

HOW DOES PEREZ DO IT?: EVALUATING TABLOID NEWS TRANSPARENCY
AND CREDIBILITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

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AND CREDIBILITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

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Melissa Leigh Voynich, daughter of Donna Eskew Voynich and the late William Gregory Voynich, was born October 24, 1983, in Atlanta, Georgia. She graduated from Pacelli High School in Columbus, Georgia, in 2002. From there, she attended Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and graduated Magna Cum Laude with University Honors in May 2006, receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism and minor in Business Administration. During her time at Mercer University, she served as Section Editor of the school paper and as an intern at a small publication covering Macon entertainment. From these two experiences, she received not only an appreciation for the craft of journalism but also encouragement to further her studies. She continued her post-graduate education at Auburn University, pursuing her Masters degree in Communication beginning Fall 2006. While at Auburn University, Melissa served as a graduate teaching assistant for various courses and taught Public Speaking and Communication in the Organization. She also assisted Dr. Jennifer Wood Adams with research duties from Fall 2006 until May 2008, publishing a co-authored article in *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*. She will graduate from Auburn in August 2008, and plans to continue at Auburn University as an Instructor of Communication for basic communication courses.

THESIS ABSTRACT

HOW DOES PEREZ DO IT?: EVALUATING TABLOID NEWS TRANSPARENCY AND CREDIBILITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

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The effect that blogger transparency has upon credibility evaluations of a weblog and Web blogger were tested. Two hundred and sixty-five university students were surveyed regarding their credibility evaluations of celebrity blogs and the blogger Perez Hilton. A transparency manipulation was included in half of the surveys, providing respondents with background information on Hilton. Comparisons were then made between the credibility evaluations of those who had access to background information regarding the blogger and those who did not. Results showed that background information did not significantly influence respondent rating of blogger credibility, while others factors such as time spent online, did affect credibility ratings. Limitations and recommendations for further research are discussed.

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I. INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of the Internet, information can be generated faster than ever before, and alternative media channels are becoming more accessible each day. Because of these and other characteristics, the qualities that traditionally comprised journalistic news production are being slowly altered. Greenblatt (2004) writes that the field of journalism is becoming a blurry marketplace where thousands of voices provide interpretations of the news to a mass-consuming public nearly every second of every day. At the same time, a surge in media conglomeration, and recent instances in which traditional media outlets were found lacking credibility, have led a mass readership to turn to the World Wide Web to find information that is up-to-date, relevant, and more audience-inclusive (Chung & Yoo, 2006; Hatch, 2003; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). One particular Internet-based factor has risen to the forefront in showcasing the shortcomings of traditional news outlets, and that factor is the presence of weblogs.

These online journals widely known in the shortened form “blogs” are often referred to as the watchdogs of traditional media, providing a check-and-balance system in which news outlets are held constantly accountable for what they publish (Lovink, 2008; Siepp, 2002). Particularly within the political sphere, blogs have become an important and influential aspect of the news media. The impact of blogs on political movements and candidate clout cannot be ignored. Jost and Hipolit (2006) refer to Howard Dean’s campaign blog as the impetus that powered Dean from a blip on the

political radar to seeming front-runner in news media. Ishizuka (2007) reports that MySpace social networking pages and political blogs have and are drastically influencing the 2008 presidential race, and Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, and Wong (2007) find that politically-motivated blog users find blogs more credible than mainstream media outlets in covering political news.

However, blogs also serve purposes beyond simply providing political commentary. Another primary use of blogs is for entertainment and social networking purposes (Spencer, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). As an obsession with celebrity infiltrates the mass-consuming public, the existence of publications such as *People*, *Star*, *National Enquirer*, and television programs such as *Entertainment Tonight*, support themselves by satisfying this obsession (Turner, 2004). Blogs, with quick information and seemingly limitless space, further serve this need for constant and new celebrity information. Blogs can publish the information that audiences crave before television stations can broadcast it, or newspapers can edit and print it.

One celebrity news blogger, Perez Hilton, has risen to fame because of his ability to publish relevant celebrity news quickly and with signature - sometimes biting - commentary. His Web site sometimes garners more than 10 million hits per day, and his readership spans sex and class demographics (Boorstin, 2008). Hilton has been consulted as a source for news content by traditional media outlets (Day, 2007; Stack, 2007), and has made an impact in the music scene, increasing many an artists' popularity simply by blogging briefly about them (Chebatoris, 2007; "Power 50," 2007). Hilton was recently named *Forbes* magazine's "#1 Web Celeb" in 2007 based on how influential his Web site has been to other bloggers, traditional news outlets, and readers (Ewalt, 2007).

Hilton virtually ignores the traditional journalist's standards of objectivity and fact-checking, but as a blogger he has taken one step that most journalists have not; he has stepped out from behind his computer screen to reveal his personal life to the public, telling childhood stories, and explaining his biases. Despite his blog being tabloid news-centered, Hilton has adopted a form of transparency to his readers which is highly encouraged as an ethical standard of traditional journalism (see Grabowicz, 2003, MacKinnon, 2005; Matheson, 2004; Palser, 2005). This study will contribute to the current knowledge on the impact of transparency, evaluating how a celebrity blogger's credibility might be influenced by the blogger's ability to be transparent.

Chung and Yoo's (2006) Internet uses and gratifications approach, current research on parasocial interaction, and credibility evaluation research are linked in order to suggest that online readers of celebrity news blogs purposefully seek entertainment and interactivity (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Beatty, 2006). Furthermore, Perez Hilton's transparency helps to establish himself as a partner in parasocial interactivity, causing readers to potentially evaluate Hilton's credibility with new considerations. In this study, the factor of transparency will be manipulated to determine what effect, if any, blogger identity has on credibility evaluation.

Tests of blogger credibility have been investigated only briefly in scholarly research until this point, and these reports relate to blog usage in the political and health communication fields (see Mackert, Love, & McKnight, 2007; Yu, Gross, Sheffield, & Anderson, 2007). This study's significance is in contributing to current research on the influence and evaluation of weblogs as a source of information. In addition, celebrity weblogs and the process through which an audience determines the credibility of a

celebrity blogger are areas of study with little or no research. With the potential for parasocial interaction developing through Web sites and with celebrities, the knowledge of blogger identity might influence a reader's trust in the blogger and subject matter. The purpose of this study, then, is to determine if and how one aspect of credibility is evaluated by a new media audience using weblogs for current information.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The chapter examines literature regarding Internet uses and gratifications, narrowing to a focus on weblogs as media allowing for socialization and rapid communication. How the Internet and weblogs have changed and influenced news reporting and journalistic credibility is discussed. The notion of transparency as a means to develop traditional and online news credibility is included in the review, in addition to a discussion of the potential for parasocial interaction due to this transparency. A brief biography of transparent blogger Perez Hilton is provided at the end of this section, followed by research questions and hypotheses posed from the literature.

Internet Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications research on various mass media channels has spanned many decades and addressed countless areas of radio, television, and print journalism (McQuail, 2006). As use of the World Wide Web permeates more and more homes and workplaces, uses and gratifications research specifically related to Internet consumption has become an important focus of inquiry (Chung & Kim, 2008). The motives, adoption techniques, and even potential benefits of computer and Internet use have been researched in both the home and workplace (Colwell, Grady, & Rhaiti, 1995; Dimmick & Tao, 2005; Perse & Dunn, 1998). For example, Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) report that computer-mediated communication is just as efficient as group meeting in making workplace decisions, and Walther (1995) finds that computer messaging allows

for employees to relieve stress outside the confines of the cubicle and conference room. In the home, Colwell, Grady, and Rhaiti (1995) report that computer games are beneficial to help adolescents generate self – esteem through a feeling of socialization with others, and Perse and Dunn (1998) find that survey respondents justify their purchase of home computers most often as forms of entertainment and distraction. Other motivators to purchase computers have also been studied, as Dimmick and Tao (2005) indicate that the amount of disposable income available per household serves as a predictor in how likely and how quickly households will adopt new computer technologies.

The introduction and availability of Internet access expanded the home computer's distraction and entertainment capabilities, and brought a worldwide information portal into homes. The emergence of Internet uses and gratifications studies reveals that the networking opportunities and news to be found in the World Wide Web allow not just quick information, but also important social benefits for consumers (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999; Liang, Lai, & Ku, 2006; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Because of the high degree of interactivity involved in using the Web, the uses and gratifications approach, with its focus on an active audience, fits easily into an analysis of Internet user and blogger goals (McQuail, 2006). Relating to Internet research, Ruggiero (2000) writes, the “ ... concept of "personalness", social presence, or the degree of salience in interpersonal relationships is being explored increasingly by U&G researchers, particularly in relation to interactivity” (p. 21). The Internet allows for social networking to escape the binds of geography, time, and even anonymity, as readers deliberately seek out Internet gratifications. Beyond seeking information, Korgaonkar

and Wolin (1999) indicate that several other user motivations are influential to how much time a person spends searching Web pages. Motivations such as social need, information seeking, economic concerns and privacy concerns significantly influence time spent on Web pages. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) also indicate that the Internet significantly alters news and marketing techniques, as Internet users search for specific content based on individualized needs.

Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) also find that Internet users are purposeful in their searches for particular Web pages. For example, users who primarily seek entertainment from the World Wide Web sought and visited more arts and sports information sites, while those who desired to gather knowledge of current events most likely visited political and news sites. In addition, Tewksbury and Althaus report that Internet user motivations most likely predict the types of sites they visit, confirming that Web site readers are influenced and also purposefully act on their needs for information, socialization, and entertainment. Even in regards to Internet shopping, social factors and prior online experience serve as strong predictors in how likely an Internet user will search for products online and complete a purchase (Yoh, Damhorst, Sapp, & Laczniak, 2003).

Just as Web users are intentional in searching for particular information, they seek socialization, affiliation, and interaction through the Internet. Isolating socialization as a factor motivating Web site visitors, Ko, Cho and Roberts (2005) find readers with high motivation to visit a Web site are more likely to linger on the site to satisfy needs of information and social interaction. Weiser (2001) elaborates on these motivational factors, identifying them as the Socio-Affective Regulation (SAR) and the Good-and-

Information Acquisition (GIA) categories. Weiser (2001) writes that Internet users motivated by a need for affiliation often turn to the Internet for interaction, thereby decreasing face-to-face interaction. Those who seek information generate social capital, and are more likely to show increased signs of social confidence.

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) find that respondents holding distinctly different views of their social surroundings predictably used the Internet differently. Breaking down Internet use motivations into categories identified as Informational and Interpersonal, Papacharissi and Rubin determined that those who had high confidence in their social ability turned to the Internet for informational proceedings. Conversely, respondents who had less positive self-ratings in face-to-face interaction turned to the Internet as a place to socialize or pass time (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Likewise, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) report those who relied on the Internet for interaction had only an illusion of social interaction, but one that was still found to be beneficial or necessary to the user. Information exchange through the Web, no matter the motivation, still has a positive effect on the perceived development of social capital, interpersonal trust, and civic engagement (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001).

Considering the Internet makes available immediate and up-to-date news representing multiple points of view, LaRose, Mastro, and Eastin (2001) write that a diversion-entertainment factor was a significant, and in fact the most likely, predictor of Internet usage in college students. Song, LaRose, Eastin, and Lin (2004) also investigated the use of Internet in college student populations to determine what uses and gratifications most predictably lead to heavy Internet use and addiction. Many of the identified and influential uses recognized the Internet's powerful social networking

abilities. “The expectation of encountering exciting and relaxing diversions on the Internet...the possibility of developing a romantic relationship online or finding more interesting people there than in real life,” were a few of the uses for which college students might turn to the Web (p. 386). Diddi and LaRose (2006) also analyzed Internet use in college students, finding that entertainment and escapism needs positively correlated with student Internet usage. Importantly, internet sites were the most frequently used by college students to obtain news, followed by campus newspapers (Diddi & LaRose, 2006).

Stafford, Stafford, and Schkade (2004) extend the gratifications of Internet usage beyond the recognized functions of information-searching and personal satisfaction. Uncovering a third Internet gratification they separately labeled the social dimension, they acknowledge that Internet users turn to their favorite Web pages for more than just uncovering fact or passing time, as “building chat capabilities and fostering a sense of community within the context of an Internet access resource” are influential factors on generating web page traffic (p. 277). A meta-analysis of Internet uses and gratifications research confirmed the existence of three separate dimensions of motivation: the discovery of information, means to socialization, and means to entertainment (Chung & Yoo, 2006). As seen in the previous review, these are the most commonly identified reasons for users to seek and search Internet sites.

Liang, Lai, and Ku (2006) find that Internet users motivated by socialization report high satisfaction with Web site content. These findings could be explained by the fact that Web users intentionally seeking socialization are highly likely to find it on Web pages that are becoming more interactive everyday. A proliferation of feedback settings,

message boards, and blog spaces enable quick chatting and open ranges of opinions. Thus, evaluating new web material, like weblogs, by the categories of socialization, entertainment, and information – seeking becomes a logical link applying the Uses and Gratifications approach. News weblogs, the focus of this study, could potentially satisfy the three above dimensions of information, socialization and even entertainment, and the uses and gratifications approach has been applied in few instances towards this new medium (Lee, 2006; Li, 2007; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl, & Sapp, 2006).

Most uses and gratifications research regarding weblogs analyzes the blogger's motivation and presentation. For example, Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl, and Sapp (2006) examine the motivations of Polish bloggers, finding that these bloggers create blogs primarily as a form of self-expression. Trammell et al. also report that blogging is used as a way for bloggers to establish social interaction within the online communication, "another communication channel alongside such channels as face-to-face meeting and mobile communication" (p. 715). Li (2007) finds that traditional media outlets overemphasize the male blogger's impact on the blogosphere, as bloggers come from all walks of life to give a voice to the unheard. As such, Li suggests blogs are primarily a way for users to create and maintain online identities as a form of self-expression. Social identification presents itself as an important factor in why bloggers decide to post, and Lee (2006) discusses how social identification becomes a motivation for readers to visit blogs.

How readers use weblogs for information and interaction has been little studied. Lee (2006) suggests that blog readers are more likely than non-blog users to read text-heavy media like newspapers. Frequency of blog use was positively correlated to

frequency of infotainment consumption, as blog readers are motivated to consume news in many forms (Lee, 2006). In addition, blog users are more motivated than non-blog readers to seek diverse opinions on an issue and to see blogs as a form of, “self-styled watchdog” (Kaye, 2005, p. 90). Confirming previous findings, Kaye (2005) reports that blogs are a place for readers to find a sense of belonging and a wide variety of opinions on any single subject. Chung and Kim (2008) apply these findings in a sample of cancer patients, reporting that both cancer patients and cancer patient families find blogs to be useful tools through which to find emotional support, advice, and the most up-to-date health news. Weblogs, usually unedited by outside sources and written in diary form, are a logical place for readers to turn when seeking viewpoints and reflections on news relevant to their lives.

