

"Do You Believe This Story?!":  
The Impact of Uncivil and Ideologically Incongruent  
Adjacent Opinion Commentary on News Credibility

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## **ABSTRACT**

Shifts in the news media environment, such as the close juxtaposition of news and editorial content online and an ongoing stream of critiques from bloggers, continue to fuel questions about a credibility crisis for the mainstream news media. In light of questions concerning media credibility, this study investigates how evaluations of news stories are affected by evaluations of adjacent messages. We draw on theoretical perspectives used in social judgment research to conceptualize credibility judgments as susceptible to context effects. Using a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design, we test whether credibility ratings of a balanced news story are affected by the ideological position and tone of an adjacent opinionated message. Our findings demonstrate that a news story is perceived as more credible when situated adjacent to opinion commentary that provides an extreme standard of comparison, a contrast effect.

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Visitors to the “Politics” page on the New York Times website encounter a mix of hard news, feature pieces, opinion columns and blogs crowded together on the same real estate of the computer screen. Google News loyalists receive their news stories aggregated and organized by topic on a page that reveals the story’s headline and source while hiding its author and story type. And in the blogosphere, the authors of the liberal blog DailyKos regularly repurpose large segments of text from online news sites, research foundations, and other blogs and embed this text within their own editorial content—often praising or criticizing the subjects of news, the news stories or the newsmakers themselves. The lack of control over distribution and the intermingling of news and editorial content are two of the factors that feed into the news media’s current crisis in credibility (Seelye, 2005; Sundar, Knobloch, & Hastall, 2007). As a marker of this crisis, a 2005 report by the Pew Research Center found that 45 percent of the population believes little or almost nothing of what they read in the daily paper, an increase in this category of nearly 30 percent since 1985 (“Trends 2005,” 2005). Just prior to the release of the Pew report, the New York Times initiated their own internal committee to determine a strategy for building the newspaper’s credibility with the public (Seelye). In light of new questions about media credibility raised by shifts in the news media environment, this study investigates how evaluations of traditional news stories are affected when the content of the story is embedded within opinion commentary.

We are interested in understanding how the credibility of a news story may be affected by the comparative evaluations of adjacent opinionated content. Specifically, the question at the center of this study is whether and how the credibility of mainstream news stories is affected by

the ideological position and tone of adjacent opinionated commentary. We draw on theoretical perspectives used in social judgment research to conceptualize credibility judgments as situational and contextual (Herr, 1986; Mussweiler, 2003). We propose that the context in which a news story is presented can affect its level of perceived credibility.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an experiment that embedded a balanced news story in an opinionated blog post about global climate change policy. The blog post was manipulated along two variables designed to affect perceptions of its credibility—level of civility and ideological incongruence (whether the content of the message “matched” respondents’ political identification)—while the news story remained unchanged across conditions.

## **Literature Review**

### *News media credibility*

Communication researchers have been concerned with credibility for decades, beginning with early inquiries into aspects of source credibility as a factor in acceptance of persuasive messages (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). These inquiries led naturally to the examination of media message features and the role of message characteristics in influencing perceptions of credibility, and have been followed more recently by a focus on medium or channel differences in studies of credibility in the electronic media era (Johnson & Kaye, 1988; Kioussis, 2001).

The concept of credibility, generally viewed as a multidimensional, perceptual construct, has been studied from within three somewhat overlapping domains: source credibility, concerned with judgments about the believability of the message originator; message credibility, exploring the impact of message characteristics; and medium credibility, defined by a focus on

characteristics of the channel through which the message is delivered (Metzger et al., 2003; Kioussis, 2001). There are numerous definitions of news media credibility in the literature. The three research traditions in credibility have identified a variety of dimensions that appear to be important in news credibility judgments, including trustworthiness and expertise, fairness, bias, incompleteness, concern for community, separation of opinion and fact, and accuracy (Gaziano & McGrath; Meyer, 1988; Metzger et al., 2003). This study is situated within the tradition of message credibility, and we draw on Meyer's (1988) five dimensions of measuring newspaper credibility—fairness, completeness, bias, accuracy, and trustworthiness—and add a sixth, addressing perceptions of balance in the news (Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004).

These dimensions imply a link between credibility and the norms of reporting in mainstream news media outlets in the United States. Indeed, the majority of research on news credibility has focused on the credibility of mainstream news sources and the texts they produce (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). This research has demonstrated that perceptions of credibility are connected to journalistic norms of objectivity, fairness, and balance. Messages that go outside these bounds by using opinionated or “intense,” non-journalistic language are often rated lower in credibility (Hamilton & Hunter, 1998).

