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An assessment of the techniques and strategies used by South Africa's three top news sites to establish and maintain credibility.

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Abstract

An assessment of the techniques and strategies used by South Africa's three top news sites to establish and maintain credibility.

With news media credibility at low ebb and under scrutiny from an increasingly critical audience, this research seeks to identify the strategies and techniques used by three prominent South African news sites in the construction of their acknowledged credibility. While academic research into South African online news credibility is lacking, ample such research exists in the US and Britain. This paper draws on leading studies conducted in those countries and establishes a list of key credibility techniques and strategies used by the best news sites, which serve as a guideline for the South African context and informs this research.

The findings suggest that the existing credibility of the sites examined stems principally from the status of their parent brands. It further indicates that the sites have limited repertoires of techniques and strategies to sustain such notions of credibility. The favoured strategy is speedy updates, possibly because it is the most observable, is easy to implement and offers the audience instant gratification. Other important techniques, which indicate a more genuine commitment to credibility, are often lacking. Furthermore, the findings point to a gap in online media credibility research in South Africa and suggest that the most respected news sites in this country show little commitment to strategies that would support authentic credibility.

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Research topic

An assessment of the techniques and strategies used by South Africa's three top news sites to establish and maintain credibility.

1. Introduction

The Internet may be the defining medium of the 21st Century. This is due to its power to distribute information through the "entire realm of human activity" (Castells, 2001). In terms of the exchange of knowledge, media observers and scholars in the sociology of communication regard the Internet's chief value as being to facilitate global exchanges of information and communication among geographically dispersed people at relatively low cost compared to print and television. It offers Web-enabled citizenry the historically unprecedented scrutiny of, access to and interactivity with the news product itself (Castells, 2001; Gillmor, 2005).

This research concerns itself with the mechanisms used by South Africa's leading serious news sites - namely *News24.com, iol.co.za* and *mg.co.za* – to uphold their credibility.

A sociological approach, together with critical political economy of the media, is the backdrop to the theoretical framework. The two ultimately merge in McNair's proposed Chaos Flow model, which takes into account the impacts of factors in the process of news production (McNair, 1998, p. 162-166).

Critical political economy is a useful point of departure because it examines questions of equity and the public good, which are fundamental to journalistic ethics. It distinguishes itself from other theories in that it delves into ways in which media is shaped by social, political and economic structures (Golding & Murdock, 2000). However, as McQuail points out, media systems are not administered by a single, "pure" theory and practice seldom adheres to any theory (McQuail, 1987). Therefore, this research examines the sociological influences, that is, the deliberate strategies and techniques websites may use to create credibility, as well as the day-to-day influences impacting professional online news editors, journalists and newsrooms which can help shape the credibility of the final product.

It is worth noting that online journalism falls into the same categories of discussion as traditional media. Since much of the content in online news is gathered either from a parent publication or from news wire services, there is some debate about whether online journalism can be considered "real journalism". Today there is broad acceptance among academics and media observers that the online variety is as "real" as traditional journalism, just new and in many ways different.

In *We, The Media* Dan Gillmor (2004) examines the development of journalism from its traditional roots into its current form, suggesting that online journalism is the ultimate in personal journalism. He points out that such change is not new in the history of the press. Deuze proposes that online journalism can be seen as simply another form of journalism (Deuze, 1998). While new forms of ethics unique to

Internet journalism may emerge over time, in essence it remains journalism and should therefore abide by the same fundamental ethics that guide traditional journalism (Osborn, 2001).

It is taken as understood that the dissemination of news is historically crucial to the success of democratic society (McChesney, 2000; Bagdikian, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Both governments and traditional media in industrialised nations have been influenced by the Internet. The capacity of Internet Communication Technology (ICT) to reach the public in ways that older media cannot underpins these changes. The dissemination of information is relevant to the forming of public opinion and decision-making. It contributes greatly to the protection of democratic values by encouraging diversity and the free expression of opinions. Therefore, it would follow that online news from respected media brands can increase transparency and accountability in government behaviour as well as the exchange of information in society. It is therefore obvious that media credibility matters equally online – some would argue that it matters more – as it does in traditional forms of media (Lascia, 2002).

2. Aim and Rationale

Lack of credibility is among the most critical problems facing the media today (Arant & Quitney 2000; Schechter 2000; PEJ 2005; Pew 2005). The problem is not limited to traditional media, but affects all forms of news.

Credibility in the media speaks directly to matters of civil society since the journalistic media has, in McNair's view (1998), become "synonymous with the public sphere" and is:

> "…rooted in its discursive status as 'truth'; its ability to mobilise belief and consent (actively or passively) through the telling of stories which are credible *because* they are journalistic. The producers of journalism cannot take this credibility for granted but must constantly assert and reassert their status through codes and conventions which signify 'truth' and 'believability' to the audience" (McNair, 1998, p. 57).

Given the medium's interactivity and transparency which allows news – whether or not the facts have been verified – to be quickly and easily electronically manipulated and disseminated, credibility in the online media is as much implicit in debates around press freedom and the fourth estate as it is in traditional media and relies on the safeguarding of high ethical standards (Glaser, 2005; Lascia, 2002).

In the US, media institutions including the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the Project for Excellence in Journalism and numerous other media training and watchdog organisations, regularly conduct detailed research into media usage, accountability and public perception via public and professional credibility surveys and studies. In 2006 the Online News Association (ONA) recorded 70 media site-monitoring surveys (ONA, 2006). Prominent research into digital media is conducted at many universities. Among the most prestigious are the Media Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); Leicester University's Centre for Mass Communications Research (UK); the University of Southern California's Annenberg School Centre for the Digital Future; the University of Missouri's School of Journalism and Harvard University's Nieman Foundation. There are also industry initiatives such as The Journalism Credibility Project (US), the Online News Association's (ONA) Credibility Project and the ongoing American Society of Newspaper Editors' (ASNE) nationwide credibility surveys.

Current debates among media educators and organisations make it clear that journalism in South Africa faces many of the same challenges as it does in other industrialised nations and problems around media credibility are high on the list of concerns among media monitoring organisations (Sanef, 2005). While credibility surveys and research are common in the USA and Britain, the same cannot be said of South Africa, where such research is rare. Apart from traffic figures and user statistics such as those provided by the Online Publishers' Association (OPA) and World Wide Worx, there is comparatively little published research into South Africa's news sites.

This paper intends to add to the body of research in South Africa in understanding what techniques and strategies three of South Africa's leading news sites use to achieve credibility. Whether or not these sites succeed in being regarded as credible, or the degree to which they do so, is not the focus of this study. Web traffic statistics

provide evidence that the most educated, affluent and influential sector of South African society has access to the Internet. This sector regularly accesses the three sites in significant numbers. Therefore credibility is assumed for the purpose of this paper (OPA, 2005, 2006; Walton, 2006; Goldstuck, 2005). This paper does not seek to address the vast landscape that is credibility in the online news media. Instead, it attempts to understand how news sites create or advance their credibility in spite of the challenges inherent in the South African online news environment. The areas of interest in this research are content, technology and revenue, which are inter-related and fit into the broader categories of political, social and economic media power.

3. Theoretical framework and literature review

3.1. Introduction

The theoretical landscapes sketched in this chapter play out in online news publications in much the same way as they do in print. However, they have the added impact of digital technology that allows the transfer of knowledge and information at incredibly high speeds across political and geographic boundaries.

McQuail (1987) emphasises that theories of media are at best "fragmentary and selective, sometimes overlapping and inconsistent, often guided by conflicting ideologies and assumptions about society" and adds:

> "Virtually no actual media system is governed by any one 'pure' theory of the press, nor does practice always follow what seems to be appropriate theory very closely" (McQuail, 1987).

This is particularly true in the case of new media, for which theories of media are still being developed and for which traditional media theory can be inadequate. This research concerns itself particularly with theoretical approaches to the power of the media and considers those theories that fall within critical political economy thinking, as well as taking into account the sociology of journalism.

This chapter looks at the strengths and weaknesses of traditional media theory, against a backdrop of the influence of technology and globalisation, and finally argues for the adoption of McNair's Chaotic Flow model, which is seen to better serve new media (McNair, 1998, p.33,141,162, 165). The following pages examine theories of professionalism in journalism, look at how and where notions of credibility arise in media theory and position it in relation to these theories.

3.2. Globalisation

During the late 1900's major media businesses implemented vertical integration strategies whereby they not only produced content but also owned the distribution channels, thus securing multi-format outlets for their products. By the end of the century a spate of mergers had changed the face of media ownership. Today the US media is dominated by a handful of mega-companies.

Critics, notably McChesney and Bagdikian, are vocal in their concern over the fact that a handful of titanic companies have taken control of the world's mainstream media. That these companies are engaged in a conspiracy to annihilate democracy and take over the world by pumping the global audience full of politically-biased, culturally-barren media offerings is challenged by Benjamin Compaine (2001) who sees McChesney's concerns as "overblown". He points to the ideological filters through which all media watchers' views are passed and suggests McChesney's arguments follow from academic critical studies, which Compaine considers to be public relations "spin" used by those who would "formerly have called themselves Marxists". Compaine's argument is based on his acceptance of democratic capitalism (Compaine, 2001) and the social urges Friedman describes as the desire of individuals for material betterment made possible through communication and Internet connectivity (Friedman, 2000, p.194-211).

Shudson, too, cautions against taking "too rigid a view of how powerful elites control news" at risk of making "…many of the most dramatic moments in US media history in the past half-century inexplicable…from the role of the press in publicising the civil rights movement to its coverage of the Vietnam War" (Shudson, 2000).

Shudson's reasoning is somewhat echoed by Jack Shafer, editor at large of *Slate Magazine*. Shafer remarks that big media can only determine what the US majority learns:

> "…in places where the newsstand sells only the *New York Post* and *Time* and where TV receivers have been doctored to accept signals only from CNN, ABC, CBS and the Fox News Channel – which is to say nowhere" (Shafer, 2004).

The issues arising from media ownership are essentially those of cultural influence, or Murdock's "structure-culture-agency triangle". Murdock views the role of the communications industry in a modern capitalist society as being to "link economic structures with cultural formations". He sees the interplay between these elements as relying on private ownership within a political system that:

> "…pre-supposes a citizenry whose full social participation depends in part on access to the maximum possible range of information and analysis and to open debate on contentious issues" (Murdock, 2000).

There are numerous compelling arguments to suggest agglomeration is merely a natural stage in economic evolution that allows big companies to exploit synergies, reduce costs, scale-up and ultimately to better serve their audiences (AC/UNMP, 2003). *The Economist* (2001) points out that popular anti-globalisation theories are sometimes based on inaccurate facts as, for example, when the size of companies is measured by their sales figures, while national economies are measured by their GDP. When compared, it appears that some large corporations are financially bigger than certain nations. Big media has occasionally been subject to such distortions by media critics (*The Economist*, 2001). Shafer confronts some statistics in the most recent edition of Bagdikian's *The New Media Monopoly*, citing the author's failure to reflect both acquisitions and divestitures across the media industry (Shafer, 2004).

Whatever its ills, globalisation has changed the way societies that were previously kept apart from each other now function because they have access to one another's markets and social and political thinking via digital media. Friedman (2000) offers the view that the "wired world" determines that globalisation is no longer a choice for either corporations or nations. In his view, prosperity is a simple matter of choice for both, advocating that it is more expedient to work with globalisation than to kick against it.

He supports his argument by quoting professor Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School, "…some political stability, prudent fiscal policies and business-friendly reforms can work wonders, even in desperately poor countries" (Friedman, 2000:197). He sees "the inexorable integration of markets" as a healthy indicator of global freedoms and stresses that globalisation is not "some economic fad" but an immensely influential system of globalised economic forces which will increasingly dominate modern life through economic power, made possible by ICTs:

> "If the defining economists of the Cold War were Karl Marx and John Keynes, who each in their own way wanted to tame capitalism, the defining economists of the globalisation system are Joseph Schumpeter and Intel chairman, Andy Grove" (Friedman, 2000, p.11).

While the Cold War world was characterised by fixed global divisions along ideological and economic lines, the single over-arching feature of the world today is seen as the increasing absence of economic, social and political boundaries, replaced by a world wide organism of technology-driven webs that communicate and interact (Friedman, 2000). Within this system, globalisation has its own defining modern technologies of which the Internet is possibly the most influential, although it would not exist without former communications technologies, most importantly, telecommunications.

In addition to globalisation's characteristic patterns of demographic movement**,** cultural and social changes and the ensuing social anxieties and shifts in government from ideology-based to market-based (at minimum, market-aware) politics, the new order is built around three overlapping systems. These are:

- The traditional balance of power between nation-states
- The balancing act between nation states and global markets in which millions of investors (dubbed "the electronic herd" (Friedman, 2000, p. 13) can move money around the world at the click of a mouse with immense impact on national economies
- The newest balance of all, that between individuals and nation states, a situation made possible by the power of the Internet (Friedman, 2000).

Media power has gained such influence in advanced capitalist society that it is deemed deserving of its own category – on a par with economic, political and cultural power. Political economy and liberal pluralist arguments react against the backdrop of agglomeration and capitalist economic power, as discussed in the following two sections.

3.3. Political economy and critical political economy of media

Fundamentally, research into Internet media, as with other media, is concerned with power. So great is journalism's influence in advanced capitalist society via the entwined categories of power – economic, political and cultural – that some academics have dubbed journalism "the new priesthood" (McNair, 1998, p. 34-57). The inclusive nature of the Internet – for example via the use of user-generated content (UGC) in online news – speaks even more strongly to this argument and also raises questions around gatekeeping and ethical issues which are fundamental to credibility.

This chapter examines media power in relation to the socio-political environment and argues against a pure critical political economy approach on the basis that all members of society, including media workers, "adhere with more or less willingness and certainty to a set of values which are embodied in their output, structuring or 'framing' of their accounts of the world" and which leads to a variety of interpretations (McNair, 1998, p.23).

An examination of the location of media power in contemporary Marxist thinking highlights three areas, namely structuralist, political economy and culturalist.

The structuralist approach is closely linked to Marxist theories of ideology and concerns itself with the textual analysis of "systems and processes of signification and representation" (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1982). These scholars organise theoretical approaches to media power into three areas, namely,

- The distinctions between liberal pluralist approaches and Marxist approaches
- Different approaches in the analysis of institutional media structures
- The location of media power in contemporary Marxist studies

In drawing distinctions between liberal pluralist approaches and Marxist approaches, it is seen that classic Marxist theories regard journalism as a system that strengthens the capitalist ideological apparatus and the values of dominant social groups or ruling classes. In doing so, they draw correlations between capitalist ownership and power, be it economic, cultural or political (McQuail, 1994; Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 1998; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The online news environment addresses this distribution of power in the sense that, on the whole, the online audience represents the most economically and technologically empowered fraction of the world's population and consequently enjoys overwhelming social and cultural power.

The political economy of media institutions interrogates questions of ownership of such institutions and seeks to locate the power of the media within a fundamentally Marxist school of thinking. Media content and the meanings derived from it are seen to be determined from economic control mechanisms such as advertising and so-called "audience maximising products", normally entertainment. However, the "workings of these controls are not easy to demonstrate – or to examine empirically" (Curran, Gurevitch & Wollacott, 1982). In attempting to identify the control mechanisms, theorists in this school rely on the examination of "professional ideologies and practices found at these organisations" (Curran, Gurevitch & Wollacott, 1982). In terms of the online news room, these control mechanisms stem directly from the pressures of a 24/7 breaking news cycle and other impacts of globalisation, addressed in later sections of this paper, which themselves impact the news gathering and news selection process.

The relationship of media institutions to the socio-political environment is similar in some respects to the political economy approach, in that it examines the media's relationship to the world beyond the news organisation, particularly with regard to questions of official sources. Marxist thinking sees the media in this context as part of the superstructure reflecting the dominant viewpoint of a powerful elite. Pluralists contend that a balance of power exists, in that the media's "ownership" of the mass audience lends it bargaining power over the control of, for example, a government agency, which it relies on for information.

Very few news sites are truly independent of the large media conglomerates that own the media industry, added to the fact that comparatively few poor people have easy access to online news. In this respect the Marxist viewpoint is valid. However, it does not account for the revolutionary and highly empowering characteristics of the Internet, which, theoretically, allows Everyman to make and publish his own opinions and versions of the news, as evidenced by the boom in blogging, citizen journalism,

self-published electronic newsletters and independent news websites. While in practice they are barely audible above the megaphone of mainstream news, the possibilities undeniably exist for alternative voices to have their say. The use of user-generated content in the mainstream media is yet another factor that defies a simplistic analysis of this topic.