Brief History of the Weblog

Blogs have been popular for less than a decade, but already have an influence on the way that Internet users view and search the Web. Free blogging software became publicly available for use in 1999, and the estimated number of blogs available for readership is upwards of three million (Clyde, 2004). As a general definition, a weblog consists of frequently updated, written posts published in chronological order to the Web, combining a mix of personal thoughts, diary entry, and reporting on current events (Byron & Broback, 2006; Lovink, 2008). Most blogs share the four basic traits of having posts, archives, hyperlinks, and comment sections (Li, 2007), even though there are many different formats of blogs. Personal diaries, institutional blogs, topical blogs, MP3 blogs, fiction blogs, podcasts, and even vlogs (video blogs) are just a few of the many types of weblogs identified in one simple Internet search (Hill, 2006).

There are general conventions that one must recognize when writing or reading a weblog. The blog's particular genre of reporting typically utilizes an informal writing style, much more conversational, linear, and diverging from the journalistic pyramid scheme of organization. Plotnik (2007) suggests that bloggers are "word bunnies" who "propagate new words from the subcultural breeding grounds" (p. 87). In addition to writing in this casual manner, a blog often includes with its posts hyperlinks to either the original story on the Web or other topic-related discussion (Matheson, 2004). In looking at the uses and gratifications of bloggers, these online journals are used by writers for many things, including a chance to vent, receive feedback from peers, and provide news on any number of interesting topics (Clyde, 2004; Hill, 2006). Hyperlinking stories enables a writer to easily provide stories and commentary while encouraging feedback. The software behind blogging interfaces enables a writer to publish easily and create archives of past entries, so writing one's opinion or commentary onto the Web is almost as simple as pressing the "send" button to deliver an e-mail message (Hill, 2006).

Because of this ease of publication, blogs exist that provide commentary on innumerable topics and interests. Blogging has become a means through which musicians publish their songs, and salespersons market their goods, and organizations can engage in public relations tactics (Nutley, 2005; Porter, Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007). By interlinking and allowing for the development of networks, blogs organize information and generate further information in the form of comments. Marketers, public relations practitioners, musicians, politicians, and even anthropologists have discussed the benefits of publishing and being marketed by a blog site or blogger (Baetke & Baetke, 2006; Edwards, 2007; Nutley, 2005; Seipp, 2002; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007).

As blogging becomes more mainstream, a set of A-list bloggers holds a significant portion of the online readership and generates frequent return visitors. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) determine that among readers of these more popular blogs, credibility ratings of the blogs were more favorable than those of other mainstream media sources. Blog readers appreciate the openness and informality to be found in a personal diary-style report of the news, while resisting the editorial, objective processes of traditional media outlets. “As with the proliferation of television channels and radio stations, perhaps the news weblog provides another example of the fragmentation of publics into isolated consumers of information,” Matheson (2004) says regarding the influence of the Web on traditional journalism (p. 462). Blogs are no exception, allowing for the most personalized of revelations and commentary regarding any news that a blogger sees fit to print.

Whether bloggers can be considered journalists is a question up for debate, as bloggers are slowly but surely proving their influence. Changing the way one can produce and publish news, blogs allow information to arrive in the publics’ hands almost instantaneously. Quick information is a benefit which bloggers have over traditional news outlets in this “global always-on, always-linked, always immediate public conversation” (Lovnik, 2008, p. 23). Blogs allow for immediate information uploading, and for the interactivity of commenting and feedback. Blogs also allow for variety in the news, publishing stories which the mainstream media has chosen to ignore or leave unprinted (Hernandez, 2007). Because of these factors, some bloggers are changing the way that readers search for and find credible news.

Traditional vs. Online News Credibility

Traits which once defined credible news reporting are now being applied by researchers to this new form of Internet information dissemination (Grabowicz, 2003; Lasica, 2003; Palser, 2005). In online news reporting, the interactivity and sheer amount of space available to publish are benefits to those seeking to publish news. Hall (2001) states, “a thoughtfully crafted set of links, appropriately described, will set a news piece in context as well as guiding readers through it” (p. 48). In accordance with an Internet uses and gratifications approach, readers purposely seek the information channels where they feel they are most likely to find information and social opportunities (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). What traditional journalists have failed to do online, bloggers have capitalized on by using the ample space of the Web to link and interlink stories, commentary, and feedback (Lee, 2006; Stack, 2007). Thus, blogs become a hub for information and social networking activities. Mackay and Lowrey (2007) find support for the idea that some online readers are more trusting of news sites not affiliated with an institution, advancing the power of blogs in becoming a more credible form of information distribution.

Blogs have faced much criticism as a form of journalism, as blogs are non-objective and occasionally policed by no one (Kiely, 2003). A budding print journalist quickly becomes aware of the basic tenants that should govern the writing and production of a story. Mencher (2003) indicates that the ideal journalist should present a story that demonstrates accuracy, fairness, balance, objectivity, and clarity. Knowlton (1997) simply writes that a journalist’s job is to “get the truth as well as they are able” (p. 14). Discerning fact from fiction when presenting news to the public is clearly a guideline to

be followed by news reporters, and Herbert (2000) recommends that producing accurate, objective news defines journalists' job roles. Herbert states that a journalist balances the work of being a disseminator of news, an interpreter of news, and an adversary of the news committed to testing each assertion made. Through these means, a journalist becomes a credible, trustworthy source of news on which the public can rely.

Determining credibility does not just lie in the hands of the writer, as readers are just as important in determining source trustworthiness. Knowlton (1997) gives full power to the journalist to determine how to interpret traditional journalistic tenants like objectivity and source revelation, and Gardner, Benhan, and Newell (1999) write from a teacher's perspective that a source's quality of information and credibility are the two basic criteria involved in determining if a source can or should be cited in a research paper. From this teacher's perspective, academic research is always preferable. Mencher (2003) indicates that news credibility is determined by analyzing the press source's track record, motive in writing, and overall believability. Credibility evaluations are based on many different traits and characteristics, with some being superficial to the medium, some lying with the reporter, and some lying with reader perspective. No matter how credibility is evaluated from the consumer's point of view, Doherty (2005) finds American press credibility evaluations to be a current crisis; a majority of Americans doubt traditional journalists' abilities to admit mistakes, provide fair stories, and avoid the influence of major organizations and the government.

Doherty's findings might be justified by the fact that media organizations largely disseminate messages based on what they believe will appeal to an audience, and therefore sell. In the continual accommodation of media organizations to specialized

segments of consumers, the World Wide Web has become an integral part of media marketing, news creation, and the overall appeal and credibility of the news organization (Cassidy, 2007; Harvey & Rosen, 2001). Because media organizations are trying to balance an appeal to a target audience against ways to use new channels of information, Wicks, Sylvie, Hollifield, Lacy, and Sohn (2004) indicate that there is potential for journalism to become a small product in the large conglomerate empire. With access to the World Wide Web, a consumer now has more choices to consider when looking for and evaluating current and relevant news. Diddi and LaRose (2006) describe the phenomena of audiences obtaining news from both traditional and online sources, saying, “The conventional news media feed online news habits by referring their audiences to Web sites...Meanwhile, the popular online sources are ‘powered’ by content from conventional news sources. So perhaps new consumption patterns arise...due to cross-fertilization” (p. 205).

As such, traditional print news channels are steadily losing overall sales steam, and trends in the consumption of online news are showing a spike in readership (Cassidy, 2007; Hernandez, 2007). Building on the intentionality that audience members demonstrate in using the Internet for information, Rieh (2002) finds that Web page readers highly value source reputation when evaluating Web sites. In terms of predicting how one might search for a Web page, Rieh indicates that internal knowledge and desire for information greatly influence how one chooses a Web site. Infotainment, tabloid news, or what some would call gossip, is a part of this news process, consumed by a mass readership motivated by a need for information and a need for entertainment. Based on Armstrong, Keum, and Clair’s (2003) definition, tabloid news is any “celebrity-based

print media” (p. 3). Most of these tabloids do not necessarily fit into the recognized qualities that govern traditional journalism. However, Hernandez (2007) writes that entertainment journalism is blurring the lines in what is pertinent information and what is gossip, and Johnson (2007) indicates that entertainment journalism was once tolerable only on the Internet, but now has arrived in mainstream content.

Differences in traditional and tabloid journalism are primarily found in the content itself, accuracy of sources, and objectivity allowed in the reporting of a story. Baym (2007) summarizes this finding, saying, “In an age of discursive integration, the assumptions and practices of the [journalism] professional paradigm have become fundamentally complicated: contested, porous, and open to experimentation” (p. 22). New media channels like weblogs follow in this trend, offering readers a chance to create and participate in the making of a story, while breaking down many of the traditional barriers currently plaguing journalism’s old guard (Grabowicz, 2003).

How Bloggers Have Influenced Journalistic Credibility

Al Gore, in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine (Wenner, 2007), suggests in order to enter the political scene today, one must, “go into it, and use the Internet. Focus on authentic, passionate communication of exactly what you believe, and wait for people to come to it” (p. 56). Gore gives credit to the medium where true and interactive communication happens with readers: the World Wide Web. With the arrival of this interactive medium, news outlets have another channel through which to send information, and the potential for consumers to seek uses and gratifications twenty-four hours a day is recognized. However, the quickened pace of the online newsroom brings rise to various ethical and print dilemmas in the editing and prior review processes

(Kiely, 2003). In regards to weblogs, Lovnik (2008) reports that the general readership are initially quick to dismiss reporting and entertainment blogs as “cynical and nihilistic” (p. 11). Baetke and Beatke (2006) indicate bloggers have had difficulty establishing credibility as traditional news media because bloggers are not held as accountable for providing fair coverage to audiences or protection to sources. These revelations are true in some cases; however, blogs make a recognized impact on many different types of news.

Kiely (2003) writes, the “geeks and their laptops” have a mission to remake politics and, possibly, “democracy itself ... by becoming publishers on the Internet” and bypassing big media (n.p.). Perhaps motivated by the fear and power to be found in this new crop of bloggers, authorship and credibility issues between traditional and new media have been debated extensively (see Baetke & Baetke, 2006; Kesmodel, 2005; Tolly, 2007). In addition, recent instances have surfaced in which traditional media outlets were found providing biased coverage of important news events, with “Rathergate,” the Monica Lewinsky trial, and coverage regarding multiple presidential candidates as a few examples of this problem (Harper, 2004; Palser, 2005). Stovall (2002) discusses how Matt Drudge used his blog to release information that was being withheld in other news outlets; this blog was the means through which the public was alerted to President Clinton’s sexual escapades.

Although a common critique of blogs is that there is no prior review on blog postings, in this manner blogs often “out-scoop and elicit corrections from the traditional media” (Kaye, 2005, p. 91). Harvey and Rosen (2001) indicate that publics are leery of trusting online news sites because of the potential for editorial and advertising decisions

to be made by the same person, but blogs still present some challenges to mainstream media institutions. “The ability of an individual to communicate with so many people so quickly outside of the mainstream media had never has such a startling and profound effect,” Stovall (2002) writes (p. 226). More recently, and in response to an outcry for more diverse representation, some bloggers are finally being credentialed along with print and broadcast outlets to cover White House news and ongoing political conventions (Jost & Hipolit, 2006). Despite blogging being a relatively new phenomenon in reporting, bloggers are slowly gaining credibility in the eyes of politicians, marketers, and citizen readers.

Weinberger (2007) alludes to the fact that the Internet has drastically influenced and changed the way that readers evaluate sources for trustworthiness and accuracy. Using the example of the Web site *Wikipedia*, Weinberger explains that although there are no named authors, editors, or experts who write each article, the general public still acknowledges the Web site as a first place to go for basic information. Because of the signs alerting readers to mistakes, and easy access to previous and edited drafts of articles, *Wikipedia* appears to be considered an authority. According to Weinberger (2007), what is trusted knowledge “now comes from enabling us inescapably fallible creatures to explore the differences among us, together” (p. 143).

Wathen and Burkell (2002) synthesize online credibility research into a model for evaluating Web pages and information. Based on the idea that credibility largely has to do with Web site trustworthiness and expertise, Wathen and Burkell indicate that Internet users evaluate content based on factors like “relevance, currency, accuracy, and tailoring” (p. 141). Once the Web page is opened, users judge the surface characteristics, and then

content delivered by the medium. Surface characteristics of a web page prove more important in those readers looking for entertainment or diversion than in those looking for information. As such, tabloid news readers, looking for diversionary information and a way to pass time, are most likely to evaluate web sites based on surface cues like appearance, interactivity, and download speed (Byron & Brobeck, 2006; Hill, 2006).

Considering the entertainment and diversion available through the Web, some research indicates that the Internet is not working as a substitute for traditional news as much as previously thought. Boyajy and Thorson (2007) find that Internet readers consult Web sites in addition – not substitution - to other types of media. Many conclusions can be drawn from this finding, including that readers appreciate more than one perspective on an issue, and traditional news media have to be more accountable to updating Internet news at the risk of eventually losing audiences. Boyajy and Thorson suggest that the meaning of this finding for print media is particularly important, as traditional printed copy typically undergoes an extensive review process before being distributed, while online news can be posted and adjusted during and after publication.

Though the practice of journalism rests on the tenants of objectivity and fact-checking, weblogs offer a new take on journalism's old tricks. Matheson (2004) outlines three ways in which weblogs help renegotiate and encourage journalism to take place:

- 1 - Weblogs can be a space for journalistic reporting on stories for which major media institutions do not allow space.
- 2 - Weblogs challenge corporate journalism by becoming an alternative medium.
- 3 - Weblogs are “democratic, interactive space” where the reader might become the writer (p. 451).

Matheson (2004) indicates that, “The weblog provides a case study of how one form of online journalism is rearticulating existing norms, and particularly some of the epistemological foundations of newswork” (p. 444).