Credibility is of practical interest to journalists and news institutions because of the widespread belief that audiences are more likely to read, watch or listen to news content provided by sources they trust. There is evidence to suggest that those who are relatively more trusting of mainstream news media are somewhat more likely to use these sources than those who are more skeptical of the media (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). However, the implications for news credibility of mixing informational genres online are not yet known. Will the credibility of a news text be affected if it is lifted from its original context (say, the “A” section of a

newspaper) and juxtaposed with opinionated commentary? To some extent, the answer to this question depends on whether we conceptualize credibility judgments as stable and trait-based, or as situational and therefore susceptible to context effects.

### *Credibility as a situational judgment*

Studies have demonstrated that ratings of news credibility are correlated across media (e.g., television, Internet, and print), suggesting the possibility that a trait may underlie credibility judgments (Kioussis, 2001; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Tsftati and Cappella (2003) explicate just such a trait with the concept they call *media skepticism*, defined as “the perception that journalists are not fair and objective in their reports, that they do not always tell the whole story, and that they would sacrifice accuracy and precision for personal and commercial gains” (p. 506). While there is strong evidence to suggest at least some role for trait-level media trust as a predictor of credibility judgments, there is also good reason to conceptualize assessments of credibility as situational, subject to the context effects seen in other types of comparative judgments (Mussweiler, 2003). Credibility can be viewed as “a relation term” (Gunther, 1992, p. 149), rather than as evidence of a skeptical disposition leading to consistent assessments across contexts.

The body of work examining perceptions of relatively balanced news media stories as hostile against one’s own views, and the role of political ideology in this process, suggests that perceptions of credibility may shift depending on involvement in an issue. Gunther (1992) drew on national survey data to explore this hypothesis and found that a distrusting disposition predicted credibility judgments only under some circumstances. Judgments overall were more dependent on individual levels of involvement with the news issue at hand. Also applicable to this debate are Newhagen and Nass’s (1989) findings that audiences appear to use different

standards to judge different news media. Television news credibility is evaluated based more on evaluations of the newscaster, while newspapers are rated based on perceptions of the overall credibility of the newspaper as an institution. Newhagen and Nass argued “the criteria for credibility and the predictors of credibility may depend on the receiver’s perspective on the medium” (p. 278). Again, this suggests that perceptions of credibility—at least as applied to assessments of specific media texts—may be better understood as both situational judgments and as evidence of an underlying trusting or skeptical disposition.

#### *Evaluating credibility in a mixed genre context*

The rise of the Internet as an information medium has demanded of researchers new ways of thinking about the credibility of media messages (Metzger et al., 2003). For example, conceptualizing the effects of source credibility has been complicated by the increasing likelihood that news content will be selected for presentation not by editors, but through the complex algorithms of Internet portals (such as Google news) or will be provided on-demand based on an individual’s personal customization choices (Sundar & Nass, 2001). The Internet has blurred distinctions among different news media, allowing the combination of video, audio and text-based news all on one Web page.

This convergence of forms is not limited to “multimedia” phenomena. The Internet also enables the blurring of distinctions among news genres. Traditional news stories, written with a detached, objective reportorial voice, may sit on a web page next to (or visually enmeshed with) opinion commentary. In a study of message persuasion, Tormala and Clarkson (2007) argued it is increasingly rare that persuasive messages are processed in isolation. Similarly, genres of informational messages are no longer read in isolation. Public affairs news stories online are not necessarily kept visually or physically separated from opinion pieces as they are in a print

newspaper. They may be posted together on a newspaper's "topic" page, or the news media text may be juxtaposed with opinionated commentary on a partisan blog. This shift toward intermingling of informational genres calls for new theoretical perspectives to help investigate questions concerning evaluations of news text credibility.

### *Context effects on judgments*

The goal of this study is to conceptualize evaluations of news credibility when the stories are not judged in isolation. It has been well established by psychological research that "human judgment is comparative in nature" (Mussweiler, 2003, p. 472). The judgments we make about objects, ideas, or persons are made in a particular context, and the assessments we arrive at are influenced by the comparison standard that is salient at the time (Mussweiler, 2003; Herr, 1986; Strack & Mussweiler, 1997). As such, judgments are fundamentally relative. They depend on the context in which the judgment is made. For instance, hostility judgments of an ambiguous target depend on whether that target is judged in comparison to Santa Claus or Hitler (Herr, 1986).

