment and application are subject to ongoing debates and criticisms. One significant area of contention revolves around the subjective nature of perceived credibility. What one individual deems credible, another may not, due to differing prior beliefs, values, cultural backgrounds, and cognitive biases. This subjectivity can be exploited in persuasive communication, where sources might strategically enhance their perceived trustworthiness or expertise to influence an audience, regardless of the objective quality of their information. Furthermore, the rise of "fake news" and echo chambers on social media platforms highlights how individuals can gravitate towards sources that confirm their existing worldviews, often dismissing genuinely credible information that contradicts them.

Another criticism concerns the challenges of assessing credibility in rapidly evolving information environments. Traditional cues for credibility, such as institutional affiliations or editorial oversight, are often absent or easily mimicked online. Users are frequently forced to make snap judgments about the reliability of online content with limited contextual information, leading to potential misjudgments. The concept also faces scrutiny regarding its potential to reinforce existing power structures; sources deemed "expert" are often those from established institutions, potentially marginalizing alternative voices or new perspectives, regardless of their intrinsic merit. Therefore, ongoing research continues to explore more nuanced and dynamic models of credibility, particularly in how it is perceived and constructed in interactive, participatory media environments, acknowledging its multi-faceted and often contested nature.

## Further Reading

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