Inherent in media-as-big-business is its power to embed social and political values within the messages it communicates and manipulates (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Concentrated media thus has the power to hinder the exchange of views necessary for true democracy (McChesney, 1998). If so, this is potentially the most dangerous of agglomeration's many implications on media credibility. Not only is civil society at risk, but also the erosion of democracy threatens to undermine the economic foundations on which big media is built and the free market principles on which its success relies. The immense influence of a conglomerated media industry with immense geographic, cultural and economic reach made possible by technology becomes obvious. Civic decay and economic fallout, then, appear to be agglomeration's chief dangers. Bagdikian, for one, sees big media as a fundamental component of a capitalist political economy (Bagdikian, 2000).

Agglomeration's apparent danger to democracy is woven into the media's role as an interpreter of reality on behalf of its audience. Recognising that information passes through many filters en route to that audience – including the political ideology of media owners and practitioners – it is accepted that all media is a construct rather than simply a mirror held up to the world. Herman & Chomsky identify the filters as:

- The size, ownership and profit-orientation of the mass media
- The advertising industry's undue influence over the media
- The media's reliance on official sources for news
- The use of 'flak' (costly and threatening negative responses) directed at media when those in power disapprove of certain coverage
- Ideological anti-communist policies exercised via the giant-media machine (Herman & Chomsky, 1988)

However, sociologist and media historian Michael Schudson suggests, without detracting from sophisticated political economy theories, that a rigid political economy perspective verges on a "rather simpleminded" conspiracy theory because it:s

> "…ignores the observable fact that reporters often initiate stories of their own, that editors rarely meet with publishers and that most working journalists have no idea who sits on the board of directors of the institutions they work for" (Shudson, 1989).

Overall, a political economy approach relates media power to economic processes and the structures of media production. However, its weakness lies in its concern with the big picture while skimming over the finer details. This approach also fails to specifically address the evidence that the increased availability of journalistic media – such as news available via the Internet – has in reality whittled away the power of the elite in advanced capitalist societies (McNair, 1998), making critical theory unviable for this research.

3.4. Liberal pluralism

In contrast to political economy theory, the two liberal pluralist approaches rely respectively on complete trust in a free-market system governed by unregulated supply and demand, or on a social liberal view that opposes media agglomeration and champions media diversity. This chapter outlines the dichotomy between a critical approach founded on a Marxist stance, and a market-driven, pro-capitalist approach which can be distilled into a question of media power – who controls it, who dispenses it and who has access to it.

In South Africa, this power is uniquely determined by a combination of a corrupt telecommunications infrastructure, soaring costs of access and an ineffectual industry watchdog with its state-appointed board. Added to high levels of poverty, this results in disproportionate online access.

Other factors, however, are similar globally. Among these is the understanding that journalism and news are commodities with "use value" and "exchange value" which requires the product to be "functional and desirable – a fact which has had considerable impact on the content, style and presentation of journalism in recent decades" (McNair, 1998, p.101).

However, journalism also has important social obligations and responsibilities. US media deregulation policies – particularly the Telecommunications Act of 1996 – combined with subsequent innovative communication technology, together ignited a "frightening speed" in media agglomeration over the past decade (Murdock, 2000). High-speed privatisation – a "multi-dimensional movement with four distinct components: de-nationalisation, liberalisation, the commercialisation of the public sector and the re-gearing of the regulatory environment" (Murdock, 2000) – plunged the US media into what Robert McChesney dubs "hypercommercialism" (McChesney, 2000).

The current trajectory of media agglomeration in the industrialised world – spearheaded by economic activity based on a model of advanced democracy, free market forces and private enterprise – gives weight to the view that the existing six mega-media companies will merge or otherwise dissolve, leaving even fewer gigantic organisations in control of the world's media, with negative implications for democracy (McChesney, 2000; Bagdikian, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 1999).

McChesney (2000) identifies advertising, the rise of media agglomeration and the emergence of multiple electronic media technologies as the combined cause of a great imbalance of media power which has led, in his view, to a lack of diversity in news products, which will ultimately result in a politically uninformed and therefore dis-empowered audience in democratic societies, with dire consequences for the future of democracy. Agglomeration critics' concern is with the political power wielded by the overly agglomerated mass media business and what McChesney calls "the corruption and degradation of journalism" across all forms of media including the Internet (McChesney, 2000). Critics contend that the Internet news media, like its print counterparts, has been taken over by corporate ownership, resulting in homogenised

news offerings that help narrow the political range of media offerings to such a degree that "political variety among the mainstream media has disappeared". The effect is a media that serves as a politically conservative loudspeaker, drowns out dissent and weakens genuine democratic process.

Further complicating matters is the suspicion that media giants have devised sophisticated models to deceive audiences into believing their products are balanced and non-partisan:

> "…it is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media…actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance and aggressively portray themselves as spokesmen for free speech and the general community interest…" (Herman & Chomsky, 1999).

The need for revenue cannot be separated from questions of media power and is the underlying theme dictating the quality, and therefore the credibility, of online news. The impacts of globalisation are felt in the day-to-day lives of journalists across all media as cost-cutting and pressure to perform more efficiently on fewer resources, staff and less time. The cost of news production will often decide the nature and degree of coverage given to a story. The drive for inexpensive content that will attract advertising revenue leads to "content synergy". Technology allows content to be maximised across multiple formats. Duplicated or re-worked content marches inexorably on through merchandising, branding, radio and live entertainment, resulting in a globally homogenised media.

Even the biggest brands in online news typically struggle to fund their operations through advertising revenue alone. The two standard revenue options are advertising sales and subscription sales. Neither deliver the levels of revenue needed for most sites. In general, the advertising industry regards online as a poor second-best to print, while research into online revenue streams in the US and Britain over the last decade shows that readers resent paying for online content (Schiff, 2006). Unlike other products where there may be little choice, alternatives are widely and freely available online thus making it a hard sell for sites that charge for news.

Liberal pluralist arguments lean towards the notion that a democratic environment ensures distance between the state and the media and permits the latter to fulfil a fourth estate role. However, a critical political economy approach has clear links between the mainstream media and business, labelling big media as big business with immense political influence:

> "…while the political role of big business is largely indirect, it can be more powerful than that of elected politicians, voters and the general public" (Kupe, 2005).

For example, as Kupe (2005) notes, when the mainstream news media turns a blind eye to corporate misconduct, the ends of a market-driven political and economic agenda are served. The Internet, initially seen as a potential medium for deliverance from mass media systems, is considered to have suffered a capitalist corporate take over, bringing with it "intrusive advertising and other highly orchestrated business displays" (McChesney, 1998).

The Internet may be seen as a media power revolution that has largely failed because there is no model that allows independent news sites to become financially viable. The image of the disaffected news journalist-turned-blogger goes a long way towards undermining the genuine power of the Internet as an alternate source of information. Like newspapers, television and other mass media, news sites perceived as credible are owned and distributed by the same media corporations that deliver other news media and the content across them all is often identical. The online news that most people trust as credible carries familiar, big media names, thus reinforcing capitalist corporate control.

The strengths of critical political economy theory lie in the interplay of related material features, which impact the final online product. However, as discussed in the following chapter, McNair sees the standard normative versus critical theory paradigm as inadequate to do justice to the complexities of modern capitalism and the media (McNair, 1998).

3.5. McNair's chaotic flow model and the sociology of journalism

While this research examines the interplay of Internet news production in the material environment (that is, ownership, management and production; finance; content and access to media) it leans towards McNair's more holistic take on the sociology of news production in the wired world as a means to understand how online news credibility is created. Seen as the most viable framework for this research, this chapter argues in favour of McNair's approach over a strict liberal pluralism or critical political economy approach.

Due to critical political economy theory's focus "primarily on the relation between the economic structure and dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of media", it has much insight to offer in the context of this research (McQuail, 1994). As a counterbalance, however, McNair posits that today "we have mass cultural information chaos" rather than "a ruling class ideological control". He elaborates, "although we can identify a dominant economic class in the abstract, materialist sense …it rarely acts as a coherent political force" (McNair, 1998, p.82-100). McNair's chaotic flow model recognises the importance of critical theory within the sociology of journalism and negotiates both schools of thought:

> "…the categories of dominance and subordination, exercised through economic and political power … still have a significant role in the sociology of journalism…" (McNair, 1998, p.19-33).

McNair proposes that the media today cannot depend on existing sociological models of normative theory versus critical theory. He proposes that mass education and social mobility have given rise to intra-class fragmentation and a lack of ideological unity which demands a new sociological model of journalism that can better articulate the media environment:

> "Adherence to the dominance paradigm, then, and the associated hypothesis that the media, and journalism in particular, perpetuate relations of exploitation and inequality within capitalism, implies a degree of conspiratorial intent, class/sex/ethnic-based unity and ideological stasis which conflicts with the experience of the late twentieth century" (McNair, 1998, p.19-33).

McNair (1998) breaks the sociology of journalism into two models, that is, into paradigms of competition (normative) and dominance (critical theory). In the normative paradigm, as witnessed in developed and Westernised nations, the media's role is "supplying information, articulating opinions and helping to resolve political and ideological differences through the facilitation and organization of public debate" (McNair, 1998, p.19-33). This fourth estate watchdog role of the media is familiar in South Africa's liberal democratic context. McNair's ideal liberal pluralist theory describes journalists as "servants of public interest", which is the foundation of his competitive paradigm and which, he states, remains the "preferred model of how journalism works in advanced capitalist societies", at least by those for whom today's capitalist society is "the best we can reasonably expect" (McNair, 1998, p.19-33).

However, he points out that liberal pluralism theory is not "matched by the practical performance of the media in capitalist systems" since the ideal of "equal competition is fundamentally constrained by the concrete realities of capital accumulation" (McNair, 1998, p.19-33). The inevitable social stratifications stemming from capitalist principles lead to inequalities in education, economic resources and political power. These inequalities cannot, in McNair's view, be adequately addressed by liberal pluralist theory. Rather, the dominance paradigm asserts that instead of serving the public, journalism media serves the "dominant, private, selfish interests of a society stratified along lines of race, class and ethnicity" (McNair, 1998, p.19-33).

Faced with opposing yet often interwoven and complex theoretical positions with regard to media power, McNair suggests it is helpful for modern journalism to dispense with the standard normative-critical, or materialism-liberalism, dichotomy and instead focus on the impact on the journalistic output of elements in that environment (McNair**,** 1998, p.33,141,162,165). He proposes a "chaotic flow" model, which allows for the observation of impacts and also allows journalistic output to be challenged or altered by journalists and other players in the process (McNair, 1998). When exploring how news sites establish their credibility, sociological influences such as technical skill levels, staff numbers and numerous other workplace issues come into play and it is useful to sketch here the theoretical basis of such an investigation.

The analysis of institutional media structures can be divided into four groups in which institutional structures and role relationships explain the final media product as the outcome of interaction between the media workers within an organisation (Curran, Gurevitch &Wollacott, 1982). These relationships are informed by similar structures as those found in industrial organisations, that is, hierarchical structures, divisions of labour, role differentiations, stated institutional goals that are translated into specific policies and practices, hierarchical lines of accountability reporting and modes of peer and subordinate relationships. News selection, editing and gatekeeping functions fall into this category. A simple example is the way reporters accept the authority of an editor's news choices. A key element in such theory is the belief that these controls are socially embedded rather than overtly or crudely imposed on media workers.

Professional ideologies and work practices study the beliefs, values and work procedures of media professionals and incorporate such questions as whether journalism has "the attributes of professionalism, which have defined the classic

professions such as medicine or law" (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1982). In the case of media workers, this field of study "identified a strong claim for professional autonomy, derived from the basic tenets of freedom of expression and the 'public's right to know'" as well as a commitment to objectivity, impartiality and fairness, all of which invite lengthy debates as to the actual possibility of their existence. The weakness of this theoretical approach, however, lies in the contrasting conclusions at which researchers arrive when observing identical bodies of evidence.

Singer (1998) was among the first media academics to examine online media from the perspective of journalists rather than from that of the audience. Singer suggests "four foundations, resting on existing theories and conceptual approaches" for researchers to consider when examining the changing journalistic roles caused by the Internet. She names these theories as Gatekeeping Theory, Diffusion of Innovation, Sociology of News Work and Social Cohesion with theoretical origins in broader historical, philosophical, ideological and social schools of thought (Singer, 1998). Singer's early research into Internet journalism serves as a valuable reference, particularly given her focus on the practicalities of the medium and how it affects journalistic work (Singer, 1998).

Offering an overview, Reese (2004) observes that Hebert Gans, the eminent Chicago School media sociologist, locates the construction of news in the processes and routines of the news organisation rather than in the journalist, the publisher or even the gatekeeping editor. Gans' approach challenges the notion that news is vulnerable to the bias of the individual media worker.

Castells is among the pre-eminent thinkers in understanding the new economy built on technology advancements, primarily the Internet. In his examination of the technology revolution and subsequent global networked economy, society and culture, he notes, "technology does not determine society" (Castells, 2000). He argues that global capitalism achieved its current power thanks to information technology, and without this would have been a "much limited reality":

> "Thus, informationalism is linked to the expansion and rejuvenation of capitalism, as industrialisation was linked to its constitution as a mode of production" (Castells, 2000).

He identifies five points of analysis, common to a number of diverse theoretical approaches to analysing the information age, which have relevance to the research proposed here, namely:

- The divide in the organisation of production and markets in the global economy
- The interaction between organisational changes and the diffusion of information technology
- The fundamental goal of organisational changes was to cope with the fast pace of change in the economic, institutional and technological environment by enhancing flexibility in production, management and marketing
- The redefinition of labour processes and employment practices aimed at saving labour through the automation of jobs, elimination of tasks and suppression of managerial levels.
- The critical emphasis on knowledge management and information processing in organisations.

(Castells, 2000).

Garnham (1998), however, confronts accepted Information Society Theory, and particularly Castells, for:

> "Massively presenting itself as both a way of understanding the present historical moment and at the same time as the favoured legitimating ideology for the dominant economic and political powerholders" (Garnham, 1998).

In support of this stance, he points to three significant themes in current media theory:

- That social communication becomes dependent on the mobilisation and access of scarce resources
- That all social communication depends on and is shaped by technology
- That the development of systems of mediated social communication was accompanied by, or produced, a class of communication specialists

(Garnham, 1998)

Friedman (2000, p. 237) quotes MIT economist Lester Thurow, who echoes Castells, in saying, "sociology almost always dominates technology", in this case Internet, thus suggesting online news technology is only as good as the people who use it, and placing responsibility for credibility squarely in the hands of online news practitioners. Both the technology that underpins online journalism and everyday newsrooms practices define the profession and the eventual credibility of the online news product.

Internet technology has all the features that might allow quite extraordinary degrees of transparency which, if used, could dispel many doubts about a website's credibility namely:

- Limitless space allowing in-depth reporting and infinite layers of context
- Hyperlinking to related news items
- Audience participation and interaction, or "conversational" journalism
- Greater transparency about the news gathering process enabled by limitless space, multimedia, interactivity and hyperlinking (for example to public documents quoted in articles)
- The capacity for swift update speeds
- More expressive and even new "vernacular" writing styles using non-linear reporting (linked to limitless space, unlike the print media)
- Unlimited archival storage capacity, which can be easily accessed

(Paul, 2005)

Nevertheless, one of the great paradoxes of serious online news producers is that with so much functionality at their disposal, it is an easily observable fact - supported by recent research (*State of the News Media,* 2007) - that the majority of serious sites (many of them owned by wealthy media organisations) fail to utilize the inherent characteristics of the Internet. In doing so, they undermine their efforts to create value (Paul, 2005). Bar a handful of exceptions, serious websites rely to a significant degree on their parent media brand for both content and credibility, with the result that news sites function in ways that are often inconsistent with ideal newsroom practices (Arant & Anderson, 2000). For example, the functionality of the delivery mechanism is seen as an important player in the credibility matrix. If a news site offers a link to an

archive or a film clip that fails when a user attempts to activate it, credibility is eroded. This failure of technology is often beyond the control of sites and thus loss of credibility can be caused by factors such as technical failure, poor telecommunications infrastructure, low bandwidth and others.

As pointed out previously, the cost of news production, chronic understaffing and concerns over profitability stemming from low returns are almost invariably the root cause of the problem (Kovak & Rosenstiel, 1999; Campbell, 2004; Bagdikian, 2000; Pew, 1999; Manoim, 2005; Berger, 2004; *The Economist*, 2006).

3.6. Professionalism theory

Most literature first attempts to define journalism before looking at its ideology and whether or not it should be regarded as a profession. This chapter explores the roots of professionalism in journalism, an important factor in would-be credible news media.

The journalism we know has its roots in Europe's social turmoil, which began as early as the 5th Century; led to the Scientific Revolution; was followed by the Enlightenment and finally opened the way for radical new thinking in numerous fields of study. While the benefits of the Enlightenment were limited to an educated elite, the vigorous intellectual life of the time included the production of political and social journals and newssheets. Open public discourse became common in city coffee houses, now seen as the birthplace of Habermas' "public sphere" (Habermas, 1991).