Experimental studies of social comparison judgments generally ask participants to render judgment of target person after a comparison standard has been primed by the researcher (Herr, 1986; Moskowitz & Skurnik, 1999; Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004). An exemplar is used to prime a particular social category, such as "extremely hostile" or "trustworthy." The comparison between a target and the primed reference point results in a judgment that either assimilates evaluation of the target toward the reference point, or contrasts evaluation of the target away from the reference. That is, an assimilation effect occurs when the target person is judged to be relatively similar to the comparison standard and a contrast effect occurs when the target is judged to be relatively different (Herr, 1986; Mussweiler, 2003; Tormala & Clarkson, 2007). In Herr's study, participants were primed with one of four famous people, an exemplar of

the categories “extremely hostile” (Hitler), “moderately hostile” (Alice Cooper), “moderately non-hostile” (Robin Hood), or “extremely non-hostile” (Santa Claus). Participants were then asked to judge the ambiguous behavior of a target person, “Donald.” Donald was judged as more hostile when participants were primed with Santa Claus than when they were primed with Hitler, revealing a contrast effect. Judgments moved *away* from the activated category (extremely hostile or extremely non-hostile). Participants primed with Robin Hood evaluated Donald as less hostile than did participants primed with Alice Cooper, evidence of an assimilation effect. In this case, judgments moved *toward* the primed category (moderately hostile or non-hostile).

Whether a contrast or assimilation effect occurs depends on how an individual perceives the relationship between the target and the salient standard of comparison. One factor known to influence whether a judgment will result in assimilation or contrast is the extremity of the comparison standard, as in Herr’s (1986) study. When extreme exemplars are provided as standards for comparison, the subsequent judgments people make, either about themselves or others, are likely to move away from that comparison standard. Comparisons between targets and more moderate standards are more likely to result in assimilation effects (Herr; Mussweiler et al., 2004; Tormala & Clarkson, 2007).

Mussweiler proposed a selective accessibility model to explain the processes behind comparative judgments (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler, 2001; Mussweiler et al., 2004). In Mussweiler’s (2003) model, individuals begin the comparison process by rendering an initial assessment (a “guess”) as to the similarity or dissimilarity of the target to the standard. If the two are assessed to be similar, a hypothesis asserting similarity is generated for testing. Based on prior research, Mussweiler argued that this hypothesis testing leads to a selective search for hypothesis-consistent evidence. Thus, if the target and standard are hypothesized to be similar,

the judge will search for information that confirms that the target and standard really are similar. The similarity hypothesis therefore encourages accessibility of knowledge emphasizing similarity, while the dissimilarity hypothesis makes accessible knowledge confirming difference. This accessible knowledge is in turn applied to rendering judgment of the target. To return to the context of Herr's (1986) study, we can imagine an initial assessment of "Donald" as different from Hitler. This would lead to a hypothesis of difference, and thus make accessible knowledge related to that difference. The end result would likely be a judgment that, compared to Hitler, Donald's behavior doesn't seem very hostile after all.

Models of the processes underlying comparative judgment provide insight into the processes that likely govern credibility evaluations in multiple information message situations online. In a study of persuasion judgments in a multiple message setting, Tormala and Clarkson (2007) found that the persuasiveness of a moderately credible target message was influenced by whether it followed a message (on a different topic) that had either high or low source expertise. Attitudes toward the target message were more favorable when the message followed a low credibility message rather than a high credibility message, demonstrating a contrast effect. The first message set the context within which judgment of the second (target) message was rendered. In essence, the low credibility message "looked bad," making the moderately credible target message "look good" by comparison. This finding suggests a direction for investigating the credibility of news content embedded in opinionated content.

#### *Conceptualizing message context effects on news credibility*

We draw together models of comparative judgment with prior research on the dimensions affecting news credibility to conceptualize the effects of a mixed message genre environment (news juxtaposed with opinionated commentary) on credibility judgments of a news story. We

propose that when a news story is juxtaposed with opinionated commentary, that commentary will be used as a standard of comparison for the news story if (1) the two messages are judged to be different and (2) that difference is salient. This should occur when the opinion commentary is an extreme example of the category “low credibility.” Under this circumstance, we would expect a contrast effect: when the opinionated commentary is low in credibility (“looks bad”), the news story should be rated as more credible. Therefore, in this study we manipulate opinion commentary across two variables that have been previously shown to affect the credibility of informational content—ideological incongruence (a “mismatch” between the beliefs expressed in the message and the pre-existing beliefs of the reader) and the level of civility in the language of the message (Hamilton & Hunter, 1998)—to observe context effects in credibility judgments of a news story.