The weblog does have the power to change traditional news media tenants of credibility, as well as change the content desired by a technology-using readership. Hernandez (2007) reports that the lines defining differences in traditional and online journalism grow increasingly difficult to draw, but online journalists are winning the credibility battle. Online news sites and blogs allow for navigational, functional, and adaptive interactivity with the audience, meaning that the process of reporting is no longer concrete (Deuze, 2003). In discussing how bloggers generate credibility despite not heeding the traditional news format, it is important to recognize that the public turns to blogs for news that the mainstream media often ignores (Lowrey & Anderson, 2005). Outside of politics and the Drudge report, Moore (2007) reveals that a blogger was actually first to discuss the increased global use of hybrid cars, with newspapers trailing behind. Bloggers also reported the misuse of sources by CBS anchor of Dan Rather (Harper, 2004). It appears that both traditional and technological avenues of reporting could benefit from the recommendation of transparency which is important to building credibility in the opinion-based blogosphere.

The Recommendation of Transparency in Journalism

One blogger, who ironically writes under the moniker “The Masked Blogger” (2006), ponders about the current state of blogging, “Is transparency the core tenant for blogging and building trust online? Does understanding more about the individual, their background, and current interests insert context into their contributions?” (transparency,

para. 1). In this question, The Masked Blogger calls attention to a new aspect of news reporting which affects credibility online. The recommendation for transparency in journalism is a new, perhaps idealistic, goal, but how news is chosen and pieced together is more important than ever when bloggers have the ability call attention to traditional media breaches of ethic (Kaye, 2005).

Bloggers, keeping a constant eye on traditional news media, have exposed reporting flaws, and even have caused news corporations to re-evaluate their own codes of ethics (Kuhn, 2007). Lovink (2008) indicates that bloggers actually do what traditional journalism ignores, and that is allowing readers to feel a part of the newsgathering process. By generating opinion and showing that they care, bloggers do not necessarily analyze the facts, but produce and enable a human element to appear in the news. Palser (2005) describes bloggers as journalism's "backseat drivers," forcing the traditional news outlets to re-evaluate editing and news presentation. Alluding to a potential trend in blogosphere readership, Palser suggests only that, "it could be coincidence that the blogosphere emerged around the same time trust in the media was falling and political rancor was intensifying" (p. 50).

The recommendation of transparency has emerged from journalism studies and from the blogosphere as one way in which reporters might generate trust with their audiences. Gratz (2005) writes that the everyday reader should see each step that goes into developing a news story as a way to provide more understanding about the news process. Rugar (2006) indicates that in an ideal reporting world, journalists would disclose source bias and how source information is obtained, as providing this information gives context to an article. Applying this knowledge to weblogs, MacKinnon

(2005) suggests that, “a blogger’s voice and point-of-view is made very clear, and this transparency and straightforwardness about one’s personality, background, and bias are considered essential to the blogger’s ability to gain readers’ trust and build credibility” (p. 32).

In journalism and even public relations fields, blogs are helpful tools for companies to achieve transparency, as the Internet allows for more space to publish, and for more readers to provide convenient, free feedback (Byron & Broback, 2006). Ko, Cho, and Roberts (2005) reported human-to-human interaction on Web sites had a significant influence on the site user’s attitude toward the site, indicating that in some instances the information on the site is not as influential as the possibility of feeling involved with others. In addition, a positive effect on credibility evaluation is suggested through transparency, as Tormala, Briñol, and Petty (2007) acknowledge that source credibility can influence the believability of a Web site or news piece. By knowing the source, a receiver can be more confident in the information. As information confidence is one important aspect in Wathen and Burkell’s (2002) model of analyzing online credibility, Trammell and Keshalashvili (2005) find that the more a blogger self-reveals, the more trusted his or her blog is perceived.

To further the recommendations behind transparent reporting, the Associated Press (“China: Bloggers,” 2007) reports that Chinese bloggers are encouraged to blog under their real names, in addition to avoiding reporting on libelous or confidential information. Tim O’Reilly recently attempted to publish a blogger code of ethics regulating blogger information requirements, but was widely criticized for this display of pseudo-censorship (“Bloggers beware,” 2007). Most bloggers choose to remain

completely anonymous in name to protect their personal rights, be it offensive or not. It appears that the last thing a blogger desires is to be forced into any regulation at all.

However, this recommendation refers to transparency of the process of news gathering, while other recommendations of transparency reference the revelation of a blogger's interests, biases, and stories. Lasica (2003) writes that transparency has helped propel blog credibility beyond that of traditional journalism sites, as bloggers discuss the raw materials of their stories, post actual interview sources, and ask readers for feedback. Beyond providing the story behind the post, so to speak, bloggers build further credibility by revealing their sources. This is done primarily through hyperlinking, as bloggers can easily direct readers back to original material. Traditional print media have struggled to balance objectivity with this source revelation, leading to a lack of transparency on which blog sites capitalize. Heim (2007) reports that despite acknowledging the benefits of transparency, print newspaper editors have shown little interest in revealing the news process or source information beyond what is necessary. Bloggers do just that by revealing interview transcripts, photographs, source names, and more in order to bolster stories.

Transparency also has social and relational benefits. Dillon (2006) indicates it is a gutsy move to open oneself up to the Web, but potential gratifications include demonstrating interests openly, cultivating a customer or fan base, and reinforcing confidence with the audience. Li (2007) writes that blogs are a venue for developing one's identity, as "bloggers tell their own stories, discuss hobbies or interests, express opinions towards events and issues of personal experience, and present creative works" (p. 20). Bivens (2008) finds that many news organizations are turning to blogs usage to

allow for more transparency in news, as well as appeal to target audiences. Source characteristics in evaluating online news are important (Wathen & Burkell, 2002), and learning about the background and biases of an anonymous blogger could enable readers to trust the blogger. Thus, blogger transparency influences reader credibility evaluations by allowing the reader to understand the news collection process and feel a connection with the blogger through cyberspace.

Developing the Cyber - Parasocial Relationship

Linking transparency to the development of online relationships, Kuhn (2007) writes that transparency of identity is important in building trust with readership. “Blogging is a tool that enhances relationship building in cyberspace via tools and behavioral norms that are predicated on enhanced interactivity,” Kuhn (2007, p. 23) said. Because of the credit that the uses and gratifications approach gives an active audience, and through the ever-growing presence of weblogs as networks linking people, a look at the development of research in relationship management and parasocial relationships is necessary.

In the development of interpersonal relationships, factors such as proximity and attitudinal similarity between communicating parties help to diminish social barriers and foster relationships (Byrne, 1961; Michinov & Monteil, 2002; Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996; Schütz & Tice, 1997). Parties in close proximity are more likely to engage in communication activities, allowing relationships to be fostered. In addition, while effects of similarity expressed between parties can influence positive attitudes, expressions of dissimilarity can cause negative attitudes to develop (Michinov & Monteil, 2002). Self-esteem factors also influence how a person seeks communication partners, as research

indicates the more introspective and certain about oneself a person is, the more he or she will affiliate with like-minded people (Michinov & Michinov, 2001; Schütz, 1998). These findings could be due to the fact that the more aware and confident of one's opinions one is, the more he or she will want to see these opinions confirmed by peers. Thus, relationships will be encouraged among supporting and supportive communication partners.

Self-esteem also influences how the parties involved in a relationship evaluate the relationship. Schütz and Tice (1997) indicate that a person with low self-esteem will often attempt to enhance his or her own self-worth by describing affiliated partners overly positively. In contrast, a person with high self-esteem is likely to discuss his or her own traits and talents in a positive manner, drawing comparisons to other parties. In either case, the subjects of investigation look for confirmation of their self-worth by evaluating their own relationships.

With this knowledge, relationship management regarding workplace interactions among employees (Kasouf, Celuch, & Bantham, 2006; Shah, Dirks, & Chervany, 2006), managers (Erdogen & Liden, 2006; Raabe & Beehr, 2003), and even with outside publics (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Ledingham, 2006; Smith, 1998), has been researched extensively. Crosby et al. (1990) indicate that factors such as frequency of satisfaction, trust, similarities, and expertise significantly impact relational development. Trust, satisfaction, and commitment are commonly-defined goals of what is considered a successful relationship, as these three things, “are intimately entwined in assessments of the quality of a relationship” (Smith, 1998, p. 5).

Self-presentation strategies in interpersonal communication have also been analyzed to determine their impact on developing relationships (Baumeister, 1982; Berger & Kellermann, 1989; Dunn, Biesanz, Human, & Finn, 2007; Foschi & Valenzuela, 2008), where factors such as amount of self-revelation and conversation evasiveness have influences on trust and relationship satisfaction. Baumeister (1982) suggests that “self-aggrandizing” talk and competitiveness for victory are self-presentational signs often employed by those who desire to leave good impressions on others, while Dunn et al. (2007) report that humor, ingratiation, and frequent smiling are other forms of positive self-presentation. Uysal and Öner-Özkan (2007) find that perceived ulterior motives and general likeability are often evaluated through self-presentation cues, making self-presentation an important determinant in how a communicator chooses and delivers content. Interestingly, Uysal and Öner-Özkan find that in a sample of University students, participants were more likely to choose to share good news for fear that transmitting bad news might influence self-presentation evaluations in a negative way.

Because relational and presentational cues impact how and what messages are delivered, relationship management in online communities becomes an important factor (Basil & Erlandson, 2008; Brake, 2007; Killoran, 2003; Lee, 2006; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). The weblog gives the perception of proximity, instant communication feedback, and the chance for self-presentation in a manner which is non-face-to-face. Lampel and Bhalla (2007) even suggest that self-presentation in the form of displaying expertise can be seen when a Web user posts advice or information on community bulletin boards as a form of sharing or “gift-giving” (p. 100). Thus, the

opportunity for development of a parasocial relationship exists and is perhaps encouraged in the use of chat, blog, and message board capabilities of the Internet (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

The parasocial relationship, originally defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), describes the ability of a media consumer to become attached to or feel affiliation with one or more figures in the mass media. Vincent and Basil (1997) discover that college students are more likely to seek television media over print media when looking to satisfy entertainment needs, indicating a preference for watching, viewing and even knowing the characters involved in producing the medium. Because of the interactivity available through many Web sites today, and particularly in blogs where users comment and receive feedback, the development of some semblance of commonality and connection through weblogs is likely (Schmidt, 2007). Ko, Cho and Roberts (2005) find that human-to-human interaction on a Web site can influence the site user's attitude, indicating that the possibility of social interaction through the Internet is encouraged through Web communication.

Internet uses and gratifications research consistently reports that socialization is a primary predictor of Web site usage, and Chung and Yoo (2006) find that, "the need for socialization was most strongly associated with the use of human and human/medium interactive features" (p. 25). Blogs incorporating interactivity features are most likely used by those looking to network and communicate. Some research indicates that feedback features on the Web do not significantly influence Web user satisfaction evaluations (Liang, Lai, & Ku, 2006), but this finding was attributed to the fact that feedback features generally require time dedicated to monitoring a site, while a majority

of Web site readers are using the Web for its time-reducing capabilities in obtaining information. Still, with interaction happening in almost real – time, relationships are forged among readers and Web writers. In addition, mass media figures become stereotyped, hyperlinked, consumed and discussed by readers, a process relating strongly to the beginnings of a parasocial relationship.

Giles (2000), in a meta-review of the literature on parasocial interaction, defines three bases on which the parasocial relationship is developed and strengthened. Authenticity/realism of the celebrity, user context, and representation of the figure across media outlets are factors influencing consumer development of a parasocial connection (Giles, 2000). The apparent credibility of a star, newscaster, or other mass media figure, is influenced by these factors, as well. Kumar and Benbasat (2002) claim that parasocial interaction is influenced by traits like “similarity, affect, receptivity, equality, composure, and formality” (p. 7). Media users can generate feelings of fellowship with media figures through a medium which lets them remain at a distance, but still experience interpersonal cues. The Internet, which allows for spatial connectivity, acts as a social intermediary. When one social actor helps another social actor to connect over similar goals or interests, a loyal, trustful relationship is forged between the two (Kumar & Benbasat, 2002). “Identity, transparency, and accountability are linked,” Kuhn (2007) writes (p. 23).

Beatty (2006), in studying creators of celebrity fan sites and instances of parasocial interaction, found that the Web site creators acknowledge the possibility of not only interacting with the celebrity, but interacting with other fans. Many of the Web sites in this study indicated that the celebrity had some interaction with the site or contact with

the site creator. Beatty concludes the Internet might become a place that provides more than just a diversion from real life, but a supplement to social interaction (p. 23).

Linking uses and gratifications with parasocial interaction, Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) suggest that consumers who have high entertainment needs are more likely to consult entertainment news sources in the mass media. In their analysis, parasocial interaction by fans can lead the fan investigating and creating new ways of living through a celebrity, or to destructive consequences like stalking. Importantly, Spitzberg and Cupach find the celebrity worshipper is someone who has some difficulty determining a line between real and mediated worlds, indicative of the connection between parasocial relationship and uses of the Internet. Chung and Kim (2008) also find support for this active usage of weblogs, saying, “those who find the information and stories on blogs to be credible are likely to internalize that knowledge and apply it to their own lives - actively and passively” (p. 302). The generation of a figure of trust online can satisfy socialization needs through pseudo-relationships.

Schmidt (2007), in producing an analytical framework for blogging practice, suggests that certain patterns of blog usage are advantageous to parasocial interaction. Schmidt attributes the interactive process of blogging to an increase in social network capability, saying that by, “incorporating shared expectations and routines into their individual ways of handling the format, bloggers not only fulfill their communicative goals, but also reinforce and reproduce the sets of adequacy and procedural rules” of networking and media selection (p. 1423). Relationship management, or the process of generating and maintaining positive online influence with readers, is a primary factor in how bloggers write, and how blog readers respond to, postings. Blogger self-presentation

is also an influential factor in developing parasocial relationships with readers and with traditional media outlets (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Because of society's continued focus on tabloid and celebrity news, parasocial relationships with these distant media figures are also encouraged through and by bloggers.

Celebrity Worship and the Blogs

Bernstein (1992), a journalist still recognized for his work uncovering and outing the Watergate scandal, comments on the state of tabloid and true journalism by saying:

The failures of the press have contributed immensely to the emergence of a talk-show nation, in which public discourse is reduced to ranting and raving and posturing. We now have a mainstream press whose news agenda is increasingly influenced by this netherworld (n.p.)

Bernstein's "talk-show nation" is the realm of pseudo-journalism focused on celebrity, gossip, and other popular infotainment. A focus on celebrity news concerns traditional and online news producers, as publics become more intrigued by the personal lives of, "performers who appear as themselves, or as what we are gratified to think of as themselves" (Schickel, 1985, p. 11). Langer (1998) defines celebrities loosely as those who have either an elite standing in society or fleeting coverage in the news. Bill Gates and U.S. presidents are examples of the former, while Monica Lewinsky and JonBenet Ramsey are two recent examples of the latter (Fox & Van Sickle, 2001). As socialization is a widely recognized factor in Internet and weblog use, the worship and even stalking of today's celebrities induces and is induced by parasocial interaction fostered in part by mass media.