Around that time in Britain (the historical parent of South African journalism), social and political thinking became restless under a centuries-old monarchical system of government. Although advocating opposing solutions to political challenges, both Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) greatly influenced public discourse, until by 1688 the English government was compelled to ratify a new Bill of Rights protecting ordinary citizens (although Habermas and others regard this as no more than a means of protecting the privileged Protestant bourgeois). Habermas cites three subsequent key moments in Britain, in 1694 and 1695, that laid the foundations for journalism to play an important role in democratic process. He declares the founding of the Bank of England to be the turning point at which capitalism gained control over the means of production and laid the foundations for journalism to become a commodity rather than a pure agent of social responsibility. He adds the elimination of legalised censorship and the establishment of the first cabinet government as the other two key events. There followed the rise of the press to its status as the Fourth Estate by the constitutional sanctioning of a set of basic rights which, among other things, guaranteed "…the spheres of the pubic realm… (and) …the institutions and instruments of the public sphere… " (Habermas, 1991, p.83).

Journalism in all its permutations since has based itself – to a greater or lesser extent – on the public's right to know. More serious newspapers believe strongly in their watchdog role in society, which over time has evolved into a broad sense of journalism's professional function in democratic society. However, Anderson (2005) points out that the "limited professional status" of journalists is a stumbling block to academic attempts to analyse journalism as a profession.

Much of the theoretical argument around professionalism can be divided into two camps. On one side, those like Bourdieu and Foucault establish notions of professionalism based on sets of traits or practices. However, unlike the medical and financial professions, which were the original yardsticks for professionalism, journalists can come from many different educational backgrounds. According to Anderson, this approach has been largely abandoned due to criticism that:

> "Unlike classically defined professions, such as medicine or law, journalism has not required the trappings of professionalism: many journalists do not readily read journalism handbooks, attend journalism schools, or enroll in training programs. Codes of journalistic behavior are not written down, codes of ethics remain largely nonexistent, and most journalists routinely reject licensing procedures. Journalists are also indifferent to professional associations" (Anderson, 2005 [Zelizer 1992]).

In the other camp are those who favour the functionalist approach of the "professional project" as proposed by Larson (1977) who suggests analysts ought to consider "…what professions actually do in everyday life to negotiate or maintain their special position" (Anderson, 2005 [Larson, 1977]). Anderson traces Larson's approach to the work of Everett C. Hughes (1963), who, rather than asking whether an occupation deserved to be considered a profession, instead looked at the circumstances in which those in an occupation "…attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people" (Anderson, 2005 [Hughes 1963]).

Building on Larson's work, Macdonald (1995) posits that a professional group engages in a "bargain" with the state to secure market control. Furthermore, she argues that professional groups must "…engage in a competitive struggle with other occupational groups that offer similar knowledge based services" (Anderson, 2005 [Macdonald, 1995]). In doing so, the group has the power to define it's own standards of competence "…through the promulgation of abstract standards of conduct and control over the selection and training of its members" (Anderson 2005, [Macdonald 1995]) Added to which, Soloski suggests the most common factor in establishing journalism professionalism is that "journalists come to share the cognitive base of news professionalism" (Soloski, 1998, p.141).

Forms of power and the control of power in Western society are at the heart of the analysis of journalism professionalism. Media power is seen as symbolic power, which influences the societies in which it functions. Anderson (2005) argues that one of the chief impacts of the Internet on the field of journalism has been to "dramatically" lower the "barriers to the acquisition of symbolic power" (Anderson, 2005).

Consequently, the underlying ethics of this powerful medium, as well as the mechanisms serious news sites employ to establish credibility in the eyes of their public, warrant close scrutiny.

3.7. Credibility: real journalism vs. new journalism

After defining journalism and positioning it as a profession in society, the challenge is answering the question of whether traditional journalistic ethics apply to online journalism. Having examined notions of professionalism in the preceding chapter, this

section works towards a definition of professional journalism and its role in media credibility.

Anderson (2005) defines journalism as:

> "…an occupational group characterized by its reliance upon a body of formalized, abstract knowledge, the technical utilization of that knowledge in its work, and a significant degree of autonomy over the selection, training, and credentialing of its members" (Anderson, 2005).

Journalists have been varyingly described as "those who have responsibility for the preparation or transmission of news stories or other information" (Weaver & Wilhoit cited, Deuze, 1998). Deuze argues that a profession "is an occupation in which members collectively (or rather: collegially) have secured authority to control the substance, performance and goals of their work" (Deuze, 1998). Deuze names Bardoel (1997) as among the first academics to specifically incorporate technology into a definition of journalism as "the professional selection of actual news facts to an audience by means of technological distribution methods" (Deuze, 1998). He proposes that online journalism can be seen as simply another form of journalism and "should be treated as such".

Black, Steele & Barney argue that traditional journalism bases its decisions about what is news on a set of measures – conflict, novelty, prominence, proximity, impact, recency – which may not represent the best ethical values. They go as far as to say these standards are "amoral" because, while they may be suitable for "defining routine news coverage, they have no ethical or philosophical foundation" (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995). They further assert that, unlike other professionals, journalists have been left to fend for themselves in determining their ethical and social roles and remind us "any person (literate or illiterate, learned or ignorant, socialised or rebellious, passive or outraged) may become a journalist without standards imposed either by government or professional groups" (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995). This absence of professional disciplinary bodies in the industry poses a significant problem to the notion of journalism as a profession. Furthermore, it places personal responsibility on those who would see themselves as professional journalists, to conduct their work with heightened awareness of the ethical codes that guide journalism.

The technology that underpins online journalism is key to defining this branch of the media and to understanding its ethical practices, which influence its credibility. Media analysts Bill Kovak and Tom Rosenstiel assert that the press has evolved into a "mixed media culture" that has thrown journalism into a "state of disorientation brought on by rapid technological change, declining market share and growing pressure to operate with economic efficiency" (Kovak & Rosenstiel, 1999). In the online environment, Quitney states:

> "Publishers and editors around the world have been in the process of learning the business of serving and pleasing audiences online. It is a new world, and there are bound to be more trial-and-error experiments as we segue from mostly print online to seeing a lot more streaming video in the future. New ethical questions will arise as news decisions regarding citizen-submitted still pictures and video clips become more prevalent. The stakes of the 'who do

> you trust?' game are only going to get higher" (Quitney Anderson, personal communication, 2006).

This is perhaps most apparent in the content offered by mainstream news media. Thanks to its reliance on shovelware and news services for copy and images, the existing balance of power in the media is seen to be reinforced while also fuelling debate as to whether online journalism can hold its own with "real journalism".

Irwin Manoim, joint founder of the *Mail&Guardian* and editor for its first ten years, asserts that since Internet journalism in South Africa largely comprises shovelware, it does not, on the whole, qualify as journalism. However, since journalism has been defined as "those who have responsibility for the preparation or transmission of news stories or other information" (Weaver & Wilhoit cited by Deuze, 1998), Deuze proposes that online journalism can be seen as simply another form of journalism and "should be treated as such". In terms of how this discussion relates to the codes and ethics that guide online journalism, it is accepted that while new forms of ethics unique to Internet journalism may emerge over time, in essence it remains journalism and should therefore abide by the same fundamental ethics that guide traditional journalism (Deuze, 1998; Osborn, 2001).

While incorporating many of the attributes of traditional media, online news is a genre of journalistic work that falls outside the parameters of the traditional definition of journalism. Journalistic ideals of fairness and truth-telling, for example, apply online as they do in print**;** however the idea of re-purposing content from print to online is an example of new media which often sticks in traditionalists' throats. Re-purposing can be seen simply as a new form of journalism, which calls for journalistic knowledge and choices in much the same way as the use of wire copy in a print newspaper calls for the skills and judgement of a print journalist or editor. While original reporting is preferred, newspapers that rely on wire services are not disparaged in the same way as news sites are for using shovelware. Furthermore, it is logical that shovelware must conform at some earlier stage in its life cycle to the ethical rules of journalism.

The shovelware argument is central to the study of online credibility. If the content provided by wire services and shovelware taken from a parent newspaper is seen as credible, so the thinking goes, then the news site on which it is published will be credible by virtue of that fact. However, this view ignores the reality that credibility is not dictated by content alone. Credibility can be implied or construed by numerous subtle (or glaring) signifiers such as web design, layout and colour; branding; choice of advertising; use and placement of graphics; degree of interactivity; update speeds and other factors.

News sites wishing to be perceived as credible direct considerable effort and resources into developing, and then continually fuelling, their reader's belief in their credibility. The simplest evidence of this is seen in the manner in which shovelware is applied. A shovelware article online may be correctly attributed to its print author; however, unless a reader is familiar with the print version, an automatic assumption can be made that the author is a dedicated online journalist. Hence, the question of whether credibility is assumed through absence – that is, by avoiding specifically identifying shovelware articles – is typical of the credibility questions deserving greater research.

The Internet has helped push the boundaries of acceptability in moral standards, quality and truth-telling across all media. Its speed, new ways of relating to the audience and technological capacities allowed it to function outside the boundaries of traditional journalism (Gillmor, 2004). Communication technology has brought about tremendous shifts in society's "moral response to the world" (Minogue, 2004), of which the rise in ethical misconduct seen in the media as a spate of media plagiarism over the last several years is only one symptom. At the same time, the profession is increasingly better educated and more conscious of its ethical and social responsibilities, including the need to work at establishing credibility in online news. (Campbell, 2004; Minogue, 2004).

Research into complaints received by online ombudsmen reveals that matters of ethics (also of taste and sensibility) are similar across print and online. Material that is offensive in print is likely to be offensive online. It is the ethical self-regulation by journalists and news organisations, in addition to a distinct domain of journalistic knowledge and expertise, that weighs the scales in favour of seeing journalism as a profession rather than a craft or trade and implies that online journalists must adhere to a set of professional ethics. The number of worldwide professional bodies serving as caretakers of the profession's integrity supports this view, as does the existence of media codes of conduct and ethics. Research indicates online ethics, particularly gatekeeping based on a similar model to traditional gatekeeping, is central to the credibility of news sites (Lambert, 2007). The message in this may be that, on the whole, the audience wants and expects certain standards of journalism to be maintained regardless of the medium.

In addition, news sites may encounter legal risks due to their reliance on wire services. Riaan Wolmarans editor of *M&GOnline* says,

> "We can be held liable for whatever we publish – the fact that another newspaper or news service published it first is no legal defence, unfortunately. Of course there is much danger in this: it's obviously impossible for us to double-check all the agency copy we use, due to our small team and tight deadlines, so often we just have to trust news agencies to get it right" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 20 March 2007).

What emerges is a broad consensus among media practitioners and academics that serious online journalism remains journalism and is subject to the same fundamental ethics that have traditionally guided reputable print publications. In practice, online news occupies a kind of no-man's land, functioning somewhat under the rules of traditional journalism, but often getting away with considerable departures from the rules thanks to the medium's technological characteristics (I. Mayes, personal communication, 16 March 2007).

This paper seeks to examine the mechanisms used by the top news sites to establish their credibility, on which their continued existence in the matrix of the news media depends, and which underpins all the foregoing theoretical discussions. Without news credibility and the mechanisms which establish and support it, the news industry would have little or no power. The questions posed by this research are based on substantial media credibility research and represent some of the most important criteria used to establish mechanisms that lend credibility to online news.

3.8. Researching online credibility

Even as the media attempts to identify it, cling to it, resuscitate or re-invent it, credibility itself is seldom clearly defined. Media experts and academics define news credibility, variously, as being about dependability, trustworthiness, timeliness, brand, relationship, context and background (API, 2001). Different editors understand credibility differently and the term has yet other meanings for readers. Nevertheless, two constants emerge in international news credibility research: that credibility matters a great deal, and that it is in danger of being lost.

According to Pew research, in 1985 84% of survey respondents said they could believe most of what they read in their daily newspaper. By 2004 the figure had fallen to 54% (Pew, July 2006). The oft-quoted research further notes that during almost the same interval, survey respondents were "consistently positive" about their own daily newspaper. In 1984, 88% of respondents who were familiar enough with a daily newspaper to give it a rating, gave theirs favourable marks. In 2005, that figure had slipped to 80%. A similar pattern emerged in the survey for network and local television news, that is, a sharp decline in believability yet only a moderate decline in "favourability" (Pew, July 2006).

Based on these studies, it appears the central concern is whether readers trust the media of their choice, filtered through their individual social and political beliefs. Accordingly, news sites might easily play on their understanding of their target audience to construct credibility in much the same way that advertising uses audience research to sell products.

In South Africa, online media credibility studies are barely extant and it is therefore helpful to briefly consider some approaches used in foreign studies, with a view to deciding what mechanisms are most important to the credibility of a news site. The studies outlined below assisted in developing points of focus for this paper.

3.8.1. Study 1: *The WebCommunicators: Issues in research into online journalism and journalists* (Deuze, 1998).

Deuze was among the first media academics to look closely at online journalism. He identifies the awkwardness inherent in using old forms of media to explain the new. His paper is a step towards developing a more relevant research instrument for the online news environment. He concludes that "content is king" given its influence in setting the public agenda and capacity to influence the audience's perception of the world. He takes the position that since journalists are responsible for the content of the media, they influence the public agenda and that a comprehensive examination of the communicators themselves is required:

> "The Internet is both hype and reality; both an elitist playground of freaks and the ultimate synergy of communication-related phenomena. It is the network of networks, the only medium where access, abundance and citizenship blur the lines of the public and private sphere into chaos - but fascinating and, from time to time - highly relevant and important chaos" (Deuze, 1998).

At the time of Deuze's writing, research into the role of online journalists in this new, chaotic medium was scarce and muddied by attempts to explain it using traditional concepts (Deuze, 1998).

His paper points out the flaws in early theory and research approaches to online journalism which studied online media as a "novelty". At the time, research was concerned with how the Internet might threaten traditional media rather than "figuring out what they are made up with and who provides them with content. In other words: online news publications should be seen as journalistic products and analysed as such" (Deuze, 1998).

Deuze refers to Jane Singer's 1998 work as the only viable approach into researching online journalism and journalists (Deuze, 1998 [Singer, 1998]). Even so, he contends Singer's work was flawed in that she failed to address the outdated nature of her theoretical concepts, which attempted "to explain something which defies the rules and definitions that are part of the theory". Additionally, her approach to the global Internet phenomenon was "all American and therefore (did) little justice to the global nature of the research topic of online journalism" (Deuze, 1998).

Deuze maintains that research into online journalism "should be guided by the same notion that makes the Net a mass medium: its global nature" (Deuze, 1998). He supports his theory using one of the medium's main characteristics, that is, the capacity to easily exchange datasets across the Net. Furthermore, he addresses the problem of the definition of online journalism and concludes that such a definition must necessarily include the technological component of journalism. He refers to Bardoel (1997) where it is defined as the "professional selection of actual news facts to an audience by means of technological distribution methods" (Deuze, 1998).

Finally, in suggesting possible models of analysis for online content, Deuze concludes that "describing content becomes a much more intricate process, since everything is content (following the line of reasoning that online journalism is total journalism: the integration of all other forms of journalism)" (Deuze, 1998).

3.8.2. Study 2: *Newspapers & the Internet: A Comparative Assessment of News Credibility* (Payne, Dozier & Nomai, 2001).

Credibility in traditional media (print, television and radio) is established through multidimensional factors (Payne *et al*., 2001 [Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988 cited]). Other research concludes that similarities exist between factor structures underlying receivers' perceptions of print and online, meaning that credibility measures can be equally applicable across all media (Payne *et al*., 2001 [Sundar, 1999 cited]). The influences of demographics, political affiliation, gender, age and education on credibility surveys are significant. Added to this are the diverse and often contradictory reasons news consumers cite for assigning credibility to news. Moreover, the researchers found that credibility assigned to a medium often varies depending on whether news is "actively sought or passively received" (Payne *et al.*, 2001). Finally, gatekeeping and branding play an important role in the assessment of credibility, so much so that Payne suggests:

> "Based on prior research (Carter & Greenberg, 1985; Mulder, 1980; Roper, 1985; Sundar, 1999) and logical deduction from theory, one could reasonably

> hypothesize that a newspaper story disseminated via paper would be perceived as more credible than the same story distributed over the Internet … Even if a reputable news organization distributes news via the Internet, the "halo" effect of this (newspaper's) mode of distribution arguably affects the reader's perception of credibility" (Payne *et al.,* 2001).

While the seminal research of Johnson & Kaye (1997) found online media to be more believable, fair, accurate and in-depth than their traditional versions, they qualify this in declaring both online and traditional media to be only "somewhat credible". Payne's argument for the "halo effect" of print forms the basis of his four hypotheses. Payne's approach is interesting in that it is atypical of the survey methods commonly preferred in media credibility research as it relies on audience perception.