While mainstream news stories maintain an air of detached objectivity, opinionated content produced by television talking heads or political bloggers often embraces incivility as a means for expressing opinions. The combination of incivility and opinionated commentary has effects on ratings of political trust and credibility of the source of the information. For example, in a study of incivility in television talking head exchanges, Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that although uncivil political discussion increased interest in the debate, it also reduced levels of political trust. Furthermore, uncivil commentary, either for political candidate statements or in online exchanges, has led respondents to rate the statements as less fair, informative, and ultimately, credible (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Ng & Detenber, 2003). Thus, the civility or tone of the discourse is one important component for ratings of credibility.

Ideological incongruence between the reader and the position presented in the opinionated message has also been shown to affect ratings of credibility. Previous research has

found that a discrepancy between the opinion expressed in a message and a reader's pre-existing opinion can lead to lowered credibility ratings (Metzger et al., 2003). Counterattitudinal information has been shown to heighten the tendency to judge information as coming from a biased source, as people tend to rate messages that disagree with their opinions or stances as more biased and hostile against their own views (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Gunther, 1992). For news about political issues in particular, political ideology is a salient group identification for many people, and it is likely to be heightened by commentary that takes an ideological position (Rahn, 1993; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

Although research suggests that simply altering the tone and ideological congruence of a text will influence the ratings of credibility for that specific content, the social comparison literature suggests it may also affect how we process and judge related content. The research on social comparison demonstrates that when differences between a target and a standard are primed, people are more likely to engage in contrast processing (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler, 2001; Mussweiler et al., 2004). Both an uncivil and an ideologically incongruent message that clearly differentiates itself from the news story could make this process more likely, as the differences between the two messages become more salient and therefore more likely to be used in subsequent comparisons and evaluations (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler et al., 2004; Herr, 1986). Therefore, an uncivil or ideologically incongruent message may automatically trigger these processes and make the news story appear more credible, given the likelihood of using the blogger's commentary as a standard to make this judgment. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

***H1a:** Credibility ratings for a news story will be higher when the story is adjacent to opinion commentary that uses an uncivil, rather than civil, tone.*

***H1b:** Credibility ratings for a news story will be higher when the story is adjacent to opinion commentary that is ideologically incongruent, rather than congruent, with the reader.*

Prior research demonstrates it is the most extreme standards that produce the strongest contrast effects in social comparison research as respondents focus on and highlight the key differences between the target and the standard. Therefore, a message that is both ideologically incongruent and uncivil should be the most extreme comparison, and promote an even greater amount of contrast between the opinion commentary and the news story in terms of credibility, heightening the relative credibility of the newspaper.

***H1c:** Credibility ratings for a news story will be highest when the story is adjacent to opinion commentary that is both ideologically incongruent and uncivil.*

Mussweiler's (2003) selective accessibility model of comparative judgments outlined the cognitive processes that result in contrast or assimilation effects. He proposed that this process begins when a salient standard is identified and an initial holistic judgment of difference (or similarity) is rendered. If this is the case, we expect that judgments of opinion commentary credibility (the comparison standard) should be related to judgments of the news story (the target) when the opinion commentary is the salient standard of comparison. This circumstance is predicted to occur when the opinion commentary is an extreme standard of comparison due to ideological incongruence and incivility of tone. We investigate this prediction with two sets of hypotheses. First, we consider the "credibility gap" between ratings of the news story and the commentary with which it is juxtaposed, predicted that the gap should be largest when the target and reference point are most dissimilar.

***H2a:** The credibility gap between evaluations of the news story and the adjacent opinion commentary will be larger when the commentary uses an uncivil, rather than civil, tone.*

***H2b:** The credibility gap between evaluations of the news story and the adjacent opinion commentary will be larger when the commentary is ideologically incongruent, rather than congruent, with the reader.*

***H2c:** The credibility gap will be largest when the news story is adjacent to opinion commentary that is both ideologically incongruent and uncivil.*

Second, we consider the nature and strength of the relationship between credibility ratings of the target message and reference point. Specifically, we predict that when difference is highlighted through the presence of extreme opinion commentary, the credibility judgments of the two message will be more divergent.