Edwards (2007) writes, that, “With even hardcore news sources like *The New York Times* and *NPR* reporting on Kevin Federline’s Brit-less infamy, rare is the blissful American who still thinks K-Fed is a brand of dog food” (n.p.). Celebrity news has infiltrated traditional news media, and has even proven profitable for big businesses due to the mass desire for this information (Poniewozik, 2007; Shao & Nichols, 2008). Again the line is blurring between what used to be legitimate news and what is now the most popular type of news. According to Edwards (2007), major gossip magazines report substantial increases in circulation, E! Entertainment television had a 17 percent increase in average number of viewers, “and that is to say nothing of the gossip blogs like Gawker and Perez Hilton that continue to cultivate a cult readership” (n.p.)

In an effort to appeal to more audience members, Armstrong, Keum, and Clair (2003) report that more and more news outlets are covering celebrity and other tabloid news, while tabloid news outlets also report on news-worthy and influential current events. Celebrities, once distant public figures, are now closer in proximity. Any person with media or blogger attention can be accessed constantly, and celebrities are even willingly stepping into the limelight to provide endorsements of products and services (Shao & Nichols, 2008). Amos, Holmes, and Strutton (2008) indicate that celebrities are generally considered to have expertise, credibility, and trustworthiness, despite publics not truly knowing much information about the celebrity. Borden and Harvey (1998) explain this phenomenon of celebrity by acknowledging that for a majority of news-consuming publics, simply “seeing is believing” (p. 16). There is no exception in the blogosphere, where writers and photographers are not hindered by space allotment or editorial discretion; most any photo and caption can be published instantaneously.

Schickel (1985) writes that because of television, celebrities have been internalized; we think we know them as if we know our friends. As such, we perceive relationships and benefits. Derrick, Gabriel, and Tippin (2008) report that an individual's self-esteem is even highly influenced when a person feels similar to his or her favorite celebrity. Fast forward a few decades, and the Internet is now the medium for which we can turn for immediate gratification, entertainment, and socialization satisfaction. Gitlin (2002) describes the public need for information as a media torrent, where, "all human beings play, but this civilization has evolved a particular form of play: wedding fun to convenience by bathing ourselves in images and sound" (p. 6). Lovnik (2008) writes that "blogs are part of a wider culture that fabricates celebrity on every possible level" (p. 28). Despite the potential for celebrity weblogs to produce parasocial interaction, very little research has been done determining the influence of this link.

Thorson and Rodgers (2006) find that parasocial interaction is fostered by giving feedback on a Web site, which generates a positive attitude towards the Web site. Most media institutions have adopted some form of online interactivity in order to generate this same positive attitude, while also incorporating blogs and infotainment news content. As tabloid fodder becomes mainstream news, celebrity gossip news brings publics and celebrities closer together (Armstrong, Keum & Clair, 2003), and celebrity gossip blogs allow a parasocial interaction to be maintained and fostered twenty-four hours a day among the blog's authors and readers (Edwards, 2007). Some blog authors who discuss celebrity news are becoming a media figures themselves. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) express, "Some [web] authors manage to create a persona, making themselves a 'celebrity' among the community of bloggers. These bloggers are among the most well-

known and regularly linked by others” (p. 968). Thus, influential bloggers begin to shape surrounding news stories through hyperlinks and comment generation. One blogger has managed to start one of the most-visited celebrity news sites on the Web, in addition to his own radio and television shows.

Who Is Perez Hilton?

Celebrity news blogger Perez Hilton, whose legal name is Mario Lavanderia, operates the heavily-visited Web site www.perezhilton.com. Most recognized by his brazen humor, grotesque cyber doodles, and outrageous hair (Mulhall, 2007; “Power 50,” 2007), Hilton has a bold personality to match his unapologetic attitude towards reporting celebrity news. Hilton acknowledges he has his own celebrity favorites and celebrity enemies, but other media outlets recognize Hilton as gaining power and influence in the celebrity news gossip industry. *New York Times* reporter Navarro (2007) has labeled Hilton, “a hard - to - ignore Hollywood player” and “pop culture phenom” (n.p.). Hilton’s life story has been featured in *Forbes*, and he has appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. He has moved from the ranks of invisible blogger to one who has made gossip his life’s work (Mulhall, 2007).

In his own words, Hilton (2007) refers to himself as a cultural watchdog who reports the celebrity news before any publicist has a chance to filter it. He satisfies a public’s need to stay informed about celebrities, saying, “I know people may dismiss what I do as being trivial or inconsequential, sophomoric, juvenile, whatever, but I know people enjoy it,” Hilton said (Leitch, 2008, n.p.). His Web site generates millions of hits each day, with some of those readers being other influential entertainment media outlets and million-dollar advertisers looking to establish connections with the blogger

(Boorstin, 2008; Stack, 2007). For example, Boorstin (2008) reports Hilton's recent 30th birthday was sponsored by Burger King and Robert Cavalli Vodka.

Boyd (2007) calls Hilton an incredible example of today's modern crossover artist, as Hilton has appeared on awards shows as a host, has provided voiceovers for popular shows like "Family Guy," and even has a successful line of clothing distributed solely through his weblog. In addition to having his own television show on VH1, "What Perez Sez," Hilton is currently working on a book, negotiating a movie deal, and remains in talks with Warner Music Group regarding his own record imprint (Leeds, 2008). Hilton even has influence on the current iTunes download charts (Tiffany, 2007), as he brought the British pop star Mika to a larger audience in America simply by dropping her name in one blog entry. Due to his popularity, Hilton acknowledges publicists seek him out and celebrities often provide him with stories, making him a press contact and his blog a hub for up-to-the-minute celebrity and music news.

Hilton's weblog focuses primarily on infotainment, or tabloid news; thus, he has exempted himself from many of the standards of traditional objective journalism. However, Hernandez (2007) reports Hilton holds himself to a higher journalistic standard than many of the other celebrity gossip magazines in the country. Hilton said, "[Other] people will flat-out print lies. I've worked too hard over two years to develop a pool of reliable sources and nurture and gain the respect of mainstream media to self-sabotage that by lying to my readers. I'm not stupid" (Hernandez, 2007, n.p.).

Armstrong, Keum, and Clair (2003) indicate that, "trend-conscious individuals likely use tabloid magazines as a way of seeing how popular culture is being implemented in celebrity circles" (p. 21). Hilton has managed to bring the business of

celebrity popular culture into the mainstream and beyond as a blogger with no fear.

“Perhaps that’s why, despite the vitriol and bile he throws in their direction, many celebrities are keen to cozy up to Perez Hilton,” Mulhall (2007, n.p.) writes. But why do news outlets, musicians, and regular Internet users choose him for their celebrity news?

Perhaps because of Hilton’s transparency and honesty with his readers, he appears to be an outsider expert with credentials, currency, and audience tailoring. Named one of the fifteen most influential Hispanics in the U.S according to his blog post, “This is A-M-A-Z-I-N-G,” on March 1, 2008, he appears to be a competent source of knowledge on celebrity news, changing the way that other news outlets choose their stories (Hedegaard, 2007). Stack (2007) writes, “In their desperate rush to keep up with bloggers like Perez...respectable news outlets flushed Ms. [Paris] Hilton’s saga out of the tabloid brush and into the spotlight, where it became a major story.” Although blogs have in recent years been a source of problematic inquiry for mass media scholars and the public alike, standards for credible news are being quickly altered by the advancement of online news. If credible news is news that has an influence on readers, then Hilton has found a functional formula for success (Ewalt, 2007; Hedegaard, 2007). While blogs regarding the entertainment industry might be viewed as misinformed or journalistically unsound by some, an analysis of the previously reviewed literature reveals that celebrity news blogs provides readers and consumers with important parasocial, informational, and entertainment-related benefits.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed, research questions and hypotheses were created to guide this analysis. First, considering Trammell and Keshelashvili’s (2005) findings

that blog users consider weblogs more credible sources of information than mainstream media sources, the following research question is posed:

Research Question 1: How do the respondents compare weblog credibility to the credibility of other forms of traditional media; what characteristics of the weblog do they use to determine credibility?

As bloggers have difficulty establishing credibility as sources of trustworthy news (Baetke & Baetke, 2006), it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1a: Respondents in this study will report weblogs as generally less credible than traditional media outlets.

Wathen and Burkell (2002) suggest that online information can be evaluated for credibility through surface and source characteristics. Source characteristics include expertise, credentials, and trustworthiness, while surface characteristics include graphics, attention to detail, download speed, and interactivity. Based on the recommendations of transparency being influential in credibility ratings, it is also hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1b: Respondents in this study will prioritize the personality traits of the blog author over superficial weblog traits when evaluating weblog credibility.

In reference to the characteristics that define blog credibility, Chung and Yoo (2006) report that not only are blog readers purposeful in their search for Internet pages, but that the discovery of information, socialization, and entertainment are the three most common and generalizable dimensions of Internet reader motivation. Applying these findings to weblog research, the following question results:

Research Question 2: What are the primary motivators for the respondents to consult weblogs?

Respondents who are seeking particular satisfactions online tend to spend more time online in search of gratification, as Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) hypothesize that users who report entertainment as a primary motivator for visiting blogs will be more likely to visit celebrity news blogs. A similar hypothesis is suggested in this research.

Hypothesis 2: Those respondents who report entertainment as a primary motivator to visit weblogs will more frequently visit celebrity news blogs.

Regarding the potential for a parasocial relationship to develop through celebrity worship motivators and blog transparency, this study focuses on celebrity blogger, Perez Hilton, who has made his biographical information public. This leads to the first research question and hypothesis regarding his transparency and its impact on Web site visitation:

Research Question 3: What factors cause the respondents to visit or avoid Perez Hilton's blogsite?

In addition to learning about Hilton through traditional media outlets, the forces that motivate one to actually read Hilton's blogsite are important. It is hypothesized that due to social motivators in readers who seek parasocial interaction (Schmidt, 2007; Vincent & Basil, 1997):

Hypothesis 3: Respondents who are encouraged by friends to seek the perezhilton.com blogsite will report reading the blogsite more often.

Factors of familiarity, a friend's recommendation, or the desire for socialization relate to the development of parasocial interaction (Giles, 2000; Kumar & Benbasat, 2002).

Perhaps the consumption of a weblog is also encouraged through relational means.

Relating to the celebrity blog, the importance of blogger transparency might prove an

important component in generating credibility. These findings lead to the following question and hypotheses:

Research Question 4: Do the respondents who are familiar with Perez Hilton's background rate him as a more credible blogger than those who are unfamiliar with him?

Hypothesis 4a: Based on research regarding transparency, it is hypothesized that those who have access to information about Hilton and see that Hilton is in the public eye ("transparent") will be more likely to see his weblog as credible or believable (MacKinnon, 2005).

Hypothesis 4b: Hilton's personal traits will be more frequently reported than general weblog characteristics as a means for respondents to evaluate Hilton's credibility.

Finally, demographic considerations will be investigated for their impact on credibility interpretations, leading to the following research question and hypotheses:

Research Question 5: Are there any differences in weblog credibility evaluation between sexes or racial groups?

Although race and educational factors have been very briefly mentioned in previous research, sex differences are more likely to influence Internet needs and uses. Bortree (2005) suggests that females will more likely than males to use blogs as ways to socially interact and generate relationships, and Li (2007) finds that males are more likely to use blogs for informative purposes rather than for socialization or self-revelation. As such, it is hypothesized that sex will be the most predictive factor in influencing ratings of

weblog and celebrity weblog credibility within this sample. Therefore, the following hypotheses are suggested:

Hypothesis 5a: Males will rate weblogs as more credible information sources than females in a general weblog evaluation.

Hypothesis 5b: Females will rate celebrity weblogs as more credible information sources than males.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to address the research questions and hypotheses proposed, the following methodology was used in the current research.

Subjects

While 310 participants were officially enrolled in the 14 COMM1000 (Introduction to Public Speaking) classes surveyed, 31 students were absent from their respective classes on survey day. Each of the 279 remaining participants completed surveys; no participants asked to be removed from the study. There were 14 surveys removed post-administration because these respondents did not meet the age requirement for participation. As a result, the final survey size was 265. As this survey was administered to a convenience sample - a recognized limitation of this study - a usable response rate cannot be calculated.

The survey was taken by 118 (44.54%) male and 144 (54.34%) female respondents, with three respondents declining to identify their sex. Respondents were asked to identify their year in school, and the following distribution was found: first-year (n = 13), second-year (n = 56), third-year (n = 114), fourth-year (n = 57), fifth-year (n = 17), and other (n = 5). Again, three respondents declined to identify year in school. Two-hundred and twenty eight respondents of the survey identified themselves as Caucasian (86%). Another 20 respondents identified as African-American (7.5%), and additional groups that each comprised less than 2 percent of the respondent population identified as

Asian (n = 4), Hispanic/Latino (n = 1), Pacific Islander (n = 1), other (n = 2), or combination of above (n = 5) in the survey. Four respondents did not identify their race or ethnicity.

Design

Perez Hilton is a source of information for readers and media outlets, and he has placed himself in the public eye; therefore, the variable of transparency, defined as the ability of a reporter to be open and available to the public regarding aspects of his or her reporting (MacKinnon, 2005; Grabowicz, 2003), was manipulated in this survey research. Subjects participated in a survey containing a 1 x 2 experimental manipulation. The independent variable within the survey was a transparency manipulation of additional biographical information about Perez Hilton provided in half of the surveys administered. The other half of the sample had no transparency information. The dependent variable was measured through a Likert scale rating of Hilton's general credibility as provided by respondents within the survey. Open response questions were used to determine how respondents justified their credibility ratings, and if Hilton's personal characteristics were a primary factor in credibility evaluation.

Procedure

A draft of the survey and manipulation were initially approved by the thesis committee. After corrections, the survey and Institutional Review Board forms were submitted to the University for final approval. The survey and information letter (see Appendices A & C) were then administered to a convenience sample of the Introduction to Public Speaking courses at this University. Fourteen of these classes were visited over a two-week period for data collection. Volunteers were recruited from each class with a

verbal invitation from the researcher to participate in survey research. Volunteers were notified that the survey pertained to one's knowledge of weblogs, that the survey was completely voluntary, and respondents had to be 19 years or older to participate in the study. The survey and information letter were then distributed to students, with one half of students receiving a transparency manipulation within the survey. The researcher remained in the room as surveys were taken in case any questions arose during the survey administration or any participants declined to take the survey. Students returned the survey to the researcher when the survey was completed and then signed a separate roster for their respective instructor indicating participation. Immediately after all surveys were returned, the roster was given to respective Public Speaking instructors, as students received extra credit for their participation in the survey.