Payne and his colleagues used focus groups to gather qualitative data that was highly subjective. The findings of the two groups, each consisting of seven students, were afterwards used to interrogate the relationship between medium delivery methods and credibility, concluding that the medium of distribution is an important factor in perceptions of news credibility. The questions were phrased in simple language and limited to six questions asking readers to rank:

- Trustworthiness of an article's source
- Accuracy of its contents
- Fairness
- Completeness
- Whether they considered the source biased or unbiased
- How credible they felt the article was overall.

(Payne *et al*., 2001)

Payne (2001) also points to the findings of Sundar's 1996 study, which determined "subjects rated stories with direct quotations from sources to be significantly higher in credibility and quality than those without quotations" (Payne, 2001). Significantly, in research by Finberg, Stone and Lynch (2002) one concern about online news credibility that stands out is the perception of non-online journalists, who do not hold online news in high regard but rather see it as a "supplementary" news source. Researchers further observed that the public has accepted online news as a credible news option and that many readers did not feel online news credibility was an issue (Payne *et al*., 2001 [Finberg, Stone, and Lynch, 2002]).

3.8.3. Study 3: *Online Credibility Survey* (ONA, Belo Interactive, 2004).

The Online Credibility Survey (2004) conducted online in the US by Belo Interactive in conjunction with the Associated Press Managing Editors and the Ford Foundation, is among the world's largest surveys into online credibility. A total of 1649 self-selected respondents answered questions prepared by Southern Methodist University professors Chris Peck and Camille Kraeplin.

From July 9th to July 19th 2004, the questionnaire was posted high on the homepage of four prominent Dallas news sites (named below) under the headline, "Do you trust our Web site? Click here to take our credibility survey". The sites surveyed were *DallasNews.com* (website of the newspaper *The Dallas Morning News*); *WFAA.com*

(website of Dallas' ABC affiliate *WFAA-Channel 8*); *TXCN.com* (website of *The Texas Cable News*) and *DentonRC.com* (website of *The Denton Record-Chronicle*).

The key findings of this qualitative research propose that credibility correlates to four key elements:

- Brand
- Speed
- Type of advertising readers see online
- Whether or not they are asked to pay for content.

3.8.4. Study 4: *The Credibility Of Newspapers, Television News and Online News* (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll & Casey, 2002.)

In this exploratory study, presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Miami in 2002, the authors compiled data using a national telephonic survey of 536 adults. Although theirs was a comparative study evaluating the credibility of different mediums, it provides useful insight for this research.

The study used a variation on a credibility evaluation method similar to that of Gaziano and McGrath's news credibility scale. Ultimately, there were similarities in how each medium was perceived, but the study also revealed fundamental differences, notably that "respondents evaluated newspaper and television news credibility more similarly than they did online news credibility". All the news mediums were deemed credible if they were perceived as "current, up-to-date, and timely" and received negative feedback for being perceived to show bias or incompleteness. On the other hand, online users were "less negative than newspaper readers and television viewers" and their perception of news credibility was built on "trustworthiness, timeliness, and bias factors" (Abdulla *et al*., 2002.

The authors refer to a 1999 study of computer technology credibility (Tseng & Fogg, 1999) describing four categories of computer-based credibility:

- Presumed (based on assumptions)
- Reputed (based on third-party reports)
- Surface (based on primitive inspection)
- Experienced (based on first-hand experience)

They propose that the perception of credibility is influenced by a user's computer and Internet:

- Expertise
- Understanding
- Need for information, and
- Evaluation errors.

Other considerations in play are timeliness (since online news can be filed or reported on at any time); conversational uses (such as forums, chat rooms, electronic mail and the telephone) and the type of information being searched by readers, for example, news versus entertainment (Abdulla *et al*., 2002. [Flanagin & Metzger, 2001]).

3.8.5. Study 5: *How Do People Evaluate a Website's Credibility: Results from a large study* (Fogg, Soohoo & Danielson, 2002).

This joint study combines the findings of work done by the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab (PTL) and an Internet design company called Sliced Bread Design.

The Stanford researchers telephonically surveyed 2684 people who were asked to evaluate the credibility of two active sites, randomly allocated from a selection of content categories, including e-commerce, entertainment, finance, health, news, non-profit, opinion or review, search engines, sports and travel.

The study assessed a total of 100 websites in a qualitative framework in which the authors "gathered the comments people wrote (2440 in all) about each site's credibility and analysed these comments to track which features of a Web site were noticed (or went unnoticed) when consumers evaluated credibility online".

The Sliced Bread Design portion of the study was comprised of reviews of health and financial websites by 15 professionals from the same fields of expertise, who were asked to "assess the credibility of sites in their respective areas". The experts visited the same sites as the consumers in the Stanford PTL study (10 health sites or 10 finance sites) and were asked to rank the credibility of the sites specific to their area of expertise on a scale from one to 10, as well as provide detailed written assessments of each site. The study was helpful in establishing the typical elements affecting the audience's perception of credibility –such as update speeds and accuracy – and assisted in defining a set of factors on which to base the research of the three South African sites examined for this paper.

3.8.6. Study 6: *Credibility of Online Newspapers* (Nozato, 2002).

Nozato's paper found strong relationships between credibility and the audience's experiences with the Internet, online newspapers and print newspapers. The research found that the more experienced users are with the medium, the more credibility they attribute to online news.

Nozato's work provides insight into the strategies news sites may use to establish credibility by understanding their target audience's:

- Experience with the Internet
- Usage of online newspapers
- Frequency of online newspaper use and, importantly,
- An individual's familiarity with the printed newspapers

Nozato refers to substantial earlier research into media credibility and cites numerous studies into factors affecting news credibility, but concludes that Meyer's 1988 study (based on Graziano and McGrath's (1986) work) establishes the five most widely accepted elements of credibility, namely:

- Fairness
- Unbiased
- Tells the whole story
- Accuracy
- Trustworthiness

(Nozato, 2002 [Graziano & McGrath, (1986)]).

However, Nozato expands on these five factors to develop a list of nine credibility factors, including those already mentioned:

- Timeliness
- Depth
- Reputation
- Accuracy
- Completeness
- Source
- Reliability
- Newsworthiness
- Interactivity and trustworthiness

(Nozato, 2002)

The author concludes that the basis for online newspapers' credibility is the same as for print, but with some online characteristics. These characteristics inform the strategies and techniques used by the news sites examined in this research paper.

3.8.7. Study 7: *Are South African news websites currently upholding the best international standards in acknowledging error and publishing corrections?* (Tucker, 2005).

This study sets out to determine whether South Africa's leading serious news sites adhere, both in their policy and practice, to one of the fundamental journalistic ethics, that is, acknowledging and correcting error online.

The question is highly relevant given the technological nature of the medium which allows errors to be disposed of without trace and therefore, potentially, without accountability.

Using content analysis, the paper compares thirteen high profile South African sites with one another and with ten leading British and US news sites. South African news brands with an online presence were selected from lists provided by the Online Publishers' Association (OPA) and the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) *South Africa Year Book 2004/2005* as well as from the top publishers *IOL*, *Johnnic*, *Media24* and *MWeb*, and from independent companies such as M&G Media and websites of broadcast news entities, *SABC* and *Carte Blanche*. International news brands were selected on their traffic figures based on ratings provided by the Online News Association (ONA) in the US, and lists published by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) in Britain.

In addition to observation of each site, a brief questionnaire was sent to editors and management of the sites to establish what error and correction policies and practices are used but which may not be visible on the websites. Questions were posed in a simple, multiple-choice format.

The research outcome rates South Africa's online news media poorly compared to its counterparts in Britain and the US. While there are some mitigating factors for this, the one most commonly cited is the lack of resources. The research indicates a need

for a uniform industry code for correcting errors in online news. The study is relevant to this paper in that it is one of very few studies specific to the South African context.

3.8.8. Study 8: *The anatomy of a death spiral: Newspapers and their credibility* (Meyer & Zhang, 2002).

Finally, Meyer & Zhang (2002), found strong links between the perceived business success of newspapers and their credibility in the eyes of their readers. Correlations can be drawn in online news. Simply put, apparent affluence makes for credibility, which, Meyer points out, is not the same as believability:

> "…A newspaper's product is neither news nor information. We are in the influence business. We create two kinds of influence: societal influence (not for sale) and influence on the decision to buy (for sale). But they are related, because the former enhances the value of the latter" (Meyer & Zhang, 2002).

The relationship between these factors is described in the chart below:

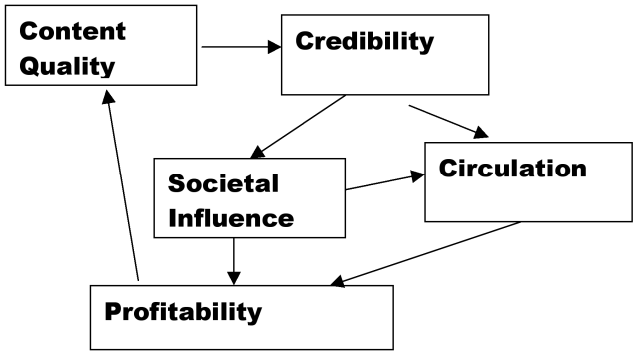


Figure 1: Relationship between factors affecting credibility (Meyer & Zhang, 2002)

This "influence model" not only describes in simple form the inter-play of a variety of factors affecting credibility, but also provides an intriguing business rationale for social responsibility:

> "The way to achieve societal influence is to obtain public trust by becoming a reliable and high-quality information provider, which frequently involves investments of resources in news production and editorial output. The resulting higher quality justifies more public trust attributed to the newspaper and, not only larger readership and circulation, but influence with which advertisers will want their names associated" (Meyer & Zhang, 2002).

The model operates in reverse when cutbacks in content quality "erode public trust, weaken societal influence, and eventually lead to losses in circulation and advertising dollars". The authors contend that when managers are under pressure from owners and investors they tend to make cutbacks regardless of the long-term consequences "because reducing quality has a quick effect on revenue that is instantly visible while the costs of lost quality are distant and uncertain" (Meyer & Zhang, 2002).

3.8.9. Recommended strategies to establish online credibility

Additional information came from the Online News Association's Digital Journalism Credibility Study (Belo Interactive, 2004**)** in the form of a concise list of strategies that the study shows will enhance the credibility of news sites. The strategies are based on the recommendations of over 2300 survey respondents and 50 digital journalists who participated in the study.

The ONA recommendations are straightforward, suggesting that news sites:

- Should hire professional journalists and train them
- Establish codes and standards of ethics and implement them
- Interact with readers
- Be open about errors and corrections
- Differentiate clearly between editorial and advertising

Further, the ONA highlights some issues unique to online journalism:

- The nature of advertising, for example pop-up advertising in editorial content
- Conflict of interest when editorials or reviews are juxtaposed with links to online sales for advertiser's products
- Corrections policies – do they exist and are they available for public viewing?
- Accuracy of news partners' pages contents of pages linked to the site
- The question of disclosure about relationships with partners, advertisers and sponsors

Some of the above findings are echoed in other research. The PEJ (2005) content analysis of nine leading sites provides further insight and suggests credibility in online news is determined by the following factors:

- Originality of reporting, that is, wire copy vs. original content
- Speed of updates and story freshness
- Interactivity, that is, how well sites interact with readers – for example, by pointing to links for ombuds, readers' forums and providing contact addresses for journalists
- Use of multimedia such as video, photo essays and galleries, use of graphics such as graphs and maps (the video articles on *Washingtonpost.com* are an excellent example of multimedia usage)
- Whether sites admit and correct errors and provide links to erroneous material in archives
- Whether sites explicitly differentiate between advertising and editorial
- Whether they acknowledge advertorial
- Questions of trustworthiness in hyperlinking and sourcing
- Transparency, that is, whether sites acknowledge sources and link to source material such as public documents

(PEJ, 2005)

The papers above were an important source of information, firstly as references for establishing a research method, and also in identifying the recurring factors affecting online credibility in the South African context, namely:

- Update speeds
- Wire copy vs. original content

- Advertising
- Accuracy
- Transparency
- Interactivity

To establish the South African context, a brief overview of the South African online landscape is offered in the next chapter.

4. Overview of South Africa's online environment

In examining how *M&GOnline (mg.co.za), News24 (news24.co.za)* and *Independent Online (iol.co.za)* establish their credibility in the context of the challenges to online news in this country, it is helpful to offer an overview of the industry in South Africa and to look at the economic factors that visibly impact these sites. This chapter looks at Internet usage, the cost of access versus Internet delivery and the misconception that online journalism ought to be produced at significantly lower costs than traditional journalism.

In the early days of Internet, the South African media joined the global stampede to launch websites. When sites failed to provide the monetary returns predicted by dotcom hype, many online newsrooms downsized significantly. Nevertheless, in 2006 industry observers began sounding notes of cautious optimism about improved revenue models and future growth in the industry (Goldstuck, 2005; Buckland, 2005, 2006, 2006a; OPA, 2005, 2006). The question is whether online newsrooms are keeping pace in terms of the resources and staff needed to produce quality online offerings for the growing audience.

Web traffic figures from the Online Publishers' Association (OPA) show a 48% increase in Web traffic in the 12 months prior to publication of the report. The total number of visitors reported across all OPA member sites in the second quarter of 2006 was 6.7 million, compared with 4.5 million in the same quarter of 2005. These figures support the increased optimism in the industry and a growth in prospects for online advertising revenue (OPA, 2006).

The *Goldstuck Report* 2005, an annual study of South Africa's Internet usage and access, found that "solid growth in corporate usage and dramatic uptake of broadband has helped to push the number of South Africans with Internet access up by 5%" (Goldstuck, 2005). Among its key findings, it reports that 3,6-million South Africans had Internet access at the end of 2005, which represented an increase in growth from 4% in 2004 to 5% in 2005. According to this research, these figures translate to mean one in twelve South Africans has access to the Internet (Goldstuck, 2005).

The current demographics of South Africa's Internet users can be summarised as being:

- In the top echelons of the Living Standard Measures (LSM)
- Educated (64% have a diploma, associate, bachelor's or post-graduate degree)
- Wealthy (20%, largest group in the household-income category, are in the top-earning bracket with household income of R400 000)
- 57% are homeowners
- 94% own cell phones
- Approximately 50% of the total audience lives in the large urban areas: Johannesburg (24% of audience), Cape Town (15%) and Pretoria (10%)
- 59% are male
- 41% are female
- Most users are in the 18-34 age group

(Walton, 2006)

PC Users in South Africa 2006, a study released by World Wide Worx in June 2006, shows that the number of personal computers in use in South Africa would be over five million by the end of that year. The study, conducted by Kirsty Laschinger and Arthur Goldstuck, moved beyond conventional methods of tabling computer sales to establish the figures. Instead they researched how long PCs, laptops and servers remain in use once they are in the market. The findings give an indication of the size of the PC user base in South Africa and point to an expected increase in the uptake of Internet connectivity.

According to *The Goldstuck Report: Internet Access in South Africa 2005,* 3.6 million South Africans had access to the Internet at the end of 2005. The report suggests factors that will continue to drive growth in this sector are:

- Strong economic growth
- The emergence of the black middle class
- Improved education levels, including computer literacy
- The evolution of the distribution channel
- Improved affordability of PCs, both as a result of cheaper product and new financing options
- Convergence of voice and data
- Technology improvements
- Demand for more server and storage capability to meet higher levels of corporate governance requirements

(Goldstuck, 2005)

However, questions of telecommunications infrastructure, cost of access and revenue challenges for the online news industry cast a shadow over such an optimistic view.

Telkom's long-standing monopoly is blamed for current poor service levels. Along with the high cost of connectivity, sluggish download times and pitiable service provision, Telkom's reign is seen to have retarded South Africa's commercial Internet viability. It has stunted the online news media as a feasible industry deserving the same levels of advertising, financing and professional staffing enjoyed by the traditional news media. These problems have begun to be contested by the second telephone network operator. While some believe the arrival of a competitor for Telkom will result in reduced costs and raised service levels if the predicted uptake of broadband happens, less optimistic observers disagree (R. Muller, personal communication, 2006; H. Herber, personal communication, 2006).

Rudolph Muller, founder of *MyADSL,* a well-known activist website dedicated to creating awareness about broadband issues in South Africa, is a critic of both Telkom and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa). In terms of how broadband access affects the credibility of news sites, Muller considers the question to be central to both the producer and the consumer (R. Muller, personal communication, 2006).