***H3a:** Evaluations of news credibility will be inversely related to evaluations of opinion commentary credibility when the tone is uncivil.*

***H3b:** Evaluations of news credibility will be inversely related to evaluations of opinion commentary credibility when the message is ideologically incongruent.*

***H3c:** The strongest inverse relationship between evaluations of news credibility and evaluations of blogger credibility when the message is both ideologically incongruent and uncivil.*

## **Methods**

Our hypotheses were tested in an experiment embedded in a web survey in which participants viewed a fictitious news story about global climate change policy accompanied by commentary from a fictitious political blogger. Participants were undergraduate students at a large Midwestern University. Students received extra credit for their participation. The study ( $N=877$ ) was fielded in April and May 2007.

### *Design and procedure*

The study used a 2 (civil vs. uncivil tone) x 2 (ideological congruence) between-subjects design, where civility of tone was manipulated and ideological congruence was measured based on whether or not participants viewed messages that “matched” their political ideology<sup>1</sup>.

Respondents read a news story about global climate change policy, which was written to emulate

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This 2x2 design was extracted from a larger experimental design. The full design included a third manipulation related to the structure of the blog post. This variable did not interact with the civility or congruence manipulation and is therefore included in the analysis only as a statistical control.

journalistic practice by providing a balanced summary of two positions on climate change policy. The article described both a liberal policy position for addressing climate change, endorsing mandatory caps on emissions, as well as a contrasting conservative position, supporting voluntary emissions reductions and technological innovation by industry (see Appendix 1 for full text of the news story). The news story was attributed to the Associated Press. The content of the news story remained consistent across all experimental conditions.

In order to replicate conditions under which mainstream news content would be reproduced in full, but also co-located with opinionated information content, we embedded the policy news story in a post on a fictitious web blog authored by a blogger named “Curt.” The blog commentary was written to critique either the conservative or liberal policy positions as represented in the news story. Therefore, the ideological incongruence condition was created by comparing participants’ reported political party identifications with the ideology of the blogger’s critique. Participants who reported Democrat affiliation and viewed blogger commentary critiquing the conservative position on global warming policy were in the ideologically congruent condition, as were Republican participants who read blog critiques of liberal policy. Republicans who read critiques of the conservative position and Democrats who viewed critiques of the liberal position were considered to be in the ideologically incongruent condition. Participants who reported either “Independent” affiliation or affiliation with a third party were excluded from the analysis.

To produce the tone conditions, we manipulated whether the blogger’s commentary included civil or uncivil references to the other side of the debate (Brooks & Geer, 2007). In the civil condition, the critique of the news story maintained a respectful tone (i.e., “Democrats often criticize Bush for renouncing the Kyoto Protocol, but they fail to recognize that most of the

signing nations have failed to live up to the promises of the accord.”). In the uncivil condition, while the argument remained the same, the blogger used derogatory terms and insulting language when referring to opponents of the blogger’s position (i.e., “Democrat whiners often criticize Bush for renouncing the Kyoto Protocol, but they can't seem to get it through their thick skulls that most of the signing nations have failed to live up to the misguided promises of the accord.”).

### *Measures*

#### *Manipulation check*

Ratings of blog credibility serve as a check on the experimental manipulation. Participants were asked to evaluate the credibility of the blog commentary using a scale comprised of six semantic differentials on an 11-point scale with the following anchors: fair/unfair, biased/unbiased, accurate/inaccurate, doesn’t tell the whole story/tells the whole story, cannot be trusted/can be trusted, and balanced/imbanced (Meyer, 1988; Fico et al., 2004). Factor analyses revealed a single factor for the credibility of the news story. Items were averaged to create a credibility index for the blog commentary ( $\alpha=.85$ ). (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.)

#### *Control variable*

Our analyses control for general levels of media trust. In a pre-test, participants were asked to respond to a two-item scale related to trust in the mainstream news media. Items were 11-point Likert scales, anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree:” “I trust the information I find in the mainstream news media” and “Most mainstream news media present information in a balanced way.” Items were averaged to create an index ( $r=.66, p<.001$ ).

#### *Dependent variables*

*News credibility.* Participants were asked to evaluate the credibility of the news story using the same scale as for blog credibility<sup>2</sup>. Items were averaged to create a credibility index for the news story ( $\alpha=.85$ ).

*Credibility gap.* The credibility gap score was created by subtracting each individual's blog credibility score from his or her news credibility score.

