

Online news portals get credibility boost from trusted sources

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People who read news on the web tend to trust the gate even if there is no gatekeeper, according to Penn State researchers.

When readers access a story from a credible [news source](#) they trust through an online portal, they also tend to trust the portal, said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. Most of these portals use computers, not people, to automatically sort and post stories.

Sundar said this transfer of [credibility](#) provides online news portals -- [Yahoo](#) News and Google News -- with most of the benefits, but with little of the costs associated with online publishing.

"A news portal that uses stories from a credible source gets a boost in credibility and might even make money through advertising," said Sundar. "However, if there is a lawsuit for spreading [false information](#), for example, it's unlikely that the portal will be named in the suit."

Sundar said the flow of credibility did not go both ways. He said that reading a low-credibility story on a high-credibility portal did not make the original source more trustworthy.

The researchers, who reported their findings in *Journalism and [Mass Communication Quarterly](#)*, asked a group of 231 students to read online [news stories](#). After reading the stories, the students rated the credibility of the original source and the portal.

The researchers placed banners from [Google](#) News, which served as a high credibility portal, and the Drudge Report, which served as a low-credibility portal, on the pages. They also added banners to identify the [New York Times](#) -- the high-credibility source -- and the National Enquirer -- the low-credibility source.

The students were significantly more likely to consider a portal credible if the source of the story was trustworthy. The credibility of the portal suffered if the source lacked trustworthiness.

Sundar said that attention to sources depended on the involvement of the reader. When readers were particularly interested in the story, they tended to more thoroughly evaluate all the sources involved in the production and distribution of that news. People who are not interested in the story base their judgments on the credibility of the portal, which is the most immediately visible source.

Sundar, who worked with Hyunjin Kang and Keunmin Bae, both doctoral students in communications, and Shaoke Zhang, doctoral student in information sciences and technology, said that the way credibility is transferred from site to site shows the complexity of the relationship between online news readers and sources.

Evaluating credibility is difficult on the web because there are often chains of news sources for a story, Sundar said. For example, a person may find a story on an online news portal, forward the information to another friend through email, who then posts it on a social network. The identity of the original source may or may not be carried along this chain to the final reader.

"With traditional media it's fairly clear who the source is," Sundar said. "But in online media, it gets very murky because there are so many sources."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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