Muller argues that while the Telkom clampdown on broadband growth persists, online news producers cannot hope to expand their offerings to the point where they will attract enough readers to generate viable advertising revenue and therefore the audience is limited to those who can afford Internet access. This feeds a cycle of cost-related problems including the numbers and calibre of staff sites can afford to employ,

the quality of journalism they can produce and the amount of innovative multimedia journalism they can feature on their sites (very costly to host and often not possible for readers to access due to Telkom's low bandwidth).

Muller links the stagnation of South African broadband Internet directly to Telkom's cost structure. Telkom's fixed line rental charge is under R100 for the copper line that delivers their voice service. When installing ADSL, Telkom performs a minor upgrade to this line, estimated to cost less than R40, thus allowing broadband access via existing copper infrastructure. In addition to Telkom's monthly fees and rental, customers have to pay an Internet Service Provider (ISP). While Telkom points to infrastructure costs to explain their high fees, Muller contends this is inaccurate, saying:

> "The copper wire infrastructure is already in place. The other infrastructure is very cheap exchange equipment and mass-produced modems" (R.Muller, personal communication, 8 January 2007).

Meanwhile, the second operator, NeoTel, has won the right to utilise Telkom's copper wire system, suggesting NeoTel should easily launch its competitive broadband product. However, this has not been the case. Internet Service Providers (ISP's) are similarly affected by Telkom's monopoly as the supplier of facilities such as the leased lines that ISPs require for building networks and services. Geoff Rehmet, spokesman for Internet Solutions, a leading ISP, is quoted as saying Telkom's fees constitute an "exclusionary act" since they preclude other industry players from competing in the market (Gedye, 2006). Weidemann (2006) suggests Telkom's actions reflect poorly on the government's managed liberalisation process in the telecommunications sector, instead seeing it as a cartel composed of a few privileged players whose profits would be jeopardised in the event of genuine competitiveness.

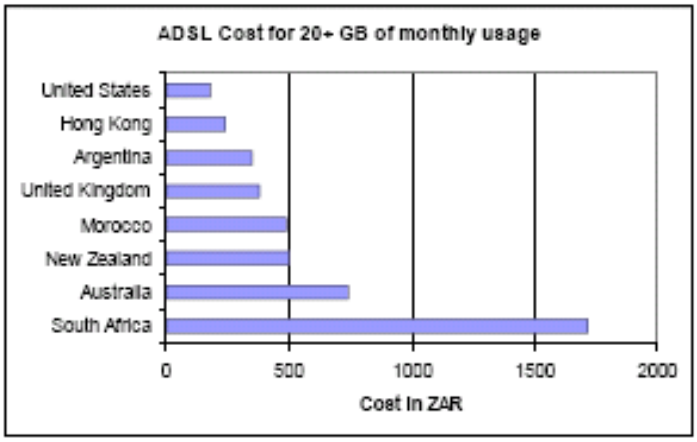
Internationally, bandwidth prices have plummeted due to increased competition and improved technology. South Africa remains an exception to this trend. According to Muller, internationally the cost of broadband is around 2% of monthly income. He says, "In South Africa it is far higher which is why the uptake has been restricted in this country". Despite the cost barrier, Muller observes broadband uptake has been "over 100% a year" proving the high demand for broadband despite prohibitive pricing. He draws a parallel between the significant public demand for broadband and the unexpectedly high uptake of cell phones among low-income groups in the 1990's (R. Muller, personal communication, 8 January 2007).

Cell phones were initially thought of as luxury goods targeting an affluent minority. Consequently, government left the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM), the most common mobile phone platform, largely in the hands of the private sector. Critics now suggest the state's failure to deliver on its mandate of telephony for the poor forced people to buy cell phones and in so doing propelled the cell phone industry "into the hands of the capitalist free market" (Weidemann, 2006). Today it is cell phones not landlines that serve as the main communication devices at the low end of the telephony market. According to Muller (2007) and Weidemann (2006), the government realises it lost an opportunity to profit with cell phones. For fear of killing another golden goose, they suggest government now strongly resists the liberalisation of Telkom while paying lip service to competition via its tame industry watchdog, Icasa.

Muller links Telkom's continuing grip on the country's Internet access directly to lack of will at senior government level. He suggests Telkom is practising a form of passive resistance while keeping within the law. In his view, Icasa's failure to properly discipline Telkom stems from its government-appointed councillors and the influence of the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications who is a signatory to Icasa legislation. In 2006 an Icasa investigation into the cost and quality of Telkom's ADSL Internet service ruled in favour of Telkom. In its ruling Icasa rejected calls to limit how much Telkom can charge for bandwidth; refused to clamp down on the national carrier's controversial, high monthly rental fees or to remove the cap on how much international bandwidth subscribers can use each month. The September 2006 findings followed hearings in April that year, during which time Icasa received a record 446 submissions on Telkom's high costs and poor service provision.

In addition to maintaining price barriers that are un-scaleable for the average South African, among the best evidence justifying such criticism is Telkom's death-like grip on WiMax spectrums, a type of Third Generation (3G) cellular network that builds on GSM to allow Internet access.

WiMax technology has been proven to deliver easy and efficient broadband connectivity to rural areas, as well as to alleviate broadband bottlenecks in populous areas. Currently, the only stakeholders with rights to exploit the WiMax spectrum (significantly, they are not obliged to use it) are Telkom, its USALs and NeoTel. Meanwhile, an estimated 50 WiMax projects are underway elsewhere in Africa and according to analysts the number is "growing every day" (Weidemann, 2006). Even as Telkom acknowledges WiMax technology can bridge the digital divide by enabling cost-effective, accessible ICT to rural areas, it continues to resist implementation. In terms of WiMax delivery, South Africa now lags behind Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana as well as two of Africa's poorest countries, Uganda and Mozambique. Furthermore, a study into international broadband cost structures, speeds and comparative pricing shows colossal discrepancies in service levels and cost when compared to those in South Africa.



Country	Service	Speed	Usage Limit	Cost
United States	ADSL	3 Mbps	Unlimited	R178
Hong Kong	FTH	100 Mbps	Unlimited	R249
Argentina	ADSL	5 Mbps	Unlimited	R350
United Kingdom	ADSL	8 Mbps	40 GB	R381
Morocco	ADSL	4 Mbps	Unlimited	R491
New Zealand	ADSL	3,5 Mbps	20 GB	R497
Australia	ADSL	1,5 Mbps	20 GB	R742
South Africa	ADSL	4 Mbps	20 GB	R1715

Figure 2: International ADSL pricing comparison (Muller, 2006).

Muller's estimates put South Africa's broadband user figures at around 300 000 with significant monthly uptake figures. Even so, like Herber, Muller remains pessimistic about the future of Internet access for the majority of South Africans. The implication is that, like cell phones, if the cost were more accessible, the uptake of broadband and dial-up Internet would exceed expectations, potentially increasing the online audience and dramatically improving the value to advertisers, raising revenue and the overall quality of online news offerings. This possibility is supported by research showing the growing number of personal computers in South Africa (Goldstuck, 2006).

Goldstuck's report – released prior to the 2006 Icasa findings on Telkom's broadband provision which found in favour of Telkom – predicted that Internet access costs would drop as a result of the fast uptake of broadband among existing Internet users. The report suggests a corresponding release of dial-up availability points to the gradual increase of Internet access to sectors of society that previously lacked it (Goldstuck, 2005). Nevertheless, the outlook remains pessimistic. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development revealed that South Africa has the worst broadband penetration in a sample of 30 countries, including a number of developing nations (*My ADSL*, Broadband Report 2006).

In addition to the cost of Internet access and poor delivery, general belt-tightening in the media industry has been exacerbated by a common misconception among media managers that ease of technology means online news demands fewer staff than print. While this is true for some cost centres such as layout, display and distribution, quality online content demands trained journalists who are more than just reporters.

Following a journalism skills audit in 2002, the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) expressed concerns about standards in the South African industry. After the tabling of the 2002 audit report, Sanef's education and training sub-committee identified 11 areas where "critical interventions were needed as a matter of urgency if journalism is to be a truly respected profession in this country". Sanef proposed, among other suggestions, that management and executives in the industry should promote the notion of journalism as a "noble profession", one with responsibility and ethics. The online environment was included in the recommendations with the recognition that the "Internet requires (the) same basic journalism skills, but on top of that multi-skilling in some areas" (Sanef, 2002).

Again, in 2004, in recognition of credibility deficits and other problems in the industry, Sanef committed itself to a number of goals aimed at improving "accurate

and ethical reporting" and "moving media to higher levels of quality" (Sanef, 2005). Credibility in online journalism is linked to a variety of factors, not least to profit making and lack of resources.

Walton (2006) counts revenue challenges among the main problems facing online media in South Africa. The inability of sites to generate sufficient revenue, thus forcing them to operate on minimal overheads, stems directly from the low number of Internet users relative to other media, which is directly linked to the high cost of Internet access and poor broadband rollout in this country. Although online advertising is on the increase in South Africa, advertising alone cannot provide sufficient profits for news sites.

Nevertheless, the chief revenue stream for news sites continues to be advertising, with subscriptions, premium and historic content and sponsorships providing lesser revenue. Research indicates Internet readers resent being charged to view news content (Schiff, 2006), partly due to the continuing broad perception that the Internet and its information is free. While a few serious news sites charge for premium content, the trend internationally is a shift away from subscriptions or other fees.

Interestingly, the most recent *State of the News Media* report published on 12 March 2007, notes that the sale of premium content is "rare". Of 38 leading news sites examined in the study, only four sell premium content. The report further found that archival material is most often given away free. These findings appear to validate the move of South Africa's *Mail&Guardian Online* to abandon their premium content charges in late 2006 (R. Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Despite its relatively poor returns, advertising remains the most viable revenue stream for the three South African sites in this study. However, according to media buyer Harry Herber, whose views are informed by his advertising industry metier, this revenue model is doomed (H. Herber, personal communication, 5 January 2007).

Herber bases his assessment on three premises. The first, that the South African press has very few first-rate journalists. The second, that the audience for news sites is likely to remain too insignificant to offer value to advertisers and, thirdly, that the Internet's very characteristics work against it when it comes to advertising.

The mediocrity in news journalism, he says, immediately weakens the news product, whether in print or online:

> "South African newspapers are much better reporters than journalists. It's borne out by the fact that there are no known (famous) journalists in South Africa apart from a handful of editors. They are reporters not journalists, there's no intellect applied to it" (H. Herber, personal communication, 5 January 2007).

This lack of intellectual capacity, says Herber, contributes to the ability of the press to work quickly and economically, which succeeds in certain news genres, including print tabloids and online. He refers to Naspers as an excellent example of business efficiency in both print and online given their re-cycling of content in, for example, *The Sun* and *Die Son* and other titles (effectively print-to-print shovelware) as well as print-to-online shovelware on *News24* which gleans content from print titles around

the country. *News24*, *IOL* and *Mail&Guardian Online* use similar business efficiencies to fill their pages.

In spite of their efforts to keep overheads low, Herber states that, to his knowledge, no South African news sites make a profit. This may be reasonably accurate given that in 2006 *Mail&Guardian Online,* which was launched in 1994 and is the oldest online news site in South Africa, posted its first, slender profit since its inception (R.Wolmarans, personal communication 9 January 2007).

Lack of profit is partly due to low online advertising rates in which clients are charged on a cost-per-page impression basis. Among the key characteristics of the medium is its high degree of measurability. In advertising terms, this allows the advertiser to pay only for a very strictly defined target, representing just a sliver of the potential market. While this model succeeds in countries where the online audience is vast, "in South Africa, where the online audience is tiny, the medium is hoist by its own petard" (H. Herber, personal communication, 2007).

The Internet, he says, is further challenged by the fact that it was not originally designed to display advertising. The Internet's evolution into a medium for news advertising has been directly, and often poorly, translated from the traditional news media:

> "Too many historic (advertising) techniques are being applied to a new medium that has a different way of being consumed. It's a different thing and therefore you've got to do it differently…you've got to create for it"
>
> (H. Herber, personal communication, 5 January 2007)

While Herber acknowledges the immense commercial possibilities of the Internet and transactional online advertising (sales over the Internet) he contends the advertising industry needs to invent an advertising dialect that speaks to the characteristics of the medium. He further contends advertisers do not understand these characteristics and he considers the existing approach to online advertising ineffectual.

However, online marketing experts have begun the creative process to invent a new advertising language for online. This includes the move towards paid search and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), to the extent that some industry leaders argue contextual search advertising may replace graphic advertising online, particularly in countries such as South Africa where Internet penetration is low. South African advertising expert, Reg Lascaris, is quoted in the *Weekend Argus* (9 December 2006) as saying digital media dialogue with customers is "replacing the megaphone tactics" of traditional print and broadcast media marketing.

However, Herber contends the rising Internet audience and advertising figures quoted by the Online Publishers' Association (OPA) and the Goldstuck Report must be warily measured against recent AdIndex figures for the 12 months ending August 2006, which puts Internet advertising spend in South Africa at less than 1% of total advertising revenue in the country, that is, R151.8M. Herber is confident the actual Rand value is far lower, saying it is common practice for advertisers to negotiate rate card discounts of up to 80% (Herber, personal communication, 5 January 2007).

Like other observers, Manson (2004) identifies under-funding as a "major problem", suggesting sustained investment strategies are required if sites are to achieve their business targets. According to Manson, the advent of the OPA did little to promote online media because "smaller industry players seem to feel they are being excluded from the process of setting an industry agenda" and points a finger at the high annual membership fee (R20 000 in 2004) as a factor in that exclusion.

Although slow to do so, it is evident that online readership is growing in South Africa despite high costs and limited access by the bulk of the population. Figures from the OPA and the *Goldstuck Report* indicate an expanding, influential and well-informed sector of Internet users, accessing both local and foreign news. Research in the US shows that journalism standards and online credibility are more closely scrutinised and criticised as familiarity with and usage of the Internet increases (PEJ 2005). It would follow that South Africa's "highly educated, high-earning" online audience (Buckland, 2004) is of value to advertisers and therefore that the online news media might expect to increase their revenue, making it possible to improve newsroom resources. However, this has not proved to be the case.

Contrary to early expectations, advertising spending has not followed the online media, although recent figures show an improvement (OPA, 2005, 2006). Until 2003 the slow uptake of online advertising could be partially attributed to the absence of accurate measures of South African online audiences (OPA, 2003). In 2003 the OPA began working with RedSheriff, a New York and Sydney-based company, to operate a statistics system that accurately monitors South Africa's web traffic (*The Media Online*, Red Sheriff/Nielsen) and can now supply accurate audience data to the advertising industry. With accurate web traffic measures now in place, traffic figures show a 48% increase in Web traffic to South African sites in the past year.

A survey by World Wide Worx, *Online Media in South Africa 2005*, conducted in cooperation with the OPA, indicates that the South African online advertising industry is in good health. The report describes the industry as having "come of age" (Goldstuck, 2005). However, the study found the traditional advertising industry lacks awareness of the "efficiency, measurability and reach of online advertising" and has not yet accepted the potential of the Internet as an advertising vehicle (Goldstuck, 2005).

Interactivity, one of the Internet's chief characteristics, gives the medium a great advantage over other forms of media since it is the one most easily and accurately measurable. This, and the interactivity which allows audience feedback and user polls, represents opportunities to collect advanced demographics through online surveys and to accurately measure readership, gain understanding of their preferences and needs and therefore to develop highly targeted advertising. This is not yet fully exploited, however, and continuing lack of revenue to some extent explains why online news in South Africa is generally a duplication of what is available in print and from news wires.

In 2004, online adspend was led by online gambling and the commercial financial sector. Manson quotes Joanne Scholtz, then media director at FCB Johannesburg, as saying:

> "Some service, business-to-business and high-end product clients spend between 5% and 10% of their budgets online. However, most mass consumer products are limited in their online spending and unless the online universe grows substantially, I do not see this changing in the near future" (Manson, 2004).

Furthermore, the claim that the advertising industry is or has been unreasonably resistant to online advertising is false, according to Herber. "The medium does not deliver. Why would they get excited about it?" (H. Herber, personal communication, 5 January 2007). Not enough South Africans are Internet users to make the medium exciting to advertisers as it is in countries with larger markets and better access to the medium. In Herber's view, the South African audience is unlikely to grow to the significant degree required for news sites to become especially profitable.

In addition to revenue, Walton (2006) identifies problem areas as being threats to privacy, concentration of ownership, shrinking diversity of voices, the race for news, challenging technologies and inequitable access to information technology. She suggests there are ongoing changes in the nature of news content, which is becoming "more contextualised, multi-modal, customised and allows more audience involvement" (Walton, 2006).