## Results

We began by conducting a two-way ANCOVA to examine the effects of our manipulations, incivility and ideological incongruence, on evaluations of blog credibility. This analysis serves as a check on our manipulations of the extremity of the standard. The analysis revealed main effects for incivility [ $F(1, 772)=29.69, p<.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.037$ ] and incongruence [ $F(1, 772)=67.98, p<.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.081$ ], as well as the expected interaction between the two manipulations [ $F(1, 772)=3.96, p<.05$ , partial  $\eta^2=.005$ ]. Post-hoc Bonferroni-adjusted comparisons demonstrate that the two manipulations together significantly amplified the effect of each alone, such that the lowest levels of blog credibility were found in the uncivil, ideologically incongruent condition ( $M=2.18, SD=1.60$ ) and the highest levels of credibility were found in the civil, ideologically congruent condition ( $M=3.76, SD=1.60$ ) (see Figure 1)

The first set of hypotheses proposed that altering the tone and ideological congruence of the blog commentary would affect ratings of news story credibility, such that the news story would be rated as more credible when the blog commentary was uncivil and ideologically incongruent. This hypothesis was tested using a two-way ANCOVA, controlling for pre-manipulation levels of media trust. The data support Hypothesis 1a: the analysis revealed a main

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<sup>2</sup> On the questionnaire, the set of items measuring news credibility was asked first, followed by the block of items evaluating blog credibility.

effect of the incivility manipulation on news credibility [ $F(1, 771)=7.41, p<.01, \text{partial } \eta^2=.01$ ].

When the surrounding blog commentary adopted an uncivil tone, ratings of news credibility were higher ( $M=5.42, SD=1.54$ ) than when the blog commentary was civil ( $M=5.15, SD=1.51$ ).

However, the data did not support either Hypothesis 1b or 1c, as we found no significant main effect of ideological incongruence [ $F(1, 771)=2.45, ns$ ] nor the predicted interaction between incivility and incongruence [ $F(1, 771)=.52, ns$ ]. These findings provide corroboration of Hypothesis 1a, in that an uncivil tone in the surrounding commentary resulted in more positive perceptions of news story credibility than when the blog commentary was civil. Hypothesis 1b and 1c were not supported by the data.

To test our second set of hypotheses, we created a credibility gap score by subtracting each individual's blog credibility rating from their rating of news story credibility. We expected that this credibility gap would be greatest when the blog commentary was a more extreme comparison standard. We conducted a two-way ANCOVA with incivility and ideological incongruence as the independent variables and the credibility gap score as the outcome variable. In addition to controlling for media trust, we also controlled for blog credibility in order to rule out concern that the size of the gap would be driven solely by shifts in perceptions of blog credibility. The results demonstrate a main effect in the predicted direction for the incivility manipulation [ $F(1, 771)=6.31, p<.05, \text{partial } \eta^2=.008$ ], such that the gap between the two credibility ratings was larger in the incivility condition ( $M=2.35$ ) than in the civility condition ( $M=2.08$ ). Therefore, the data support Hypothesis 2a. There was no main effect of ideological incongruence [ $F(1, 771)=1.58, ns$ ], nor did we find a significant interaction between our two manipulations [ $F(1, 771)=.437, ns$ ]. We found no support for hypotheses 2b and 2c.

Our third set of hypotheses was designed to test the nature of the relationship between evaluations of the target (news story credibility) and the comparison standard (blog commentary). We expected that the two credibility ratings would only be related when the blog commentary was an extreme (and thus salient) standard of comparison. Therefore, to support our hypotheses we should find significant inverse correlations between blog credibility and news credibility when the blog commentary was uncivil or incongruent. H3a predicted that blog credibility and news credibility would be negatively related when the blogger's commentary was uncivil. The data support this hypothesis: in the uncivil condition, the two credibility scores are negatively correlated ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ), while they are not correlated under conditions of civility. We also tested the correlation between the credibility scores under conditions of ideological congruence and the pattern again supports our hypothesis: under conditions of incongruent commentary, there is a significant negative correlation ( $r = -.12, p < .05$ ) that does not occur in the congruent condition.

However, we also expected that when the opinionated commentary is most extreme—when the blogger's commentary is both ideologically incongruent and uncivil—the two credibility scores should be most closely related. The data support this assumption, as the two credibility scores were significantly negatively correlated only in the condition where the news story was embedded in uncivil, ideologically incongruent blog commentary ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ). In the other three experimental conditions, news credibility ratings were not related to blog credibility ratings, thus demonstrating the relationship between blog credibility and news article credibility found due to civility and ideological incongruence were being driven by the combination of both of these extreme standards. Therefore, the data support Hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c by demonstrating that under conditions of extremity, the credibility scores of the

newspaper are inversely related to the credibility scores for the blog, supporting our expectations that the extremity of the comparison would lead to contrast effects in making a judgment.