Dependent Measures

The paper-based survey had 23 open- and closed-ended questions relating to weblog evaluations and credibility assessment (see Appendix A). In order to provide consistent knowledge to each survey respondent, definitions for "weblog" and "credibility" were provided in the beginning of the survey. The definition of weblog generated from the literature reviewed was, "a Web site where an author or authors make routine posts and users are allowed to comment/reply." Credibility was defined as, "regarding accuracy, trustworthiness, and/or expertise in a subject area." A Likert scale question was developed in order for respondents to provide a rating of the general credibility of weblogs on a scale of 1-7, where 1 was "least credible" and 7 was "most credible." Open-ended questions inquired as to the respondents' justifications for their ratings, and these responses were coded based on keywords corresponding to source and

surface characteristics of credibility rating suggested by Wathen and Burkell (2002). Keywords like “trustworthiness,” “expertise,” and “competence” linked with blog author were coded independently, as were responses including keywords regarding surface blog characteristics like “professional,” “up-to-date,” and “interactive.” Further open-ended questions asked about the amount of time each respondent spent using and posting on weblogs in order to determine the respondent’s frequency, interactivity, and familiarity of weblog use.

To determine the motivations behind a respondent’s use of weblogs, Chung and Yoo’s (2006) motivations for Internet use were operationalized into closed-ended responses addressing information, socialization, and entertainment uses. Response choices included, “check facts,” “to read alternative perspectives,” and “to be entertained.” To determine relationships between the respondent seeking entertainment and reading celebrity blogs, a question was provided regarding how much time respondents spent consuming celebrity news weblogs and other forms of celebrity. Each respondent was then asked to report if and how he or she had heard of the blogger Perez Hilton or the blog perez Hilton.com. Respondents chose between the closed responses, “Internet search,” “television,” “print medium,” “communication with a friend,” or “Other (please specify).” In this way, Hilton’s presence in the media from the respondent’s point of view could be analyzed. Skip patterns in the survey were provided so only respondents who had heard of Hilton or the blog reported how much time they spent on his blog.

The survey then requested each respondent analyze his or her knowledge of Perez Hilton and his blog based on the information provided in the survey packet. Here, the test

of transparency was manipulated. Each respondent was asked to evaluate how credible he or she believes the perez Hilton.com blog to be using a Likert scale of 1-7, where 1 was “least credible” and 7 was “most credible.” To assess the influence of transparency on respondents, seven randomly - selected classes (half of the classes surveyed) received survey packets in which copies of a *Rolling Stone* and a *New York Times* article on Perez Hilton were attached (see Appendix B). The survey encouraged these respondents to read over the articles before answering the questions about Hilton’s credibility. Respondents were also asked to indicate the likelihood that they would visit Hilton’s site to obtain celebrity news. In this way, two manipulations of the respondent’s trust in Hilton’s source credibility could be evaluated.

Respondents were then asked to provide a written explanation for their feelings on Hilton’s credibility. Through open coding of these responses, transparency was evaluated as a manipulation of credibility. Coding for these responses was developed based on respondent-generated keywords to evaluate if the respondent focused on Hilton’s personal - or transparent - characteristics when evaluating credibility. Wathen and Burkell’s (2002) quantification of Web site source and surface characteristics were again incorporated into this coding, as some respondents focus on site attractiveness and apparent recency when evaluating a Web site while others focused on blog author expertise or trustworthiness.

Finally, an open-ended question allowed respondents to further explain their views on perez Hilton.com being a credible - or not credible - weblog. This question was provided as another manipulation to determine if respondents were evaluating credibility based on the transparent characteristics of Hilton, or the characteristics of the Web site

itself. Coded responses categorized opinions of credibility as the respondent mentioned, “Hilton’s personal characteristics,” “Hilton’s popularity,” “Lack of trust in blogs,” and “Unfamiliarity with sources used,” to name a few. The survey concluded with optional demographic questions regarding each student’s year in school, sex, and race. These questions were used to determine if there were any predictive patterns in respondents’ use of blogs, celebrity news, and subsequent evaluations of Hilton’s credibility.

Statistical Analysis

The resulting data are displayed with frequency, percents, and statistical analysis using SPSS where appropriate. Statistically significant relationships were determined by chi-square, correlation, t-test, and one-way ANOVA. Significance was set at .05 for all tests. For the five open-response questions, intercoder reliability determined using the following formula comparing the degree of agreement between coders:

$$\frac{2M}{N1 + N2} \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{(where M = number of instances on which coders agreed)} \\ \text{(where N = coders' total number of questions coded)} \end{array}$$

Intercoder reliability was tested in each of the five open-response questions with between 20 and 40 responses in each question coded by two trained coders, not including the principle researcher. Reliability was 85 percent for all responses among the five open-response questions.

IV. RESULTS

Statistical tests were run in order to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions proposed. The following are the results of the statistical test measures.

Weblog Interaction

To determine familiarity and interactivity with weblogs, respondents were asked to disclose how many times per they consulted weblogs for information (see Appendix A, items 4, 5, & 6). Responses ranged from 0 to 10 times per day ($M = .7$, $SD = 1.38$). While 148 respondents (55.8%) reported that they did not consult weblogs at all, another 93 (35%) respondents check weblogs once or more per day. In addition, twenty-four respondents reported checking weblogs less than once a day (i.e., once or twice a week). Respondents who use weblogs spend a minimum of .2 hours (12 minutes) and maximum of 2.5 hours per day consulting them, with an average of .68 (40-41 minutes) hours per day doing so ($M = .68$, $SD = .54$). To further define the interaction that respondents had with weblogs, students were asked to report if they had ever written or posted on a blog site. Ninety-four (35.5%) indicated that they had done so, and 165 (62.3%) had not. Another six respondents (2.3%) replied they were unsure if they had ever written or posted on a blog.

General Weblog Credibility Ratings

Research Question 1 asked, “How do the respondents compare weblog credibility to the credibility of other forms of traditional media; what characteristics of the weblog

do they use to determine credibility?” A Likert scale measurement of general weblog credibility (1 = least credible; 7 = most credible) revealed that the credibility rating for weblogs (M = 3.38, SD = 1.37) was below the scale’s midpoint of 4 (see Appendix A, items 1 & 2). Although the most frequently selected response in this scale question was 4 (medium credibility), chosen 26.8 percent of the time, responses from “least credible” (1) to “medium credibility” (4) were chosen in 78.5 percent of the total responses.

Hypothesis 1a

Hypothesis 1a suggested that respondents in this study will report weblogs as generally less credible than traditional media outlets. In comparing other media forms of information with weblog information, only five survey respondents said weblogs provide more credible information than other types of media. Another 101 respondents (38.1%) reported blogs could be more credible “in certain instances,” and 149 respondents (56.2%) reported blogs are not more credible sources of information. Ten respondents were unsure of weblog credibility. These frequency counts support Hypothesis 1a, that respondents would report weblogs as generally less credible than traditional media outlets.

Respondents had the opportunity to explain their beliefs regarding this general evaluation of blog credibility with open response questions (see Appendix A, item 3). Responses were coded using keyword indicators to determine what characteristics respondents use to evaluate weblogs. For respondents who reported finding blogs less credible than other forms of media, blog author expertise being undefined (22.3%), blog author anonymity (17.7%), and blogs containing too much bias (16.2%) were the most often cited reasons why respondents did not view blogs as more credible (see Table 4.1).

Those who said they believed blogs could be more credible believed blogs have insider information (4.9%), media reports are often skewed (3.8%), and that blogs allow for freedom of information (4.5%). Interestingly, blog author expertise was used to explain both why blogs were credible (i.e., Blogs have insider information or authors writing about their passion), and other respondents used expertise to justify distrust in blog information (i.e., A blogs author’s anonymity is problematic to building credibility) (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: General Weblog Credibility Evaluation Justifications

Why Blogs Are Less Credible than Traditional Media	Why Blogs Are / Could Be More Credible than Traditional Media
“Blog Author Expertise Undefined” – 22.3 percent	“Blogs have Insider Information” – 4.9 percent
“Blog Author is Anonymous” – 17.7 percent	“Blogs Allow for Freedom of Information” – 4.5 percent
“Blog Information Too Biased” – 16.2 percent	“Traditional Media has a Skew” – 3.8 percent
“Blog Information Not Regulated” – 14.3 percent	
“Blogs Are Not Fact / Contain False Information” – 11.7 percent	Other / I don’t know – 3.4 percent Missing Values – 1.1 percent

Many respondents expressed strong opinions about the credibility of weblogs in these questions, with responses ranging from the tolerant to the bizarre. One respondent said, “Blogs are generally from real people/consumers and might give a more realistic opinion, rather than one [opinion] from a company or other media source.” Another wrote, “Weblogs are often personal ideas and attitudes. The authors use them to relieve stress more than inform. Traditional media tries to inform and has more people seeking it for information and therefore is held more accountable.” Another respondent claimed,

“Blogs are like the signs that bums hold except the person has a computer instead of cardboard.”

Hypothesis 1b

Hypothesis 1b, that respondents in this study will prioritize the personality traits of the blog author over superficial weblog traits when evaluating weblog credibility, was tested. Chi-square tests were employed to determine relationships between respondent ratings of weblog credibility as compared to traditional media, and a respondent's reported criteria for evaluating weblogs. Hypothesis 1b, that blog author traits would be most frequently reported as a means to evaluate credibility, was supported with significance ($X^2 = 152.2$, $df = 33$, $p = .000$). In addition, Pearson correlation tests were used to determine if the hours per day respondents spent on weblogs might be related to respondent rating of weblog credibility measured in Likert scale (1 = least credible, 7 = most credible). The correlation indicated significance at the .05 level ($p = .00$) with the correlation measured at .224, indicating a weak positive relationship between the two variables. The more time a person spends on weblogs per day, the higher their rating of weblog credibility. This finding confirms the suggestions of Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005).

Motivators for Blog Use

Research Question 2 asked, “What are the primary motivators for the respondents to consult weblogs?” Eighty-nine respondents (33.6%) reported no motivation to read blogs (see Appendix A, item 7). This response was the most frequently reported, as expected based on the previous question about time spent on weblogs. Other closed-ended responses incorporated Chung and Yoo's (2006) Internet gratifications. According

to this meta-review of the research, users purposefully seek the Internet to satisfy entertainment, informational, and social needs. Responses to the survey question included the motivations of entertainment, getting up-to-the-minute news, fact checking, and getting alternative perspectives. From these choices, 56 respondents (22.1%) reported being motivated to visit weblogs for entertainment, while 31 respondents (11.7%) noted that it was to gain alternative perspectives. Seventy-four responses fell into a final broad category for “Other/A combination of above” (23.8%). This category generated open responses which further supported the motivations of entertainment and obtaining alternative perspectives. Respondents within this category also suggested the motivator of using blogs as a way to “catch up with friends abroad” or “know what friends are up to.” Nine replied that they visited blogs to get up-to-the-minute news or check facts, and six respondents reported that they did not know what motivates them to visit blogs.

The mean weblog credibility ratings were compared between the entertainment-motivated sample and the sample that chose obtaining alternative perspectives as their motivator. For those who visit weblogs for entertainment, the mean credibility rating of blogs was 3.13 ($n = 56$, $SD = 1.22$). This rating is below the 3.38 credibility rating of the total surveyed sample. For those who visit weblogs primarily to obtain alternative perspectives, the mean credibility rating was 3.45 ($n = 31$, $SD = 1.31$), which is higher than the overall sample’s mean credibility rating of 3.38. Using t-test analysis of general weblog credibility ratings and respondent motivators to visit weblogs, these responses do not have statistically significant differences ($t = -1.15$, $df = 84$, $p = .252$). However, there is some indication that those who recognize the potential for websites to provide new or alternative media perspective likely find weblogs more credible because these

respondents are actively seeking and analyzing weblog information over superficial characteristics of the Web site. Likewise, those who visit blogs primarily for entertainment are less likely to analyze the value or credibility of blog information, perhaps explaining the lower credibility rating in this group.

Using the Celebrity Weblog

Respondents provided general information about their celebrity blog usage (see Appendix A, items 8 & 9). First, respondents reported that they spent either no time reading celebrity blogs ($n = 194$; 73.2%), less than 1 hour ($n = 59$; 22.3%) or between 1-2 ($n = 11$; 4.2%). One respondent also reported spending 2 – 3 hours reading celebrity blogs each day. These responses indicate a very low familiarity and interaction with celebrity weblogs. Besides weblogs, 112 respondents (42.3%) reported using other traditional television, radio, and print celebrity media outlets “rarely,” while 65 (24.5%) reported using these outlets “often.” Another 87 (32.8%) reported consulting no other media for celebrity news.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 suggested that those respondents who report entertainment as a primary motivator to visit weblogs will more frequently visit celebrity news blogs. A one-way ANOVA test was used to determine if the entertainment motivator was a significant factor influencing the amount of time that a respondent spends on celebrity news blogs. Time was the dependent variable and motivator the independent variable (see Table 4.2). Significance at the .05 level was determined ($F = 6.46$, $p = .000$) in the differences between entertainment and other motivators and amount of time spent on

celebrity blogs. Entertainment was the primary motivator in each time category, which supports Hypothesis 2.

Table 4.2: Motivator Frequency Among Respondents Using Celebrity Blogs

Time Spent Consuming Celebrity News Blogs	Primary Motivator for Using Blogs (Frequency Reported)	Secondary Motivator for Using Blogs (Frequency Reported)
Less than 1 hour	Entertainment (19)	To Gain Alternative Perspectives (8)
1-2 hours	Entertainment (4)	To Get up-to-the-minute News (1)
2-3 hours	Entertainment (1)	(No other motivations reported in this category)

For those who consulted celebrity news media, respondents provided the type of media outlet(s) sought for non-Internet celebrity news (see Appendix A, item 10). These outlets included magazines (15.8%), television (13.2%), a combination of magazines and television (13.6%), radio (1.5%), and word of mouth (1.5%). Twenty-two respondents (8.3%) also reported using a combination of three or more types of celebrity news media. Although many respondents did not name the specific outlets which they consulted, the magazines *People*, *Star*, and *US Weekly* were named frequently, as well as the television channels E! and VH1, and the television shows *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*. The Internet Web sites perezhilton.com, pinkisthenewblog.com, and ESPN.com were also reported.