She credits Arrie Rossouw, founding publisher of *News24.com*, with the following pointers for creating successful news sites, suggesting sites should:

- Produce quality content
- Never compromise credibility for speed
- Offer local content
- Integrate print and online
- Create tailored content
- Distribute content on all platforms

(Walton, 2006)

The Internet has impacted the practices of working journalists, the structure of the online newsroom and the industry at large. There is a continuing "realignment of relationships between publics, journalists, news organisations" (Walton, 2006). For example, in step with international trends, *MoneyWeb* recently equipped reporters with mobile communication devices that will allow them to work as mojos (mobile journalists). However, *Moneyweb* is a rare example of excellence in the South African online environment, as most news sites continue to be pitifully under-staffed and under-resourced (Manoim, 2000; Krüger, 2005; Buckland, 2005a).

Furthermore, Manoim (2000) speaks of the "uneasy truce between the subtle requirements of due care and attention to detail, and the brute force demands of production quotas and deadlines". He asserts that even the most tightly run newsroom needs staff levels that will ensure a quality product (Manoim, 2000). Some South African news sites have successfully bridged the gap between the cost of producing excellent online journalism and the revenue needed to fund it, but have largely failed to attract the kind of substantial advertising revenue seen in other media.

5. Factors influencing online news credibility

Research (see Researching online credibility) consistently cites five observable, key factors directly influencing the audience's perception of a news site's credibility. These are: the speed of updates, the use of wire copy compared to original content, the placement and content of advertising, a site's policy and practices regarding accuracy and how well a site interacts with its audience. The British Broadcasting Corporation (*BBC*) news site, *BBC News Interactive*, serves as one of the best examples of excellence in all these areas and is mentioned in this chapter as a frame of reference.

5.1. Update speeds

The speed with which news is updated or changed on sites is cited as a credibility factor in nearly all studies on the subject. Steve Hermann, Head of *BBC News Interactive*, agrees that update speeds are possibly the most significant factor in online news credibility.

> "Update speed is a key selling point for anyone who wants to be a serious news provider in terms of 24 hour news. Our guiding principle is we respond to breaking news within a minute or two and add to the detail as quickly as possible. The first step will be a moving ticker or news alert. Within five or ten minutes we write an initial breaking news story which is followed up later once more comes in." (S.Hermann, personal communication,15 February 2007).

The *BBC's* principle is to work on the story incrementally after getting the first alert up within minutes of the story first breaking. In this respect, they have the advantage of a global news-gathering network posting from around the world. The newsroom, staffed by 200 dedicated online journalists, is linked – as are other departments in the *BBC* building – to a central tannoy system announcing whenever a journalist files a new story from anywhere in the world. Whatever is filed is immediately available to all *BBC* news operations, whether text, video or audio and can be freely used without the problem of in-house embargos, which can limit the use of news from title newspapers (as is the case with *IOL* in South Africa*)*. "No one department or section has dibs on any incoming content," says Hermann. Incoming stories are first screened by a news organiser who does copy tasting for their section before it's decided whether or not to use a story.

Hermann fingers technology and the "people factor" as the prime stumbling blocks to updating timeously:

> "On 9/11, site traffic clogged the system. We now have load balancing and other solutions, but given that technology is developing all the time, it is inevitable that it will let you down at some point."

The "people factor," says Hermann, stems from the high pressures of the 24-hour news environment:

> "It demands a lot of the journalists. They are expected to make quick decisions and keep track of several, often-complex stories at the same time. While people in the forefront are experienced, our policy is to err on the side of being

> right rather than of being first" (S.Hermann, personal communication,15 February 2007).

He further concedes the margin between being first and second with the news online can be a matter of a few minutes. In Hermann's view, professional competitiveness often contributes more in the race to be first than does the audience's demands.

5.2. Wire copy vs. original content

It has been noted that the leading news sites in South Africa frequently lead with identical stories. This, added to the knowledge that sites employ few staff, is a strong indication of wire copy journalism in practice. It applies in the case of sites backed by strong print brands, including the "fiercely independent" *Mail&Guardian Online* (Buckland, 2003). In 2006 the *Mail&Guardian Online*, one of the country's most respected news brands and the recipient of international acclaim, reportedly had only one dedicated online reporter on its staff. In comparison, *BBC Interactive*, legendary for original, multimedia content, employs 200 full-time newsroom staff (Hermann, 2006):

> "Our staff is mostly office based only because the *BBC* has a such a big existing network staff already. We send out our own journalists when the story warrants it. Otherwise journalists work at a great deal of re-writing and adapting broadcast news whether being filed live or from transcripts, into web text."

As an example of excellence in online news, the *BBC* is hard to beat, to a large extent thanks to their access to original content from other *BBC* media. Although reference is made to *BBC* radio or TV news sources, online journalists conduct their own research and write original copy since it is more practical to write fresh pieces than to re-work broadcast content. Journalists are also expected to continually update articles on the site.

One advantage the *BBC* has over competitors from a print-to-online background is access to rich multimedia such as streaming radio and TV content. This is illustrated by the February 2007 radio interview with Prime Minister Tony Blair, which was also broadcast via Internet (S.Hermann, personal communication,15 February 2007).

From the South African perspective, online news has much to learn. Manson (2004) contends:

> *"Independent Online* (*IOL*) produces only 5% of its own copy and pulls 35% from wire services and 60% from its traditional media partners.
> *News24* does slightly better, generating 10% of its copy in-house, but it gathers 15-20% of its content from traditional partners, and pulls another 70-75% from wire services.
> The *Mail&Guardian Online* also produces 10% of its copy in-house, getting 65% from wire services and around 25% from its print partner"
>
> (Manson, 2004)

However, Bryan Porter, content manager at *News24*, contests this view with the riposte:

> "There is (also) this perception in the market that wire copy is of lesser quality than other content. This is of course not true as the wires also have some of the best writers, editors and photographers around" (Manson, 2004).

5.3. Advertising

The division between advertising and editorial is among the key yardsticks used when measuring media credibility. This is true of both traditional and new media (Pew, 2005). This research investigates what practices are used to maintain distance between advertising and editorial, even in the face of revenue challenges and looks at the revenue models used by South African sites with a view to understanding how they impact the credibility of the publications being researched.

Research into the placement of sponsorships and advertising online shows that advertisers benefit from a site's credibility (Rodgers, Cameron & Brill, 2005). Advertising placement influences "memory for and attitude toward" the content on the page. For example, when advertising appears at the end of news articles, readers recall more details and gauge the credibility of the content as being higher. The same research notes that Internet sponsorships placed before news stories could be beneficial if the news content is perceived as credible. However, the placement may also confuse readers "as to the sponsor's intention" (that is, did the sponsor influence or provide input into the content?) and can blur the divide between news and advertising. The research contends that the sponsor can be advantaged by editorial credibility, but also warns that readers may develop a negative memory towards the sponsor, ultimately damaging the credibility of the site (Rodgers *et al*., 2005).

Other findings confirm that audiences have higher recall of advertising placed in the middle of the page than that placed at the top, but, conversely, proved that mid-page placement has a "negative effect" on readers. This may be due to reader's annoyance at having to "jump" while reading. The research suggests the intrusion causes a "partial integration" of the article, resulting in lower memory about what was read, resulting in lower perceived credibility for both the advertiser and the news content (Rodgers *et al*., 2005).

The tactics used by advertisers are often memorable, or even annoying, rather than enjoyable for the audience, a trait which advertisers see as the hallmark of a successful campaign. The researchers go on to suggest that advertising that interrupts or comes before the story "may have to be deciphered by readers" thus allowing for misinterpretation. They suggest sites should ideally have advertising polices in place to make sure readers are unambiguous as to where advertising ends and editorial begins (Rodgers *et al*., 2005). These findings have important implications for online news credibility, particularly the last one which states that advertising appearing after a news story is "most remembered and trusted". While advertising that appeared at the end of news content receives less benefit, such placement possibly best supports the credibility of the news site:

> "…Without interference of a sponsor, cognitive resources will be devoted to the news story, resulting in greater memory for the content. News stories that are processed without the presence (or influence) of a sponsor may also benefit from having greater perceived credibility" (Rodgers *et al*., 2005).

However, advertisers are unlikely to easily accept bottom page slots on a website. As a result, sites are required to negotiate a ceaseless balancing act between defending their credibility and their need for advertising revenue.

5.4. Accuracy

With a few notable exceptions like *Mail&Guardian Online,* which has a dedicated corrections page linking from the home page, Tucker (2005) suggests South African news sites are impervious to the importance of correcting error in a transparent, ethical way.

South Africa's news sites' preferred method of dealing with the inevitable errors that happen in the media is to make the problem vanish, leaving no record of the fix. This is evident from the non-existence of dedicated corrections pages on most serious news sites and the lack of direct email addresses and contact numbers for writers and editorial management. Instead sites offer generic "faceless" webforms and general email addresses for letters or complaints.

Only the *Mail&Guardian Online* gives a link to the press ombudsman. Interestingly, the names and direct contact details for advertising sales staff is easily found on all the websites observed in this research.

The importance of acknowledging error and correcting it while retaining a record of the correction and the original mistake is known to be as important online as it is in any serious newspaper. Sites that fail to appreciate this entertain the risk of damaging their own credibility and that of their news brand (Tucker, 2005).

Mark Glaser (2005) suggests the problem is serious because inaccuracies or even false information spread quickly via the Internet through media sources and blogs. "Even though the original source of the inaccurate info might put in a correction later, you rarely see that correction spread to all the other places online. It's a huge problem, especially for false rumors and such". Is the apparent lack of error and correction policies and transparency in the online news media indicative of a deeper ethics problem in journalism globally? Mark Glaser thinks it is more likely a matter of time pressure (M. Glaser, personal communication, 2005).

Despite this, just one of the sites surveyed, *Mail&Guardian Online,* alerts readership to earlier errors with a dedicated corrections page. Again, lack of time and resources are the most common rationalisations. Krüger (2005) disagrees with these justifications saying, "Everyone always complains about not having enough staff. I do think the speed of the medium is a factor - people working there have no deadlines because everything has to be posted 'now'." Acknowledging error "reflects an organisation's fundamental attitude to audiences and to their work," says Krüger (F. Krüger, personal communication, October 2005).

In Arant & Quitney's 2000 *Online Media Ethics* survey, more than 200 US editors were asked what they thought the corrections policy for online newspapers should be.

- 20% responded that a correction should be run after publishing a mistake
- 17% felt it was sufficient to replace the incorrect story with a new, corrected version

- 60% said they would run a correction and replace the incorrect story with a new, corrected version

(Arant & Quitney, 2000).

Some respondents agreed that, "to simply replace an incorrect story with a correct one smacks of '1984' and the wholesale revision of history" (Arant & Quitney, 2000).

Steve Hermann of *BBC Interactive* suggests the transparency of the Internet means journalists "can afford less to be gatekeepers". Far from being damaging to credibility online, he believes transparency "enhances credibility because the audience feels included and it helps them understand what we do and how we do it; that the media is not some sort of news-god with all the answers but is made up of ordinary people" (S.Hermann, personal communication, 15 February 2007).

5.5. Interactivity

The characteristics of the Internet allow far greater degrees of interaction with the audience than traditional print media, which is most often limited to a letter's page and dictated by space.

The value of interactivity is in the addition of value and context for readers, who can interact with content and journalists as well as participate in content creation. The experienced online audience is not as accepting as print readers. They are more familiar with the characteristics of the Internet and expect to interact with the medium. It is a common mistake among South African sites to treat interactivity as a technical feature.

Robert Niles, editor of the USC Annenberg *Online Journalism Review*, writes:

> "Interactivity is a relationship, built not with computer code but with words exchanged by real, living people on both sides of the Web server. Yes, you need good computer code to help enable and manage these relationships. But the code alone won't make them happen" (Niles, 2007).

The keys to successful interaction are:

- Links giving writers direct email addresses and should be easy to find
- Ideally, the same should apply for ombudsmen
- Reader's comments must be read and responded to
- Sites must offer readers the opportunity to talk to the writers. This is the one unique feature that differentiates interactivity on a news site from others and makes it valuable to readers who otherwise can comment and talk among themselves on a web forum
- Managing comments and shutting down discussions after a suitable time frees journalists and editors from the fear of having to respond on comments to every article they've ever written
- Sites must accept responsibility for keeping the conversation alive. Readers have to be "coaxed into the conversation then allowed to have the floor once they engage" (Niles, 2007).
- Sites should have a dedicated space (discussion boards, forums or blogs) where readers can converse among themselves. These formats make demands

on site resources because they call for moderators, but they can be useful sources for story leads.

- The participation of staff writers is imperative in the relationship between the site and audience.

Online interactivity takes the form of emailed letters, links to blogs and citizen reporting as well as forums and chat rooms. All of these come with their own merits and dangers, however the key ingredient is that readers are able to engage easily and quickly. If well handled, this conversation has immense benefits for the brand in terms of reader trust and overall credibility.

5.6. Brand

The notion that credibility is inherent to a brand rather than dependent on a site's content or other factors is particularly prevalent if the site derives its identity from an existing brand, which is the case with all three sites under scrutiny. In all three cases the power of the web brand stems from brand recognition, and the historical integrity of the brand in the eyes of loyal readership. (Although editor Jannie Momberg asserts *News24* is a stand-alone brand, the site unquestionably derives significant status from the print title brands from which it gets most of its content and which fall under the *Media24* umbrella).

Herber (2007) asserts the credibility of all three sites is linked directly to the fact that they are giving the readers what they want, rather than actively strategising to establish online brands:

> "To create a brand you've got to spend money. *IOL, News24*, *M&G* and their parent companies, are terribly low spenders in terms of self-promotion. They ride on heritage totally. They exist in the ether and they ride on the parent brand, which has been around for a hundred years. I think things are credible that you relate to" (H. Herber, personal communication, 5 January 2007).

Herman Manson (2004) suggests the online media industry has stagnated and is failing to attract more readers because no content-based brand of any significance has arisen locally, due in large part to the lack of original online journalism on the major news portals. Manson adds, "Presentation of content plays a further role in defining the brand". He quotes *News24's* Bryan Porter as saying, "The consumer does not care where their news originates, as long as they can find what they want on the media brand of their choice" (Manson, personal communication 2004).

Patrick Collings, a self-described "brand architect" and founding partner of Sagacite Brand Agency, has the advantage of seeing the topic from both a journalism and an advertising perspective. He started out as a journalist at the *Cape Times*, moved to *United Press International* (UPI) where he finished his 10-year reporting career as bureau chief for Southern Africa. During his journalism career he had management oversight of the *I-Net Bridge* financial newsroom and worked with *Dow Jones Newswires* in a management consultancy capacity, introducing them into the SA market. Collings tenders:

> "Brands play a major role in the success of an online site as they provide a type of shorthand to the audience that the news is from a reliable source. All three sites that you mention (*IOL, News24, Mail&Guardian Online*) rely on

> the brand recognition and association created by their traditional print operations to build their online audience" (P.Collings, personal communication, 18 January 2007).

He adds that journalists normally take umbrage to his contention that news is a "commodity product and therefore subject to the same broad brand methodologies and practices as other products and services." However, he tempers this, saying:

> "…building an online brand is not dissimilar to building a traditional print or broadcast brand. Essentially there are two things that the brand must deliver to its audience, namely relevant and credible news and functionality. In achieving the first brand objective of relevant and credible news, online news sites have to establish point of parity with the consumer. Points of parity allow the consumer to position the product or service within a known category and therefore understand its broad function as well as expectations of how it will perform. For example, if I said a media organisation carried sensational news about public figures, especially their alleged sexual misdemeanours and embarrassing moments in public, you may think of tabloid newspapers" (P. Collings, personal communication, 19 March 2007).

BBC Interactive is a case where brand power lends credibility to online news. The site was started in 1997 with the single disadvantage, says Hermann, of having to live up to the *BBC* brand and legacy at a time when the online environment was very new and staff were inexperienced in the medium's demands:

> "Right from the beginning it was drummed into everyone that this was the *BBC* and these standards and values would be upheld. Brand is a strength for the *BBC* website, but it also carries significant responsibilities – to get it right, to be fair and accurate and impartial" (S.Hermann, personal communication, 15 February 2007).

A more subtle challenge for the *BBC,* says Hermann, has been in aligning the brand which is seen in some countries - he uses India as an example - as an icon of somewhat staid respectability, while simultaneously remaining plugged-in to youth culture and the vibrancy of the Internet medium. "The intrinsic challenge online is in reinventing the *BBC* brand in a new arena (to) a new audience, so there's an element of gently updating the brand" (S.Hermann, personal communication, 15 February 2007).

The audience for 24-hour news is hard to define, but the *BBC*'s user testing sessions have established that much of their traffic is office-based. Hermann describes this group as the audience that "needs to know"; whom he says are the opinion formers, news-makers, and others to whom business and political breaking news is of key importance. Other visitors merely "flick around the web during breaks".