## **Discussion**

The majority of credibility research has either focused on factors that affect general levels of media trust or skepticism or on message characteristics that determine the credibility of specific, isolated media messages. This kind of research has great value. However, we argue the new media information environment demands consideration of credibility judgments made under conditions where news messages are not read in isolation, but rather in conjunction with a variety of other news content and genres. Furthermore, we argue that through the process of comparison, the characteristics of messages can affect not only ratings of their own credibility, but also of adjacent messages. The results of our study demonstrate that the credibility of a news story depends, at least in part, on evaluations of surrounding messages.

This study was designed to investigate what happens to the credibility of a balanced news story when it is juxtaposed with opinionated content on a web page. We drew on theoretical perspectives from comparative judgment to predict that an uncivil, ideologically incongruent blog commentary would serve as an extreme standard of comparison to a balanced news story. Our findings provide strong support for this theoretical model as applied to news credibility judgments. The manipulation of incivility in the tone of the blog commentary had an impact on the credibility of the news story—the text of which was not altered across conditions. That is, the exact same news story appeared more credible when juxtaposed with an uncivil opinionated blogger than when next to a civil opinionated blogger.

Not only do we find that our manipulations had an effect on news credibility, but we were also able to test the theoretical implications of Mussweiler's (2003) model that the two

judgments should be related. Blog and news credibility ratings were only related in conditions where our manipulations highlighted the differences between the opinionated commentary and the balanced, objective news story. Our study was not designed to test the possibility of assimilation effects in credibility, as our messages were drawn from two inherently distinct genres of information content. Regardless of condition, the news story was consistently rated as more credible than the blogger's commentary. This supports Hamilton and Hunter's (1998) findings that people perceive messages that use opinionated language as less credible. Therefore, we would not expect participants to perceive the two media messages as similar. Contrast effects should be the more likely outcome in general in a mixed genre information environment.

Although the second manipulation, ideological incongruence, affected levels of blog credibility—the commentary was rated as less credible when the participant's party identification did not match the ideology of the critique—it had no significant impact on news credibility. We had expected the manipulation of incongruence to heighten the effects of incivility, making the blog an even more extreme standard of comparison. It appears that the relationship between blog credibility and news credibility is not so simple. Newhagen and Nass (1989) found that people use different criteria to evaluate the credibility of different media. If Mussweiler's (2003) model is correct, judgments of targets are rendered based on accessibility and applicability for the particular judgment context. Ideological incongruence of the blog commentary does not by itself seem to have been a relevant piece of information for rendering judgment on the news story. Future research should seek to problematize the concept of extreme standards of comparison in research outside the field of social judgment categories.

These findings have further implications for scholars interested in news credibility. We find strong evidence to suggest that credibility judgments are susceptible to context effects. The

manipulation of blog commentary civility predicted news credibility even after controlling for general trust in the mainstream media. Such effects should be taken into account in studies—particularly of experimental design—intended to evaluate the effect of message characteristics on credibility judgments. Comparative credibility judgments are becoming particularly important because of the ease of content manipulation and repurposing online. As the Internet offers new and more accessible ways to combine and use content from diverse media sources, more research is needed to understand the effects of the context in which the information appears.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. The sample was comprised entirely of college students, whose responses and attitudes may not reflect those of an equivalent adult sample. On the other hand, students are in some ways an ideal test sample for the hypotheses presented in this study. Younger audiences are turning to the Internet for news in vast numbers, and are more likely than older cohorts to make use of new genres of information content such as blogs (Fox & Madden, 2006).

Our study is also limited by imprecision in the measurement of incongruence between the content of the blogger's message and the pre-existing opinions of the participants. The issue of global climate change is multifaceted, and may not parallel the ideological continuum represented by party identifications used in our measure of incongruence. A more ideal measure of incongruence would involve creating the manipulation using a pre-test measure of opinion on global climate change.

### **Conclusion**

This study serves as an initial exploration of questions concerning news credibility in the new media environment, where news and opinion content are often found side by side. Applying

comparative judgment models to credibility research offers an important new route through which to consider the impact of new media on perceptions of credibility. In situations where the differences between two genres are highlighted, the two media messages are more likely to be perceived as different and a contrast effect is likely to occur. Our research reiterates the fact that context effects occur in judging media credibility, expanding past the three areas of credibility (source, message, and medium) studied in mass communication thus far. This adds yet another realm to investigate how credibility judgments differ in a variety of context. Our study suggests that the extremity of comparison may be an important area to investigate, but it is only one of many that could influence contextual credibility.