Respondent Recognition and Use of Hilton’s Weblog

The surveyed population was almost equally divided in their recognition of Perez Hilton as a celebrity blogger (see Appendix A, item 11). One hundred and forty respondents (52.8%) had heard of Hilton prior to the survey, and 125 (47.2%) had not. In accordance with survey skip patterns, only those who had heard of Hilton prior to the

survey provided information on how they had heard of Hilton, if they regularly read the weblog perezhilton.com, and how often they consulted Hilton's blog for celebrity news.

Research Questions 3 asked, "What factors cause the respondents to visit or avoid Perez Hilton's blogsite?" Of those who had heard of Perez Hilton before taking the survey, 54.9 percent of respondents (n = 78) heard of Hilton through a television report (see Appendix A, items 12, 13 & 14). Another 22.5 percent of respondents (n = 32) heard of Hilton through communication with a friend. Additionally, respondents reported learning of Hilton through an Internet search (10.6%), print media (5.6%), and "other sources" (6.3%). Only 23 respondents of the 140 who had heard of Hilton actually read perezhilton.com (8.7% of the total survey group).

Of these 23 respondents who read perezhilton.com, 16 of them report reading the blog for less than one hour per day, and 6 of them read the blog for between 1 and 2 hours. One additional respondent clarified that she does not currently read the blog, but has in the past; therefore, she could not estimate the hours per day she spent on the weblog. Again, these results confirm that this population has little to no interaction with celebrity weblogs - and Hilton's blog in particular. Correlation and chi-square tests were employed to analyze the data for the 142 respondents who had heard of Hilton before the survey.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3, that respondents who are encouraged by friends to seek the perezhilton.com blogsite will report reading the blogsite more often, was tested. Significance at the .05 level ($X^2 = 17.32$, $df = 4$, $p = .002$) was found in a comparison of how respondents heard of Hilton and if they read the blog. Those who discovered Hilton

through an Internet search read the blog in 33.3 percent of cases (n = 5), supporting the suggestion that those more active on the Internet more likely read Hilton’s blog.

Respondents who learned of Hilton through a friend read the blog 35.5 percent of the time (n = 11). However, those who saw Hilton in a television report only read the blog 7.8 percent of the time (n = 7), and none of those who learned of Hilton through print medium read his blog site (See Table 4.3). Hypothesis 3 is supported. These findings demonstrate some predictability in what might motivate a respondent to read a blog.

Beyond being Internet savvy, having a friend discuss or recommend Hilton’s site is more likely to influence blog visitation. Media who discuss Hilton are not as influential in generating readership.

Table 4.3: Respondent Motivation to Read perezhilton.com

How Respondent Discovered Hilton’s Weblog	Percentage Of These Respondents Who Read Hilton’s Weblog
“Communication with friend”	35.5%
“Internet Search”	33.3%
“Television Report”	7.8%
“Print Medium”	0%

Hilton’s Credibility and Site Visitation

Research Question 4 asked, “Do the respondents who are familiar with Perez Hilton’s background rate him as a more credible blogger than those who are unfamiliar with him?” In order to address this question, half of the survey respondents (Condition Two) were prompted to read additional biographical materials on Perez Hilton as provided in the survey packet. (Condition One survey respondents had no biographical information provided.) After this prompt, a general evaluation was taken of the likelihood that survey respondents might visit perezhilton.com for celebrity news (see Appendix A,

item 15). This manipulation was the primary experimental design, and Table 4.4 shows the comparison of responses between conditions.

Fifty-two total respondents said that they would visit perezhilton.com for celebrity news, while 174 said that they would not. One response was not provided, and an additional 38 replied that they did not know. Of the 52 respondents who said they would visit the site, 25 of them were from Condition One, and 27 were from Condition Two. Of the 174 respondents who reported unwillingness to visit the site, 89 were from Condition One and 85 from Condition Two. An additional 20 from Condition One and 18 from Condition Two did not provide an evaluation (see Table 4.4).

Hypothesis 4a

Hypothesis 4a, that those who have access to information about Hilton and see that Hilton is in the public eye (“transparent”) will be more likely to see his weblog as credible or believable. In Condition One, Hilton’s credibility rating was 3.04 (SD = 1.46) and in Condition Two, where biographical information was provided, Hilton’s credibility rating was measured at 3.04 (SD = 1.56). There was no difference in credibility rating between the two conditions. Also, the experimental manipulation of transparency and its relationship with desire to visit Hilton’s site showed no significance in chi-square tests ($X^2 = .21$, $df = 2$, $p = .90$). Because of the lack of significance found in the differences of transparency manipulation and reported blogsite visitation, Hypothesis 4a is not supported.

Of the 134 respondents in Condition One, 18.7 percent reported they “would visit Hilton’s site,” 66.4 percent said they “would not visit,” and 14.9 percent said, “Do not know.” Of the 131 respondents in Condition Two, where biography materials of Hilton

were provided, 20.8 percent respondents said they, “would visit Hilton’s site,” 65.4 percent said they, “would not visit,” and 13.8 percent said, “Do not know” (see Table 4.4).

The survey then asked respondents to explain why they would or would not consult perezhilton.com to learn about celebrity news (see Appendix A, items 16 & 17). First, the “would consult” and “would not consult” questions were coded into categories determining if the respondent focused on the personal characteristics of the of the blogger, characteristics of blogs and Web sites in general, or personal motivation.

Table 4.4: Frequency Report of Weblog Visitation Between Survey Conditions

Survey Condition	“Would Visit”	“Would Not Visit”	No Evaluation Provided
One	25	89	20
Two	27	85	18
Totals	52	174	38

In order to begin addressing Hypothesis 4b, that Hilton’s personal traits will be more frequently reported than surface weblog characteristics as a means for respondents to evaluate credibility, a discussion of how respondents evaluated Hilton as both a credible and non-credible source of information is necessary.

Motivations for Consulting Hilton

In the “would consult” column, codes were created based on response key words in the following categories: “I’d visit to be entertained,” “I have a desire to be in the know,” “Hilton has credibility through celebrity connections,” “Hilton is entertaining,” “The site is up-to-date,” and “I am curious about the site” (see Table 4.5). Although skip patterns were built into the survey to eliminate redundant questions for respondents, 83

respondents choose to explain why they would consult Hilton’s blog, despite only 52 respondents indicating that they would actually do so.

Twenty-two respondents (26.5% of the 83 who would consult Hilton’s blog) replied they would use the blog specifically if they were bored and needed entertaining. Responses in this category included direct mention of boredom or needing to be entertained (i.e., “It’s entertaining,” “For entertainment purposes,” “If I were extremely bored,” etc.) Another 15 (18.1%) would visit the site to learn celebrity news, or be “in the

Table 4.5: Frequency of Reasons Why Respondents Consult perez Hilton.com

Respondent Motivation to Consult Hilton’s Weblog	Criteria Evaluation Focus	Number of Respondents Reporting
“I’d visit to be entertained”	On Reader	22
“I have a desire to be in-the-know”	On Reader	15
“Hilton has celebrity connections”	On Blogger	20
“Hilton is entertaining”	On Blogger	11
“Site up-to-date”	On Weblog	5
“I am curious about the site”	On Weblog	8

know.” Responses for this category included direct mention of purposefully seeking celebrity information. Common responses were, “If I wanted information on celebs,” “to find out the scoop,” and, “so I can find out what’s going on with celebs.” These above responses comprise the majority of respondent motivation for using blogs, confirming the findings of Chung and Yoo (2006), who suggest that Internet users purposefully search the Web to satisfy entertainment and informational needs.

Twenty additional respondents (24.1%) mentioned credibility or source expertise directly when explaining why they would visit perez Hilton.com. Eight of these responses

attributed Hilton's credibility to having celebrity connections, while 12 more mentioned credibility with no other explanation. Responses attributing credibility to Hilton included, "Perez spends time researching his topic," "Apparently he knows a lot about celebrities," "He is an inside source to the celebrities," "He is there with the celebrities having had real contact," and, "He is bluntly honest and tries to set up celebrities in a real light."

Eleven respondents replied that they would visit the site specifically because Hilton is an entertaining blogger. Responses in this category directly referenced Hilton's personality characteristics. Examples under this category include, "He has funny things to say," "He always has a funny twist on everything," "Perez is ferosh [a blog-speak form of ferocious]," and, "I've seen him on TV and think he is hilarious." An additional five respondents said they would visit the site because it is "up-to-date," and eight said they would visit out of "curiosity."

Motivations to Avoid Hilton's Blog

As stated earlier, 174 respondents reported that they would not visit Hilton's Web site for celebrity news. Skip patterns were written into the survey to eliminate redundant questions from the respondents, but 202 responses for this question were given. The 202 responses were coded into the following (see Table 4.6): "No interest in celebrity news" (n = 79), "Perez Hilton is too biased/lacks credibility" (n = 45), "Do not like personal qualities of Perez Hilton" (n = 30), "Would rather use other media" (n = 12), "I have no time / not worth my time" (n = 11), "Do not like blogs in general" (n = 8), and "I don't know / Not familiar" (n = 7). A more extreme response category was created grouping respondents who explained their disdain toward celebrity news in verbose terms. This category was entitled, "Celebrity news makes me sick!" (n = 10), mirroring one of the

respondent’s exact views toward celebrity reporting. The following are examples of responses from each coded category:

- No interest in celebrity news - “I’m not interested in celebrities or their lives;” “I don’t care enough about celebs to visit the site;” “I don’t really care enough about celeb gossip;” “I have no desire to find out what celebrities do. They are individuals and I respect their privacy.”

Table 4.6: Frequency of Reasons Why Respondents Do Not Consult perezhilton.com

Respondent Motivation Not to Consult Hilton’s Weblog	Criteria Evaluation Focus	Number of Respondents Reporting
“No Interest in Celebrity News”	On Reader	79
“I have no time/Not worth my time”	On Reader	11
“Celebrity News Makes Me Sick!”	On Reader	10
“Hilton is Too Biased/Lacks Credibility”	On Blogger	45
“Do Not Like Personal Qualities of Hilton”	On Blogger	30
“Would Rather Use Other Media”	On Weblog	12
“Do Not Like Blogs”	On Weblog	8

- Do not like Perez Hilton – “He looks like an idiot;” “He has nothing better to do than gossip;” “I don’t really like him from seeing him on TV;” “He is almost stalker-like;” “[He] refers to readers and himself as ‘we.’ Annoying.”
- Perez Hilton is too biased / lacks credibility – “There is no way to tell is the info is reliable or to prevent anyone from posting whatever they want;” “I would not consult this if I needed formal research;” “I couldn’t get facts from something that changes that quickly without testing or other measures;” “He doesn’t do

research. He just spouts his belligerent opinions;” “Hilton isn’t a credible name to me.”

- Would rather use other media – “I would rather consult VH1 or *People*;” “Anything really important will be on the news;” “I don’t believe he would offer any extra insight beyond celebrity info provided by other media outlets;” “I would rather stick to my TV and my magazines.”
- Celebrity news makes me sick! – “Celebrities make me sick;” “I think celeb news are a direct attack on a media that provides knowledge of pertinent political issues;” “This pathetic news only encourages and massages their egotistical complexes;” “It [celebrity news] is stupid.”
- I don’t have time / Not worth my time – “I don’t have time for celebrity gossip. There are more important issues in the world;” “I have no desire to research this on my own time;” “I’m too busy for this;” “Celeb gossip is a waste of time.”
- Do not like blogs in general – “I’m not much of a blog person;” “I never read blogs;” “I do not fully trust blogs;” “I do not believe in blogs.”

Hypothesis 4b

Hypothesis 4b suggested that Hilton’s personal traits would be more frequently reported than general weblog characteristics as a means for respondents to evaluate Hilton’s credibility. Hypothesis 4b was not supported by t-test analysis comparing the two conditions and credibility rating ($t = -.002$, $df = 261$, $p = .999$). In addition, Hilton’s personal characteristics were not mentioned more frequently as a motivator to visit or not visit Hilton’s weblog, as chi-square analysis ($X^2 = 4.84$, $df = 8$, $p = .775$) revealed no significance differences in motivation of a respondent to visit Hilton’s weblog and

frequency of Hilton's personal characteristics mentioned. A discussion of how these coded responses are related to the experimental manipulation of transparency can be found in the Transparency discussion below.

Perez Hilton's Transparency and Credibility

Every survey respondent was asked to provide a rating of Hilton's credibility as a celebrity news blogger (see Appendix A, item 18), and 263 respondents rated this on a Likert scale (1 = least credibility; 7 = most credible). The mean score of this rating was 3.04 (SD = 1.51), and 82.1 percent of all responses to this question rated Hilton between "least credible" (1) and "medium credibility" (4). Only one respondent rated Hilton as "highly credible" (7). Thus, Hilton's credibility rating in the surveyed population is just under the general evaluation that the respondents provided for weblogs as an overall source of information (M = 3.38, SD = 1.37).

A closed-ended question asked respondents to compare Hilton's credibility to other news media that cover celebrity gossip (see Appendix A, item 19). Fifteen respondents said Hilton was more credible than other media regarding celebrity news, 107 respondents (40.7%) said that Hilton was not more credible, and 116 (44.%) stated they were unsure or could not make an adequate judgment. An additional 25 respondents labeled the question as not applicable, and two respondents did not answer the question.

Open response justifications of Hilton's weblog credibility as compared to other media sources were also coded for frequency counts (see Appendix A, item 20). Justifications for the blog being credible were the blog being up-to-date (n = 1), the most popular celebrity news site (n = 6), and equal to other media in terms of reporting credibility on celebrity news (n = 6). In addition, some respondents specifically

mentioned Hilton's credibility through celebrity connections and doing his research (n = 14). Other general responses of credibility where no explanation was provided were coded into a general "Has Credibility" category (n = 4). Some respondents mentioned both positive and negative qualities about the blog site, and fell into a category of "Credible with drawbacks" (n = 7). Eight respondents indicated they had no interest in the subject matter, and two respondents said that they would rather use other forms of media for celebrity news.