As Collings (2007) points out, there are multiple techniques to build a brand. The essential basics are:

> "To make people aware of the brand you need to make sure people know what the brand does (provides a wide range of news via the internet and other electronic communication), then you position the brand within the product or service category (entry-level or high-level offering, etc), you try to mould a perception of the product (good quality, etc), and finally you look to build a

> long-term relationship (Apple is a good example of a brand that has achieved that)" (P. Collings, personal communication, 19 March 2007).

In essence, the *BBC's* online success can be attributed to a commitment of funds and other resources and to the power of the brand, which is underpinned by the *BBC's* values of traditional journalistic excellence. This could serve as a benchmark model for South African news sites.

5.7. Design & layout

In the early days of online news, sites did not design their pages with credibility in mind. This is the opinion of Irwin Manoim, formerly a founding editor of *Mail& Guardian*, and involved in the start-up of *Mail&Guardian Online*. "I think what happened is that sites bought a content management system and slapped their logo on the top," he says. His views are supported by the fact that none of the editors or other personnel interviewed for this research had convincing responses to questions of how their page design might affect credibility. This is despite the availability of research proving that advertisers try to leverage the credibility of news sites to enhance their own product brands (Rodgers, Cameron & Brill, 2005).

Manoim (2007) attributes the one-size-fits-all approach to the use of Content Management Systems (CMS). All major news sites use pre-determined templates, which allow pre-selected and edited content to move into position according to a set of pre-determined rules. One of the most common is time stamps, where new content refreshes at certain times. This does not imply that the sites have automated feeds. Almost all have some form of human interface in the form of sub-editing or re-writing. Automated feeds are generally limited to content, such as financial markets news, which lends itself to moving tickertapes. However, the CMS is "usually a single formula that never changes," says Manoim (I. Manoim, personal communication, 20 March 2007).

Custom-built CMS's are extremely complicated and costly to build. Most serious media organisations purchase off-the-shelf systems, which come standard with key features. The home pages of news sites invariably have similar basic designs featuring a banner area across the top of the page, a column down either side featuring links and small advertisements or news items, space for a photograph at the top right hand side of the main frame, a sprinkling of smaller advertisements at the bottom and a large box advertisement mid-text in the main article.

Size standardisation for advertising copy is helpful for the advertising industry. However, the editorial team is compelled to work within these limitations, which are "incredibly intrusive," says Manoim. He relates an argument with an advertiser in the early days of the *Mail&Guardian Online* over the positioning of the client's copy:

> "I wanted to put it at the bottom (of the page) and he insisted it had to go at the top – a complete reversal of print rules. It went at the top. This is an indication of the series of battles online media have had to concede to win advertising" (I. Manoim, personal communication, 20 March 2007).

For online staff, the main limitations stem from the pre-set template. The absolutely fixed size available for the press photo is not always appropriate for the photograph.

Headlines and blurbs have to be written to fit both the first page and the subsequent pages that link to the story. The Internet is limited to the use of a specific range of 256 web-safe colours. Sites have "a tendency to use the same primary colours as used in newspapers" says Manoim. CMS's that place news according to a hierarchy of importance are very rare. This is a downfall when momentous news comes in that ought to push other items out of the way. "On 9/11 a number of websites in South Africa were still running a story about a Big Brother scandal. The sites lacked the flexibility to move the 9/11 story up the page," says Manoim (I. Manoim, personal communication, 20 March 2007).

Updating can be compromised by other factors. Typically, staff are allocated different authority protocols to change certain pages. If a staff member is unexpectedly away from the office there can be problems accessing their area of control if changes have to be made. Finally, CMS-driven news sites "have no way of flagging major news," says Manoim. "On 9/11 there was no difference between the front page than the day before" (I. Manoim, personal communication, 20 March 2007). This amounts to sameness in the appearance of many news sites, relieved only by differing logos, advertising and colours. All these factors represent potential technical and human-error stumbling blocks, which in turn impact site's credibility.

Shovelware is possibly the biggest swampland in online news. Manson (2004) believes the answer to the problem may lie in the structuring of sites. He suggests sites ought to give their original content, often made up of opinion pieces and features, a higher profile than they currently enjoy. "Whoever manages to truly differentiate themselves first in this market stands to win reader loyalty, market share, and ultimately revenues." He adds that online publishing should not be seen as an isolated industry, but rather as part of both the broader publishing and Internet communities (Manson, 2004).

Eyetrack III (2004) is a detailed study of broadband-era news websites. Conducted by Eyetools Inc. in partnership with the Poynter Institute and the Estlow Center, the study looks at patterns in users' eye movements across the home pages of news sites, and draws conclusions about the efficacy of news layout and advertisements according to their size, design and placement on a homepage.

Researchers noticed that readers' eyes most often "fixated first in the upper left of the page, then hovered in that area before going left to right. Only after perusing the top portion of the page for some time did their eyes explore further down the page" (*Eyetrack III*, 2004).

Other *Eyetrack III* observations note:

- Dominant headlines most often draw the eye first upon entering the page especially when they are in the upper left, and most often (but not always) when in the upper right
- Photographs, contrary to what you might expect (and contrary to findings of 1990 Poynter eyetracking research on print newspapers), aren't typically the entry point to a homepage
- Text rules on the PC screen – both in order viewed and in overall time spent looking at it
- A quick review of 25 large news websites reveals that 20 of them place the dominant homepage image in the upper left
- Most news sites have a consistent page design from day to day; they don't often vary the layout as a print newspaper would
- We observed that with news homepages, readers' instincts are to first look at the flag/logo and top headlines in the upper left

(Eyetrack III, 2004).

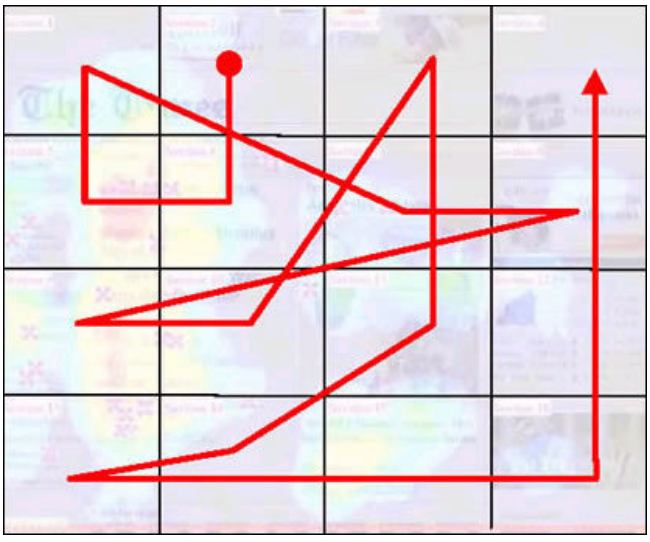


Figure 3: Zones of importance formulated from the *Eyetrack III* data.

Interestingly, some *Eyetrack III* recommendations as to how sites can offer advertisers more value, can damage their credibility in the eyes of the reader.

Table 1: *Eyetrack III* recommendations for optimum advertising.

- Consider designing news homepages so that ads are not set apart from editorial content too much with horizontal or vertical rules and excessive white space, which can act as barriers to viewing ads
- The researchers' observations suggest sites get better viewing for banner ads that do not contrast too severely with surrounding editorial content. We are NOT recommending that ads be presented as camouflaged editorial content. While that may attract more visual traffic, this practice would diminish your credibility
- Text ads work, in part, because they look similar to editorial content. It also helps if they are in close proximity to editorial content, which helps draw eyes.
- Size isn't always the dominant factor in Web ad performance. To get the most people to actually look at an ad, insetting it into the text flow seems to work better than any other placement. But sheer size appears to perform better in this regard
- Consider using expandable banner ads if you want better performance than static ads offer, but let viewers know the banner will expand rather than surprise users. If you're going to use a mouseover-expand ad, we suggest positioning it in a normal path of user mouse movement as a way to get the expanding part of an ad seen by a lot of people. (Note: Most users would see such an ad. The trade-off is that such ads annoy some users)
- Should you choose to use pop-up ads on your homepage, be aware of their poor performance relative to other ads

(*Eyetrack III*, 2004)

5.8. User Generated Content

Digital technology determines that traditional news organisations no longer have the sole power to publish and disseminate news. While liberating, it also changes the role of gatekeepers. Citizen journalism, from blogs to private websites and user-generated content utilised by mainstream news organisations, are beyond the control of the rules that govern professional journalism.

Among the challenges are the Internet's capacity for anonymity, opinion masquerading as news, news selection by people who are not bound by rules of fairness or completeness, anonymous or suspect sources, the manipulation of digital images, cut and paste plagiarism and the possibly suspect methods used in news gathering, such as through "lurking" in chat rooms or online communities.

In 1999, in preparation for an article she was writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, journalist Jennifer Egan spent several weeks visiting websites geared to the gay community and lurking in chat rooms that were restricted to gay and lesbian teens. Egan, in her 30's, accessed the chat rooms by falsifying her age and identity on the site's registration form (although she later identified herself as a reporter).

The case raises ethical red flags in journalism. Some argue that chat rooms and forums are public spaces, not only due to the ease with which the registration process can be skirted, but because the Internet itself is fundamentally a public sphere.

However, J.D. Lasica argues that to fake one's identity online is acceptable only "when the subject is of significant public importance". The public's right to know is itself a highly debatable topic, but added to this, Lasica further points out that Net etiquette frowns on the use of quotes from chat room discussions or bulletin boards without permission and he questions the journalistic ethics of such practice, particularly when dealing with "deeply personal" topics and comments made by minors (Berkman & Shumway, 2004).

Egan's research was further challenged by the simple fact that she could not always be sure exactly whom she was observing or interviewing. Internet communication easily allows identity concealment, just as Egan initially did, and for the construction of online personas quite different from reality, which many of her sources did. How, then, could Egan verify that her sources were indeed gay teenagers, and how could they be sure that she was a writer working on an article for *The New York Times Magazine*?

Soloski (1998) suggests it is in the interests of news organisations to conduct themselves in ways that support credibility, as this helps establish a "monopoly" of trusted news in the marketplace. Serious news sites may find this a valuable model, given the Internet's capacity to disseminate spurious material.

User-generated content would appear to be an inexpensive way for sites to add value to their product. David Payne, senior vice president and general manager of *CNN.com* is quoted on *Forbes.com* as saying, "I think we all see it as an opportunity to increase our news category by effectively enlisting an army of millions" (Hau, 2006). While exciting in theory, the reality falls short.

Digital citizen journalism is not new, as the same *Forbes.com* article points out. Amateur video played an "integral part in TV news reports ranging from the 1991 Rodney King beating and the subsequent riots in Los Angeles to the destruction wrought by the September 11 terrorist attacks, 2005's terrorist bombings in London and Hurricane Katrina" (Hau, 2006). New technology makes it increasingly easy for ordinary people to submit content as well as to manipulate it.

Among the most prominent sites using significant amounts of user-generated journalism are *OhMyNews, BBC News* and *Global Voices*. Other sites, such as the video-sharing site *YouTube* (which, although not a news site, does feature alleged eye-witness accounts of hostilities in the Middle East), *DailyKos* and *Digg* (which calls itself a "user-driven social content website"), may have legitimate news, but they fail the credibility test since they have no perceivable gatekeeping or verifiability, with the result that despite their high traffic, their brands lack believability.

The same digital technology that allows citizens to submit news to the media also allows them to manipulate or falsify images. Furthermore, questions arise as to the methods used to obtain user-generated content, raising important ethical considerations for professional news organisations inclined to use such content.

The 2004 Asian tsunami and 2005 London bombings are examples of professional commercial news organisations' use of user-generated video. In 2006, *CNN* referred to a video feed on *YouTube* featuring Middle East conflict. However, the broadcaster always cautioned that the authenticity of *YouTube's* content was not independently verified. The question remains whether *CNN* abdicated its gatekeeping role, which by traditional journalism standards includes the verification of news, and in doing so jeopardised *CNN's* credibility.

In Britain, July 7 2005 is seen as a defining moment in the mainstream media's attitude towards UGC, and in the audience's behaviour. In the two weeks following 7/7, four other bombings were attempted in London. The British public, having responded to the first attacks by submitting cell phone photos and other reports which had been used by the *BBC*, "knew what was expected of them and photos and videos flooded into the *BBC*" (Hermida & Thurman, 2007).

Interestingly, the 2007 *State of the News Media* study finds that despite being frequently punted as an important factor in relationship building and, by association, in establishing credibility, user-generated content is "more theoretical than a virtue in full bloom" (*State of the News Media,* 2007). The study took into account news sites offering "individual voice", that is, e-mail, blogs, commenting on stories, rating stories, entering live discussions and voting polls in response to a question, as well as "group voice" content, that is, tracking most-viewed and most-emailed stories and listing them on the site. While these mechanisms are useful in creating a sense of community among the audience, over- reliance erodes the credibility of serious sites because of the absence of trusted gate keeping:

> "Most news sites, whether stemming from traditional media outlets or not, place a high premium on reported news stories and keep control over their selection (and sometimes creation)" (State of the News Media 2007).

Mark Deuze argues that completeness, verifiability, truth and objectivity, while not strictly mechanisms for creating credibility, are ultimately central to the way sites establish and maintain credibility (M. Deuze, personal communication, 7 February 2007). Hermida & Thurman, (2007) point out that the "boom in free-flowing self-expression is largely taking place outside of established notions of professionalism", suggesting it is symptomatic of the public's desire for creative expression. Their research suggests that established news organisations prefer to retain traditional gatekeeping roles with regard to UGC while integrating it into a professional journalistic framework.

Concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues suggest that news organisations have too much at stake to throw their doors wide to UGC. While in collaborative journalism control is distributed among users, in participatory journalism news organisations provide editorial structures to bring different voices into news reporting. This research suggests that news organisations have an opportunity to take on the role of facilitating user media, by filtering and aggregating it in ways useful and valuable to audiences.

An example that perhaps exemplifies this area of difficulty is that of the global furore ensuing in 2006 from the publication in Danish newspapers of cartoons depicting the

Prophet Mohammed as a terrorist. In Britain, *The Guardian* newspaper print edition elected not to publish the cartoons. The paper's online publication, *Guardian Unlimited,* took a similar view. However, in keeping with one of the key characteristics of the Internet , the capacity to provide depth and reference material, *Guardian Unlimited* provided an outside link to the original material published on another website.

Ian Mayes, who at the time was reader's editor of *The Guardian* and also responsible for the online edition, agrees this is one example of the as yet uncharted ethical territory for which traditional journalistic ethics are often inadequate (I. Mayes, personal communication, 16 March 2007). The ethical and legal swamp deepens when legal issues are at play. In Internet law, every individual download of an article is considered a separate publication. Were an online publication found liable in a claim, it would be held accountable for every download of the offending material. For a publication like *Guardian Unlimited*, which according to Mayes has approximately 15 million unique users across 190 countries, this is a potentially devastating threat.

Given such scope for disaster, the need for news sites to be vigilant about Deuze's "completeness, verifiability, truth and objectivity" seems obvious. In practice, few sites abroad, and none of the three local ones researched for this paper, have the manpower or apparent inclination to direct resources to these areas.

Finally, the fact that citizen contributors are essentially non-professional journalists without a grounding in the fundamentals of journalism ethics limits the value of this form of newsgathering and throws the credibility of a site that is careless about user-generated content into question. The average citizen cannot access newsmakers in the way professional journalists, backed up by recognisable news organisations, are able to do. While UGC has a role, its lack of credibility due to lack of verifiability - and the fact that it happens largely outside the established framework of media professionalism - can be a benefit as well as a serious shortcoming in the credibility stakes.

6. Methodology

This research employs a mixed method approach leaning towards a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one. It is not intended to be an audience credibility survey, but rather an investigation into the techniques and strategies news sites employ to convey a sense of credibility.

Due to the limited scope of this work, the questions interrogated can be organised into two themes:

- What are the challenges to credibility in online news?
- What techniques and strategies do news sites use to build and maintain credibility?

In arriving at a set of questions to guide the research, previous online credibility research served as a guideline (see Researching Credibility). Additionally, The School of Journalism at Indiana University in the US used a database of online ethics cases prepared by Barry Bingham, Jr. (2002), published in his newsletter, *FineLine*. These provide a useful list of major categories for credibility studies:

- Sensitive news topics
- Handling sources
- Naming newsmakers
- Workplace issues
- Getting the story
- Covering politics
- Law enforcement
- Controversial photos
- Invading privacy
- Being first
- Bottom-line decisions
- Military issues

(Bingham, 2002).

The credibility of the three sites selected for research is taken as a given. The research looks at relevant newsroom practices and considers how these practices influence online news production and the decision-making that precedes or stems from these factors and which are known to influence the perception of credibility of the final product.