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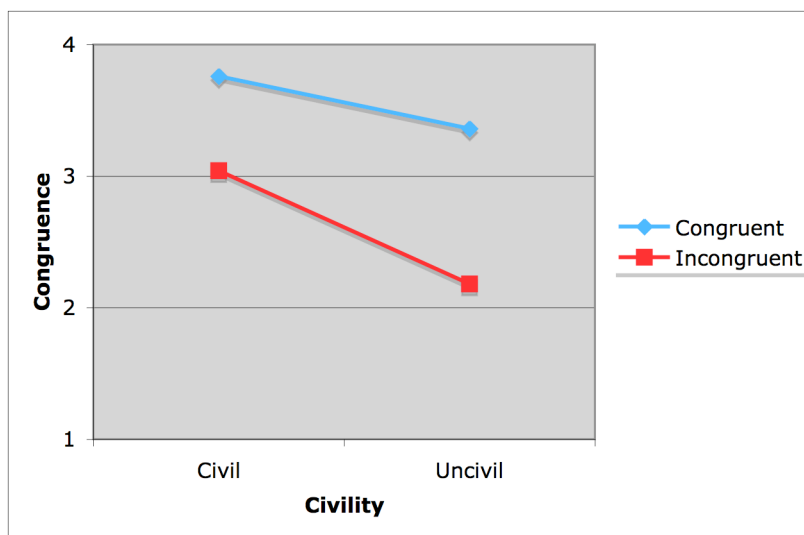
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**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Media trust	5.10	1.12	0	10
Blog credibility	3.11	1.72	0	8
News credibility	5.27	1.54	0	10
Credibility gap	2.16	2.35	-4.17	9.83

**Figure 1: Interaction of incongruence and incivility on blog credibility**



## Appendix 1: Full text of news story

HEADLINE: Lawmakers debate competing proposals on global warming

WASHINGTON - Congress turned the spotlight on global warming this week for the first time in six years, promising to pass legislation to address climate change by year's end.

Lawmakers in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate said there is growing agreement that Congress needs to address the problem of greenhouse gases causing global warming. There is less agreement, however, on how that should be done.

In a recent press conference, Rep. Mark Hunt, D-Colo., touted a plan that calls for mandatory caps on greenhouse emissions for power plants, industry and oil refineries. President Bush has opposed mandatory caps but has called for changes to federal fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles and a boost in ethanol production.

The Hunt plan, co-sponsored by Rep. Bill Reedy, D-Ky. would require releases of heat-trapping gases to return to 2004 levels by 2012 and to 1990 levels by 2020.

Carbon dioxide, produced from the burning of fossil fuels, is the primary greenhouse gas. United States emissions of this gas have increased an average of about 1 percent per year since 1990.

"With each passing year, the consequences of federal inaction on reducing greenhouse gas emissions become more devastating for our children and grandchildren, and the range of solutions grows smaller," Hunt said Thursday.

Conservatives such as Rep. Mike Donald, R-Kan., oppose strict limits on emissions, arguing that they would raise energy costs for consumers and hurt economic growth. "Carbon caps will hit hardest on those with the least ability to pay. Do we really want that?" he said.

President Bush, while acknowledging concerns about global warming, maintains that industry can deal with the issue through the development of new technologies.

The president has submitted a plan to combine technological innovations and voluntary efforts by industry to reduce emissions through energy conservation and the use of renewable fuels.

These measures, administration officials say, are already well on their way to slowing the growth of greenhouse gases.

The Bush plan falls short of the mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions envisioned by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which President Bush renounced in 2001. "We can get beyond . . . the pre-Kyoto era with a post-Kyoto strategy, the center of which is new technologies," he said on a visit Tuesday to a DuPont facility in Delaware.

Critics have questioned whether President Bush's proposals are the best way to address the problem of global warming.

"When you get to the bottom line, there are no hard caps, no enforcement mechanisms, and we aren't even going to start reversing the increase in carbon dioxide emissions in the transportation sector for 10 years," Hunt said.

The Bush administration believes that market forces will prove more efficient than government regulation. White House spokesman Tony Snow said, "Carrots work better than sticks."