Those respondents who justified the weblog's lack of credibility had responses coded in the following categories:

- Lack of credibility because Hilton favors his own opinion (n = 48). Responses included, "He makes things more juicy to attract readers," "His blog is just what one guy thinks," "He reports his own agenda and just gossips," and, "Opinion based coverage. Very biased. This is coverage based on his own experiences with celebrities."
- Lack of credibility due to Hilton's personal characteristics (n = 29). Responses included, "I think he is crazy," "He is a fool. Look at his name. It is a joke," "PH is a character. Look at him and tell me how you could ever think he was credible," and, "I would not believe much of what Hilton has to say if he was in front of me."
- Lack of credibility due to Web site characteristics (n = 24). Responses included, "It is an Internet source no backed by a school or govnt. office," "It's a blog. It can't be trustworthy," "It's appearance makes it less trustworthy," and, "Most Internet sources like this cannot prove themselves credible."

- Lack of credibility because Hilton does not cite sources/research (n = 16).

Responses included, “It doesn’t say where the info comes from,” “Not sure where he is getting his facts,” “You have to just take his word for it,” and, “If he does not have a personal relationship with the celebrities, he cannot truly write about them.”

Thirty-two respondents did not know enough to compare the blog to other celebrity media, nine were placed in an “Other” category due to their miscellaneous responses, and 59 respondents did not provide an answer to the question.

Other Influences on Hilton’s Credibility Rating

Multiple measures were taken in the survey to judge the manipulation of transparency on respondent ratings of Hilton’s credibility. First, descriptive statistics were generated for each condition. For Condition One, where respondents had no biographical information, the mean credibility rating for Hilton was 3.04 (SD = 1.46). For Condition Two, the mean credibility rating was also 3.04 (SD = 1.56). These findings show the manipulation of providing information on Hilton did not alter the general credibility rating that each sample gave Hilton.

T-test analysis determined significant differences ($t = 3.22$, $df = 261$, $p = .001$) between respondents having heard of Hilton prior to the survey and how they rated Hilton’s credibility. If respondents had heard of Hilton before the survey, they rated him more credible. For the sample who had heard of Hilton before the survey, the average credibility rating was 3.31 (SD = 1.57). For those who had not heard of Hilton, the average credibility rating was 2.72 (SD = 1.37). To determine what source or site factors were most prevalent in credibility evaluation, frequencies and percentages for the open-

coded responses were taken in each condition (see Table 4.7). Respondents in Condition One (no further information) most frequently reported wanting to visit the site out of boredom (n = 11, 27.5%) or to be “in the know” (n = 10, 25%). Five respondents said Hilton was entertaining, six said Hilton had general credibility, and two specified Hilton had credibility through celebrity contacts, making 13 responses that mention Hilton’s credibility directly. Condition 1 respondents reporting not visiting Hilton’s weblog most frequently explained this response by lack of interest (n = 39, 37.9%), Hilton having too much bias (n = 18, 17.5%), and not liking personal characteristics of Hilton (n = 11, 10.7%) (see Table 4.7).

In Condition Two, respondents also most frequently reported visiting perez Hilton.com due to boredom factors (n = 11, 25.6%). However, an additional 18 (42%) respondents in this manipulation mentioned Hilton’s credibility and ability to entertain as reasons to visit the site (see Table 4.7). The reasons that Condition Two respondents gave for not visiting Hilton’s site corresponded with those of Condition One; the most frequent answer was “no interest” (n = 40), followed by not liking the personal qualities of Hilton (n = 19), and Hilton having too much bias (n = 14). Here again, a slight increase in the frequency in which Hilton’s personal characteristics are mentioned is noted in Condition Two responses (see Table 4.7).

A chi-square test found no significance differences between experimental conditions and the respondent’s closed-ended choice to visit perez Hilton.com for celebrity news ($X^2 = .21$, $df = 2$, $p = .90$). As such, the presence of transparency information was not significantly related to credibility ratings or motivation to visit the Web site. However, Pearson correlation tests did report significance in the relationship between respondents’

evaluations of Hilton’s credibility and evaluation of general weblog credibility. With the correlation measured at .324, (n = 261, p = .000), there was a positive relationship observed in that the higher a person rates the general credibility of weblogs, the higher the person will rate Hilton’s weblog.

Table 4.7: Frequency Comparison of Credibility Evaluations Between Conditions

Credibility Evaluation Criteria	Condition One Frequency	Condition Two Frequency
Would Visit out of Boredom	10	11
Would Visit to be In-the-Know	10	5
Would Visit; Hilton is Credible / Entertaining	13	18
Would Not Visit; No Interest	39	40
Would Not Visit; Hilton is Biased	18	14
Would Not Visit due to Hilton’s Personal Characteristics	11	19

Demographic Effects

A classification section of the survey inquired as to respondent sex, race, and year in school (see Appendix A, items 21, 22 & 23). Research Question 5 asked, “Are there any differences between sex or racial groups in their evaluations of weblog credibility?” Relationships determined by race were not tested due to the highly non-normal distribution found in the convenience sample, and the resulting hypotheses are discussed below.

Hypotheses 5a & 5b

Hypothesis 5a predicted that males would rate general weblogs more credible than females would, and Hypothesis 5b suggested that females would rate celebrity weblogs as more credible sources than males. A t-test determined significance differences in the general weblog credibility ratings of male and female respondents (t = 2.44, df =

256, $p = .015$). Male respondents rated general blog credibility higher than females, with respective average ratings of 3.62 and 3.20 respectively on a Likert scale (1 = least credible; 7 = highly credible). Hypothesis 6a is supported. However, chi-square tests revealed no significant differences between the sex of respondent and respondent motivation for reading weblogs ($X^2 = 7.044$, $df = 7$, $p = .424$), although a significant difference was determined between sex and likelihood of consulting celebrity news media. Supporting Hypothesis 6b, females were more likely than males to consume celebrity news ($X^2 = 56.45$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$).

Male respondents ($n = 118$, $M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.36$) rated Hilton's credibility slightly lower than females ($n = 142$, $M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.61$), although t-test analysis did not find a significant difference between Hilton's credibility ratings and sex of respondent ($t = -1.91$, $df = 258$, $p = .057$). Pearson correlations also determined significant differences between respondent's sex and willingness to consult Hilton's blogsite for information ($C = -.242$, $n = 262$, $p = .004$), as females more frequently reported a willingness to visit the site.

V. DISCUSSION

Both general weblogs and Hilton's weblog failed to the Likert scale's medium point (4) rating of credibility in this study, even when blogger transparency was presented as a manipulation. Other forms of traditional media are still preferred to weblogs for obtaining credible information, as the blogosphere presents problems regarding blog author anonymity and expertise. One respondent wrote in explanation, "Blogs have less regulation than other media outlets and are subject to the same dubious reputation of most Internet sources." It appears from these suggestions that expertise revealed through blogger transparency would improve perceptions of blogger credibility in this sample.

Although the presentation of transparency information did not influence credibility evaluations, respondents still reported blog author identification and expertise frequently as ways to evaluate credibility. These findings indicate that within this convenience sample, respondents find that transparency should remain an important goal for bloggers - and other information outlets - to seek in order to be viewed as more credible sources. Respondents also found blog credibility problematic because in most cases, blog authors are not required to report their expertise, bias, research, or even their name when posting. This sample evidently seeks these characteristics and finds them more often in traditional media outlets.

Still, blogs are appreciated by some respondents for their lack of editorial regulation and subsequent ability to report what the traditional media ignores or edits. As

one respondent writes, “Sometimes people may be 100% truthful while the official government on a topic may be untruthful.” Another adds, “The TV and printed news is influenced by politics. One cannot always believe their side of the story.” It appears that some respondents acknowledge blogs can provide some tangible benefits to readers. In addition, the more time a person spends using weblogs, the higher the person will rank weblog credibility. This finding indicates that a familiarity with weblogs lends itself to higher credibility ratings, providing one reason why the transparency manipulation might not have affected credibility ratings. It is clear from the interactivity reports described in this sample that over half of the sample had never used blogs. Many respondents did not use and were not motivated to read weblogs, and generated lower ratings of weblog credibility as a result of this lack of usage.

Wathen and Burkell’s (2002) factors influencing computer-based media credibility explain that source competence, trustworthiness, and credentials are evaluated separately from site characteristics. This finding was also partially supported in the current study. Hilton’s personality characteristics directly relating to competence and credentials were mentioned often by respondents as a means to judge sites, followed in priority by evaluation of superficial characteristics of the medium. Fans of the weblogs praise blogs because they can be updated constantly, as one respondent wrote of Hilton’s site, “I visit this blog because it provides info on celebrities and other current events faster than other sources.” Other respondents beg the question of credibility relating to blogs, saying that, “Blogs cannot be credible because they are blogs.”

The purposeful seeking of Web information suggested in Internet uses and gratification research were also indicated in this survey. The most popular motivator for

one to seek blogs was entertainment, followed by seeking new forms of information. Socialization was also listed as a motivator, as Web searchers desired to use blogs as ways to interact with friends. Spitzberg and Cupach (1997) hypothesized that those who were motivated by entertainment were more likely to read celebrity news, and this suggestion was supported by the higher frequency that entertainment-motivated respondents consulted Hilton's Web site. The general survey group replied with a positive desire to visit the blog 19.7% of the time, but those who were motivated by entertainment reported the desire to visit at a slightly higher percentage (25%), supporting again the purposeful intentions with which Internet users search for and read Web pages. Entertainment seekers are more likely to seek celebrity news in this case.

Research Question 3 inquired as to the influence source factors have on respondents using the Internet. This sample reported minimal time spent on celebrity weblogs, and a majority of respondents use celebrity media rarely if at all. As a result, the medium through which a respondent heard of Perez Hilton significantly predicted if the respondent would later visit perezhilton.com. Those who learned of Hilton through the Internet were likely to read the blog, again confirming that interactivity on the Web leads to positive evaluations of Web sites. However, a more likely predictor of visiting Hilton's site was seen in whether or not the respondent had heard of Hilton through a friend. A link to parasocial interaction through blog visitation is established in that socialization off-line can be supported through online means (Schmidt, 2007).

Beatty (2006) reported that Web users occasionally generate parasocial interaction through the Internet as a supplement to the social activity occurring in real life. The current research supports aspects of this suggestion, as communication with

friends caused a heightened probability of blog visitation within this sample. Through reading the blog site, a parasocial relationship is developed to support real relationships, as respondents can become “in the know” on the latest gossip by reading. Due to the surveyed population’s low report of celebrity media consumption, blog reading is portrayed as a supplemental form of parasocial interaction, and not a replacement for real-life interactivity, in accordance with Beatty’s (2006) conclusions.

This research study did not find significance in its manipulation of blogger transparency, but some interesting indications of transparency and parasocial interaction were observed. First, in both manipulations, a majority of respondents indicated that they would visit Hilton’s blog site “to be entertained.” However, those in Condition Two who had access to biographical information more frequently used Hilton’s personal characteristics to justify their attitude toward the blog. Addressing RQ5, those who knew Hilton’s background did not find him significantly more credible, but they did prioritize his personal characteristics slightly more highly. It appears that the more a respondent knew about a blogger, the more likely he or she would use this information in the evaluation, and perhaps prioritized it over site characteristics or personal motivations. Positive or negative use of the information could not be determined, but in Hilton’s case, it appears that the additional information in some ways made the blogger appear less credible. This finding was reinforced in the reports of how respondents heard of Hilton and correlation with likelihood of reading his blog; those who learned of Hilton through print or television media and could experience Hilton independently of the blog were less likely to read the blog.

Based on the parasocial interaction research of Kumar and Benbasat (2002), these findings can be explained. Kumar and Benbasat indicate that parasocial interaction is encouraged by perceived similarities, equality, formality and receptivity between source and reader. Because of Hilton's presence in the media, and the transparency manipulation, respondents had a chance to judge (with brief information) these factors. Perhaps the lack of increase in credibility ratings was due to the fact that with more information, respondents could clearly discern a lack of similarity, equality, and receptivity between Hilton and themselves. After all, the most common responses justifying the weblogs lack of credibility were readers having no interest, and then Hilton's bias, lack of credibility, and potentially offensive personality traits. As one respondent wrote, "I have seen Hilton on TV, and he does not have the appearance of a credible person."

Certain credibility evaluations could be predicted based on interactions with demographic characteristics. Due to the highly abnormal distribution of race in the survey population, relationships predicted by race were not tested. However, sex did prove a significant factor in determining relationships. Females rated Hilton's credibility higher, and were more likely to visit Hilton's site for celebrity news, even though no significant relationship was determined between sex and motivation to visit weblogs. Females were more likely to consult celebrity news in general, even though this relationship did not correspond with likelihood to be motivated by entertainment. It logically follows that female respondents are more likely to note Hilton's credibility due to celebrity connections, popularity, and equivalence to other media because females see these things

in the other celebrity media they consume. Thus, females are made aware of Hilton's popularity and celebrity connections through media interaction.

Though the transparency manipulation in the study did not find significant differences between experimental condition and credibility evaluation, aspects of transparency like source characteristics and expertise were defining factors in how respondents rated credibility and evaluated Hilton's weblog. Knowledge of blogger sources, expertise and bias are integral factors as reported by this survey audience, but bloggers still have many more people to convince of their credibility. Although bloggers might be participating in parasocial interaction practices, respondents in this survey consult blogs mainly for entertainment, but transparency and credibility ratings were not related. The following will further explain known limitations to this study.

Limitations of the Research

First, a convenience sample was utilized. Although there were a normal distribution of class ranks represented within the sample, race and sex were unevenly distributed. The student population also indicated a very low interaction with weblogs and with celebrity news overall, which might explain in some part the lower-than-average ratings of credibility in both general and celebrity news blogs.

In addition, the issue of respondent self-reporting is problematic. Open response questions were used to support all research questions, but one can never trust that respondents report accurately or honestly to the researcher. For this survey, one problem within the survey was the manipulation, as a researcher cannot guarantee or be assured that survey respondents in Condition Two read the attached biographical information

when prompted. This factor might have altered the significance of the transparency manipulation.

Because there is little to no research on transparency, this study just scratches the surface of developing an appropriate methodology for testing credibility evaluations and transparency factors. Although survey administration is a direct way to generate responses and explanations for credibility, other measures such as face-to-face interview might be more appropriate for getting the more detailed responses and noting self-presentation styles.

Finally, there is potential that the very subject matter of the survey, blogger Perez Hilton, served as an extreme or outlier in evaluating credibility through transparency. Although Hilton was chosen for his range of influence in pop culture, popularity of blog, and availability of biographical material for the transparency manipulation, it is acknowledged that Hilton has a flamboyant - almost offensive - personality which some respondents mentioned in their credibility evaluations. Although the biographical information came from the sources *Rolling Stone* and *New York Times*, respondents might have still formed their own strong opinion about Hilton prior to survey administration, and no amount of manipulation or information would alter these opinions.

Further Research

Although transparency is a recommendation surrounding journalism institutions and bloggers alike, very little research has been done testing the results of transparency as reported by the consuming audience. Building on the results and limitations mentioned in this study, recommendations for further research address sample generation, manipulation type, and blogger choice. First, different survey populations should be

generated in and outside of educational institutions. Random samplings of a population, or targeted samples of particular majors might yield significant differences in evaluation. Certain majors, like information science, public relations, or journalism, might value transparency in different and unreported ways. Age and sex factors should be manipulated in further tests utilizing both male and female blog readers to determine effects due to similarity factors. Also, samples using respondents who are more familiar with blogs could generate different ratings and justifications for blogger credibility than the ones generated from this sample. Manipulations of transparency could and should be built into computer-based or other forms of survey where respondents are forced to read or at least see the biographical information before generating credibility ratings.

Also, transparency might become a factor in the likelihood that Web readers develop parasocial relationships through other types and genres of weblogs. If bloggers release more personal information, readers will view the blog as more credible, and readers will visit more often. As more bloggers continue to make personal information more available, further expectations and impressions about the blogger, as well as parasocial relationships, may develop. Again, this is an area of research that needs to be developed for its potential impact on socialization procedures in an evolving, technology-based world.

It is suggested that future research using bloggers outside of the celebrity news genre of reporting would yield important contributions to this line of research. Although some populations report using blogs for entertainment (making celebrity news blogs an appropriate venue for research), other populations use blogs primarily for information-seeking, and political or current event blogs would be more subject-appropriate. The

trend of popular television news anchors and newspaper reporters maintaining blogs could lend itself to study in parasocial relationship development and a switch from traditional to new media dependency for information. As shown in this study, the strength of motivation to visit and familiarity with blog author can be significant influences on weblog use.

Concluding Statement

According to the results of this research study, bloggers have a long road ahead toward developing a credible image to audiences. Interestingly, in order to develop credibility, it appears that bloggers need to work to overcome the very issues of anonymity and bias audiences perceive as problems, but many bloggers appreciate as a benefit of the medium. Relatively low weblog credibility averages found in this study are potentially due to the fact that this population had little to no interaction with weblogs prior to survey administration, but weblogs were still rated as less credible than traditional media outlets. Transparency did not prove a significant factor in determining audience-generated credibility ratings, although elements of blog author expertise and personal characteristics were highly prized as means of credibility determination. Indicators of parasocial interaction were found in the results, as survey respondents were more likely to visit Hilton's blog, regardless of credibility evaluation, if they he or she had heard about the blog from a friend. Seeking celebrity news is one way in which respondents can complement real social interaction through parasocial activity, and Hilton's blog provides a popular and potentially credible outlet in which to satisfy this particular need.

Although Hilton's credibility ratings were low in this sample, respondents still evaluated Hilton's credibility based on their interest in the subject matter, and Hilton's personal appeal. As such, this research begins to determine how bloggers may or may not develop credibility through being transparent with their audience. The influence of background information on credibility evaluations had some, albeit not significant, influence on credibility in both positive and negative directions. One respondent provided a summation of this, and a direction for future research, as he discussed evaluating blogs, saying, "Who wrote it? Are they just random people or professional critics? Are they so concerned with being entertaining that they forgot to mention why they were qualified to comment? How do they know this?" These questions are important considerations for scholars, journalists, and bloggers alike.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Weblog Credibility Survey

Voynich - Weblog Survey

General Weblog Evaluation- Please consider your knowledge of weblogs to answer the following questions.

For this survey, a “weblog” is considered a Web site where an author or authors make routine posts and, users are allowed to comment/reply. “Credibility” is generally defined regarding accuracy, trustworthiness, and/or expertise in a subject area.

Q1. On a scale of 1 – 7, with 7 being “most credible,” do you believe that weblogs can be credible sources of information? (circle appropriate answer)

Least credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Most credible

Q2. Do you consider weblogs as more credible sources of information than other types of traditional media, such as television or printed news? (circle appropriate answer)

- 1. Yes
- 2. No
- 3. Only in certain instances
- 4. I don't know

Q3. Please explain why you think blogs may or may not be more credible than other media outlets in the space provided below:

Weblog Usage – For the next few questions, please think about your own usage of weblogs to complete the questions.

Q4. On average, how many times do you consult weblogs per day? (Please write in the appropriate response)

Q5. On average, how many hours per day do you spend reading the content of weblogs? (Please write in the appropriate response)

Q6. Have you ever written or posted on a blog site?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know
4. Not applicable.

Q7. What motivates you to visit and read blog sites? (circle all that apply)

1. I do not read blogs.
2. To be entertained
3. To get up-to-the-minute news
4. To check facts
5. To read alternative perspectives
6. I don't know.
7. Other (please provide answer)

Q8. On average, how many hours per day do you spend reading **celebrity news** blog sites? (Circle appropriate answer)

1. 0 hours
2. less than 1 hour
3. between 1-2 hours
4. between 2-3 hours
5. between 3-4 hours
6. between 4-5 hours
7. More than 5 hours (please provide estimate _____)

Q9. Do you consult television, print, or other types of non-Internet based media for **celebrity news**?

1. Yes, often
2. Yes, rarely
3. No (Skip to Q11)
4. I don't know

Q10. What other types of celebrity news media do you consume? (Please specify)

Q11. Outside of this survey material, have you ever heard of the blogger Perez Hilton?

1. Yes
2. No (skip to Q15)
3. I don't know

Q12. How did you first hear of the blogger Perez Hilton or the blog perez Hilton.com?

1. Through an internet search
 2. Through a television report
 3. Through a print medium (magazine or newspaper)
 4. Through communication with a friend
 5. Other (please explain)
-

Q13. Do you read Perez Hilton.com?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know

Q14. On average, how many hours per day do you spend reading Perez Hilton.com celebrity news blog site?

1. 0 hours
2. less than 1 hour
3. between 1-2 hours
4. between 2-3 hours
5. between 3-4 hours
6. between 4-5 hours
7. More than 5 hours (please provide estimate _____)

For the next few questions, please scan over the blog information provided in this survey packet.

Q15. Based on the information provided in this survey packet, would you ever consult Perez Hilton.com blog to learn about celebrity news? (circle appropriate response)

1. Yes
2. No (skip to Q17)
3. I don't know

Q16. Why would you consult Perezhilton.com? (please answer in the lines below)

Q17. Why would you not consult Perezhilton.com? (please answer in the lines below)

Q18. Based on the information provided in this survey packet, would you consider Perezhilton.com to be a credible celebrity blog? Please rate based on the following scale: (circle appropriate response)

No credibility 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly credible

Q19. Do you feel that Perez Hilton's blog is more credible than other celebrity media that you consume?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know
4. Not Applicable

Q20. Reflecting on the answers provided above, please describe why you would or would not consider Perez Hilton to be a credible celebrity blog.

Classification Section – Please mark the appropriate answer. Answers to this section are not required.

Q21. Are you:

1. Male
2. Female

Q22. Which of the following best describes your classification in school?

1. First-year
2. Second-year
3. Third-year
4. Fourth-year
5. Fifth-year
6. Other (please specify) _____

Q23. Which of the following best describes your race?

1. African-American
2. Asian
3. Caucasian
4. Hispanic/Latino
5. Native American
6. Pacific Islander
7. A combination of the above
8. Other (please specify) _____

Thank you very much for you time. Your opinions and comments are extremely appreciated.

Appendix B: Transparency Manipulation Attachments

New York Times – July, 29, 2007

Love Him or (He Prefers) Hate Him

By MIREYA NAVARRO



Steve Fenn/ABC

Perez Hilton, as a host on “The View” and mingling at a VH1 awards show

MARIO ARMANDO LAVANDEIRA JR., better known as Perez Hilton, the self-proclaimed “Queen of All Media,” clearly operates by media rules of his own.

Take a recent week from his July datebook: On a Friday morning, he was sparring with Joy Behar and Elisabeth Hasselbeck on “The View” about the not-so-nice dish on his celebrity gossip blog, Perezhilton.com. The next Monday, he made a cameo appearance on Victoria Beckham’s reality special on NBC, followed by Kathy Griffin’s reality show on Bravo on Tuesday. Then he wrapped up the week with a “Nightline” profile on Friday.

After all that dignified mainstream exposure, he challenged a rival to a hot-dog eating contest on a paparazzi-patrolled block of Los Angeles, and the next day exposed himself to a camera crew from the celebrity news Web site TMZ.com, which merrily posted the footage.

At present, sitting at a Cuban restaurant for an interview and picking at his ropa vieja (which he promptly dismissed as inauthentic), Mr. Lavandeira said that even he himself, who has seen his share of the baffling and surreal since coming to Hollywood, is surprised at his own rapid ascent.

“I’m doing things on my own terms,” he said. “I don’t have to answer to anyone but me.”

In barely three years, Mr. Lavandeira, 29, has risen from the blogosphere to reap some of the same fame and notoriety as the entertainers he celebrates and humiliates daily on his Web site.

With his shameless self-promotion and buffoonish appearance, Mr. Lavandeira, a childlike bear of a man, has become a hard-to-ignore Hollywood player.

But what game he is playing is hard to define. One day he was a struggling actor, paying bills with nonglamorous day jobs (publications manager for a gay organization; publicist for trade shows; a reporter for Star magazine, which fired him). The next day, he was an orange-haired pop culture phenom....

Posted Nov 01, 2007 11:17 AM



Perez Hilton: The Queen of Mean

How a Pudgy TV Addict from Miami Became the Most Hated Man in Hollywood

ERIK HEDEGAARD

As a child, Mario Lavandeira spent most of his time in bed, watching TV. He watched *Friends*, *Melrose Place*, *She-Ra*, *He-Man*, *G.I. Joe*, *The Wuzzles*, *Snorks*, *Transformers*, *Thundercats*, *The Facts of Life*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, the talk shows, the soaps and all the MTV he could. He glued himself to the tube for hours on end, usually dressed in just a T-shirt and shorts. His parents allowed this. He didn't even have to get up for dinner. His dad, who hung wallpaper for a living, delivered Mario's meals to him on a tray. He may have been picked on at school, because he was chubby and effeminate, but in bed he was top dog. Nobody pinched the fat on his back there. He was in charge. It's part of what made his childhood so special, so delightful, so memorable, so fun.

In the future, though, what would become of a child such as Mario? In fact, what *should* become of a child such as Mario? His mom thought he'd make a good lawyer. The way it turned out, Mario came out of the closet, changed his name, dyed his hair, gussied himself up, glued himself not to a TV but to his laptop and became Perez Hilton, of perezhilton.com, which draws about 7 million visitors every day to see what the self-styled Queen of All Media, twenty-nine years old, is up to now.

What he does with his blog mainly is scrawl nasty, snarky comments on pictures of young Hollywood-type celebrities — Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Nicole Richie — and hand-doodle suspicious-looking little white dots around their noses, mouths and nether regions. It's lowest-common-denominator stuff, totally debasing, totally now, totally like he's getting even with those kids who pinched the fat on his back, and it's turned him into a sensation. He's got a book deal. His chubby cheeks, pointy teeth and obnoxious-gay mannerisms have enlivened shows like *The View*. When he reports that Fidel Castro is dead, legitimate news outlets take him seriously (for a second). He's being sued by DJ Samantha Ronson for \$20 million, for calling her a "toxic," no-good friend to Lindsay Lohan — a true sign of arrival. Also, he's been banned from the Chateau Marmont for no reason other than on general principle. ("Hey, I love that kind of thing," he says. "It means I'm doing something right!") More recently, he got his own reality series on VH1, called *What Perez Sez*, about him hobnobbing with celebs. In fact, he's become one of them now — a star, influential and to be reckoned with. The first episode boosted ratings among eighteen- to forty-nine-year-olds by 112 percent and featured Hilton teaching sweetie-pie singer Mandy Moore how to grind on a stripper pole — and maybe she should run her tongue along the pole while she's at it.

Appendix C: Respondent Information Letter

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION AND
JOURNALISM

Information Letter for Research Study Entitled

A Truly Open Forum: Blogger Transparency and Credibility in the Blogosphere

You are invited to participate in a research study focusing on the uses and evaluation of credibility determined by weblog users. This study is being conducted by Melissa L. Voynich, graduate student of Auburn University in the Department of Communication and Journalism. I hope to further evaluate current recommendations for blogger credibility by uncovering student perceptions and uses of weblogs regarding celebrity news. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a college-enrolled student taking classes in the Department of Communication and Journalism. You must be at least 19 years old to participate.

If you decide to participate, you will fill out this paper-based questionnaire that will take less than 20 minutes to complete. Your participation is solicited, although strictly voluntary. While your participation is voluntary, you will receive ten points on your class participation grade for your participation.

The risks associated with participating in this survey are the potential for coercion and breach of confidentiality. In order to alleviate these risks, your instructor will leave the classroom, and I will remain to administer the survey. Participants will sign a roll sheet indicating their presence for the survey, and this sheet will be given to the instructor of this class after all surveys are completed. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings; thus, any information obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous.

You may withdraw from this study at any time by simply not completing the survey and returning it to the survey administrator. Finally, information collected through your participation may be published in a professional journal and/or presented at a professional meeting. No individual responses will be presented or published, as any information obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University of the Department of Communication and Journalism.

If you have any questions, you are invited to contact Melissa L. Voynich at voyniml@auburn.edu, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. You may keep this letter for your records. For more information regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or email at hsubjec@auburn.edu or IRBchair@auburn.edu.

The Auburn University
Institutional Review Board
has approved this document for use
from 1/7/08 to 1/6/09
Protocol # 07-277 EP 03.01

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HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO.

Please continue with the survey if you wish to do so. If you wish to end your participation, please return the survey to survey administrator.

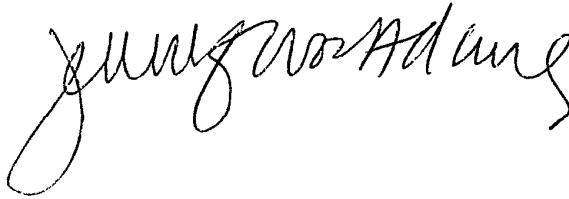
Thank you for your time.

Melissa Voynich



Date 1/30/2008

Dr. Jennifer Wood Adams, Thesis Committee Chair



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