6.1. Criteria for selecting sites

The sites selected for this research are high-profile online news brands belonging to top publishers in South Africa. They were identified from lists provided by the Online Publishers' Association and the *Government Communication and Information System Handbook* (GCIS) 2005/6 as well as from web traffic figures supplied by the ONA (2006):

- *Mail&Guardian Online (mg.co.za)*
- *News24 (news24.co.za)*
- *Independent Online (iol.co.za)*

The sites were selected on the basis that they:

- Are serious news sites, not news aggregators
- Have the highest South African readership figures of South African sites
- Are seen as national rather than local in their coverage of news in the same way that print newspapers are delineated, for example, *The Star* online is a considered a local online paper, whereas the *Sunday Times* online is seen as a national site
- Brand and market themselves primarily as news sites not as email providers or general entertainment or information sites

The quantitative section of this research comprises a log of observations of the key elements known from prior research to impact credibility (see Researching Credibility). The home pages of the three sites were surveyed over three consecutive days, at random, a minimum of three times daily.

6.2. Home pages

There are many justifications for using the home pages ("front pages") of the sites as the unit of measurement. One of the most compelling is that, as with print, it is the front page that sells a newspaper.

It is here that sites and newspapers represent themselves to their audience on many levels. A home page strongly conveys style, image and tone and displays the most important news thus indicating the publication's news values and its social and political stance.

The high visibility of a home page serves as an important and logical point of entry into the body of the publication. It links all the other pages of the site. Users can enter a site from any page as they are indexed in search engines. However, it is critical that they are able to find their way to the home page as a point of reference in what would otherwise be a chaotic terrain of unrelated pages posted randomly online.

The non-linear nature of online news, together with the vast quantities of information accessible via links and archives, required that this research draw the line at an appropriate level. All three sites use their home page to list news and other menu links. The navigation schemes centred on the home page serve as a navigational tool throughout the sites.

6.3. Traffic figures

Traffic figures used to identify the top three news sites are based on figures measuring local traffic only, for the second quarter of 2006.

Table 2: Online usage figures for the second quarter, 2006 (local visitors)

2nd Quarter 2006, LOCAL Sites UB and PI Averages

	June UB	May UB	April UB	Q2 UB Ave		June PI	May UB	April PI	Q2 PI Ave
www.mwe	625858	657923	542866	608882	www.mwe	18944356	14048629	11055946	14682977
news24.co	589649	654656	522192	588832	news24.co	14677167	15643357	12168817	14163114
iol.co.za	408251	450846	378968	412688	iol.co.za	6509626	7404171	6320298	6744698.3
ananzi.co.	289440	322294	273002	294912	ananzi.co.	2420804	2767561	2268444	2485603
fin24.co.z	242248	239388	195151	225596	fin24.co.z	2982891	3674374	2722384	3126549.7
iafrica.cor	196938	220661	190337	202645	iafrica.cor	6636411	8038724	7351895	7342343.3
careerjunc	186978	193428	157110	179172	careerjunc	9448463	9681247	7040616	8723442
health24.c	176605	190874	156091	174523	health24.c	3201552	3389355	2652759	3081222
mg.co.za	141241	173447	132012	148900	mg.co.za	1535701	1716288	1347898	1533295.7
wheels24.	137467	146855	113468	132597	wheels24.	1692141	1961166	1537565	1730290.7
women24.	134406	146087	118255	132916	women24.	1236814	1395609	1067367	1233263.3
yellowpag	131850	134969	111181	126000	yellowpag	2490710	2588778	1950245	2343244.3
www.priva	122868	128907	108071	119949	www.priva	4461847	4925191	3912459	4433165.7
Property2	121410	132649	113934	122664	Property2	2703006	3132314	3218281	3017867
sundaytim	111795	117506	93341	107547	sundaytim	1528964	1672750	1402886	1534866.7
Bizcommu	109217	93017	71156	91130	Bizcommu	2626322	2243022	1704243	2191195.7
tonight.co	102390	102314	91632	98779	tonight.co	682960	629142	486423	599508.33
ioljobs.co	102040	103882	91742	99221	ioljobs.co	2904214	3067509	2311160	2760961

(Source: OPA, 2006)

2nd Quarter 2006, LOCAL Publishers UB and PI Averages

	June UB	May UB	April UB	Q2 UB Ave		June PI	May PI	April PI	Q2 PI Ave
Media24	977209	1086560	884006	982592	Media24	31714721	35273189	28222779	31736896
MWEB	636136	666692	554073	618967	MWEB	20568304	15734017	12668326	16323549
Independe	826314	638368	539711	668131	Independe	18143527	13754067	11256035	14384543
Ananzi (Pt	388547	418995	356727	388090	Ananzi (Pt	8727401	9233745	7812978	8591375
SuperSpo	208103	238518	216004	220875	SuperSpo	4149407	5204666	5086437	4813503
iafrica.cor	196938	220661	190337	202645	iafrica.cor	6636411	8038724	7351896	7342344
CareerJun	186978	193428	157110	179172	CareerJun	9448463	9681247	7040616	8723442
Mail & Gu	141834	174057	132588	149493	Mail & Gu	1540274	1721779	1352413	1538155
Electronic	80604	85579	121431	95871	Electronic	1117648	1062441	1429888	1203326
Johnnic C	137793	148410	116481	134228	Johnnic C	2376424	2576452	2030018	2327631
Yellow Pa	131850	134969	111181	126000	Yellow Pa	2490710	2588778	1950245	2343244
Private Pr	123454	129723	108587	120588	Private Pr	4478895	4949509	3931080	4453161
Telkom SA	101161	121538	101437	108045	Telkom SA	1192021	1461516	1200905	1284814
bidorbuy (	94148	100110	83062	92440	bidorbuy (	2540604	2566738	2205160	2437501
Bizcommu	109217	93017	71156	91130	Bizcommu	2626322	2243022	1704243	2191196
5FM	71911	74895	69954	72253	5FM	1501195	1534618	1383785	1473199
ITWeb Lin	71988	80712	66051	72917	ITWeb Lin	464617	514305	380659	453194
SABCNew	63297	96081	63025	74134	SABCNew	857081	1184757	888672	976837
BDFM Pub	68505	71221	59447	66391	BDFM Pub	732416	749585	582893	688298
Moneywel	69452	69872	55945	65090	Moneywel	1132044	1283635	992111	1135930
Ramsay, S	56340	57491	51287	55039	Ramsay, S	1185541	1271112	1042858	1166504
365 Digita	26627	35381	31027	31012	365 Digita	302847	422884	351510	359080
Creamer M	33078	39727	30944	34583	Creamer M	180383	212282	161323	184663
Business	2694	3921	2784	3133	Business	8402	12923	9227	10184
Market Av	2502622	2683826	2256712	2481053	Market Avera	118949969	123131142	100915171	114332094

Table 3: Top local publishers according to web traffic numbers for the second quarter 2006.

(Source: OPA, 2006)

6.4. Qualitative research using interviews and questionnaires

The data was gathered by visits to the websites and discussions with editors in which the production processes and newsroom practices of the three sites were interrogated. The qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews, included questions specifically addressing the factors which prior research shows is most relevant in online credibility studies (see Researching Credibility).

Qualitative research was conducted via Email, telephone or personal interviews with online news journalists, editors and technical staff, as well as with media academics in South Africa and abroad. While a qualitative approach does not allow for a statistically measurable outcome, it is seen as the most honest method, since credibility is largely a matter of audience perception and is therefore difficult to establish quantitatively.

The following academics, editors, strategic management and online journalists were interviewed:

Name	
Nora Paul	Director, Poynter Institute for Media Studies and Director: Institute for New Media Studies, School of Journalism, University of Minnesota, US.
Lizette Rabe	Head, Department of Journalism, University of Stellenbosch
Mark Deuze	Founder, *First Monday;* Associate Professor, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, Bloomington, USA
Irwin Manoim	Co-founder, *Mail&Guardian*, Big Media. Lecturer, University of the Witwatersrand
Riaan Wolmarans	Editor, *Mail&Guardian Online*
Rudolph Muller	Founder, *MyADSL*
Rhys Johnstone	Content Manager, *Independent Online*
Bryan Porter	Editor, *News 24*
Johann van Tonder	Digital Media Manager, *Media 24*
Harry Herber	Group MD, *The MediaShop*
Patrick Collings	Brand architect, Sagacite Brand Agency
Steve Hermann	Editor, *BBC Interactive*

Table 4: Interviews & discussions

The table below served as a guide during the semi-structured interviews. It allowed for detailed discussion of the main categories of key questions known to impact credibility and also helped introduce discussions about factors impacting on credibility that are specific to individual newsrooms.

Question category	Policies	Practices (formal or informal)
Update speed (timeliness)	What, if any, are the newsroom policies on update speeds? What influences the creation of news online?	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors influence update speeds?
Reliance on brand	To what extent does the site rely on a parent brand, for example shared resources, revenue split, marketing and building brand awareness?	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors affect the extent to which the site relies on the parent print brand to promote its reputation for credibility?
Advertising	What policies exist regarding the site's choice of advertising and placement on the home page? Does the site employ independent online advertising staff or share advertising staff or resources (e.g. ad agency) with a print parent?	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors influence the choice of advertising and the placement and position of advertising on the page?
Corrections	What policies exist regarding the handling of error and correction ?	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors influence the correction of error online?
Interactivity	Policies on use of video, sound, outside links including fact checking relating to outside links.	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors influence the use of video, sound and outside links?
Staff	What policies exist to guide staff selection? Are staff qualified journalists? How many staff members run the site? How many are journalists, how many are technical staff? How much overlap is there between roles?	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors influence staff selection?
Wire copy vs. original reporting	What policies exist regarding the use of wire copy vs. original copy?	What newsroom or managerial practices and factors influence the use of wire copy vs. original content?
Technology and training	What influence does practical technology skill have in the creation of the product? Are journalists writing for the site, or placing copy on the site? Are journalists trained in technical matters and use of multimedia (for example inserting hyperlinks into text for purposes of depth)?	What training do journalists get for online work? What are the tools of the trade for an online journalist (sound recorder, mobile phone, camera and phone, laptop etc). Are journalists formally trained in their use or is it assumed they have sufficient common knowledge of technology to load onto a site? Does the newsroom have access to technical advisors?

Table 5: Categories of questions.

The research centres on how the online news media establishes and maintains credibility. Crucially, this section examines the policies and practices in place in online newsrooms, which create, dilute or impact on the credibility of the product at

the three sites under scrutiny. The research intends to highlight schisms between policies and general practices.

6.5. Quantitative research using content analysis

Although relatively limited in scope compared to the qualitative sections of this research, the quantitative aspects of the project are important. The quantitative evidence was established through daily observations of the three sites under scrutiny. This comprised a three-day sample, during which time each site was visited randomly three times a day.

The content of each site was monitored on the basis of how well they complied with the survey criteria. The home page was used as the key unit of analysis (McMillan, 2000 [Ha & James, 1997 cited]). Researchers suggest alternative descriptive and normative analysis methods for the online news media (Deuze [Edelstein (1998), Zollman, 1997; Alexander and Tate, 1998; Rich, 1998]).

The home pages were monitored in random order and at random intervals a minimum of three times daily over three consecutive weekdays. The following key elements, known to influence the perception of credibility, were logged on daily observation charts:

Observation chart category	Criteria for assessment
Update speed and regularity	Does page show time stamps for updated stories? Frequency with which headline stories are updated or replaced with new material: once daily; more than once daily; less than once daily.
Wire copy vs. original content	How much wire copy is used compared to original content? How clearly is wire copy and original content attributed?
Advertising	Is the division between editorial and advertising content made explicit? How is advertising placed on the page in juxtaposition with editorial? To what degree is advertising sensitive to content of current editorial on the page?
Accuracy	Are errors corrected and are the corrections indicated by eg: an apology/correction or a link to such a page? Do sites have, and clearly point readers to, ombuds or reader's editors?
Transparency	Are sources identified wherever possible and links provided where possible – for example, to public documents?
Interactivity	Does the site use video, sound, outside links and forums to engage the reader?

Table 6: Observation chart : criteria for assessment.

The findings of this survey are related in a narrative style since the content study section was not conducted over a sufficient period of time to generate meaningful scoring data. While each of the factors named above could warrant individual study, the aim of this research was not to conduct an exhaustive interrogation of each factor impacting credibility, but instead to establish a broader understanding of the techniques sites use in constructing credibility.

6.6. Limitations of study

The research interviews and questionnaires were limited to media workers and academics with Internet access and online media know-how.

The credibility of the news sites researched is assumed on the basis of having the highest high traffic figures.

Only home pages were considered in the study.

Home pages were observed over a brief period of time.

7. Quantitative study: website monitoring

The sites were monitored for three non-consecutive days, at random times through the day. The focus of this exercise was to look at the copy produced on each site, note its timestamp and the frequency with which the news on the site was updated or changed.

When an article was carried over from the previous night, or had not changed since the previous observation, it is noted in red.

In examining the use of wire copy, the source of the main news item was noted. It was observed that all three sites rely on significant amounts of wire copy or copy lifted from partner newspapers. In all cases, the stories were clearly attributed to their authors if by-lines were used (normally with photographs but not with text), or to the news agency they were taken from. Given the limited quality of this segment of the research, it is not reasonable to comment on how much wire copy as opposed to original content the sites use. However, it is safe to say that during the three days of observation, the front pages were dominated by wire news and shovelware. A summary of where stories originated is provided at for each story.

When observing the sites' reliance on their brand, the use of the publication's colours and logo was taken into account, together with the number of references to the brand itself and its related news products such as mobile news, breaking news alerts, newsletters, RSS feeds, forums, blog hosting and other services. Value services such as these tend to raise brand awareness and suggest success and scale, which are known to impress readers with a corresponding belief in the credibility of the product (Meyer, 2002).

Each site appears to use a similar Content Management System (CMS) with a template that gives the sites a similar geography, particularly with the placement of their advertising, that is: down the right hand column of the screen, across the top and with a box advertisement in the middle. The division between editorial and advertising content was interrogated, as was the juxtaposition of advertising with editorial. It was found that advertising is generally clearly defined as such on all three sites and only one advertisement was found to be "camouflaged" as an information box (on *IOL*). No insensitivities were noted between the editorial content and advertising. While readers prefer to see no advertising at all (Rodgers *et al*., 2005), during the period of observation, advertising did not appear to negatively influence credibility on the three sites to any significant degree.

Photographs are routinely used on all three sites and were noted as part of the multimedia elements on the site. All the sites used images in the top half of the home page, but these were seldom linked to the main news item. Images mostly came from wire services, and occasionally from partner news sites. Graphics were infrequently used. *News24* was the only site to offer thumbnail pictures in links to stories.

7.1. *IOL*

Update speed: The lead story on the front page was regularly updated or replaced. Time stamps showing the exact time of the update appear with each story. Overall, the site scores well with regard to the speed of updates. As was commonly the case with all three sites, *IOL* sometimes used stories from the previous day or night for their morning pages. *IOL* evidenced a stronger domestic news balance than *News24*, which accounts for their quick turnover of news in the early morning. The time difference in the time stamps for lead stories varies from four hours to half an hour.

Day one: 29/12/ 2006	**Day two: 02/01/2007**	**Day three: 05/02/2007**
07:33: "Two die as killer goes on rampage" *29/12/06 07:18*	06:30: "Wife reportedly suspect in hijack of editor" *2/1/07 07:26*	06:30: "Bush and Maliki probe Saddam death video" ***4/1/07 23:15***
10:40: "Body of missing tourist found" *29/12/06 10:17*	8:30: "Wife reportedly suspect in hijack of editor" *2/1/07 7:26*	08:30: "Drunk McBride : police seek evidence" *5/1/07 06:24*
11:40: "Guards held after CBD killings" *20/12/06 10:34*	10:00: "Couple mourn son's death after accident" *2/1/07 09:42*	09:20: "Security delays Mbeki's speech" *5/1/07 07:46*
14:30: "Motorists cannot escape New Year roadblocks" *29/12/06 14:02*	13:00: "Editor's family shocked at widow's arrest" *02/01/07 13:49*	10:20: "Teens abducted during hijacking" *5/1/07 10:13*
18:00: "Search for pipe bombs continues" *29/12/06 14:30*		

Wire copy vs. original content: It is not possible to ascertain how copy may have been adapted or rewritten if a site claims the information as original. However, it is clear that when stories are not original, they are attributed to either a news service or to a partner newspaper. *IOL* occasionally adds links to the associated newspaper website where the original article appeared, however subscription is required for access to these links. No original content appeared on the *IOL* site over the three-day monitoring period. The table below describes the article, the time and the source of the content.

Day one: 29/12/ 2006	**Day two: 02/01/2007**	**Day three: 05/02/2007**
07:33: "Two die as killer goes on rampage" Source: *Sapa*	06:30: "Wife reportedly suspect in hijack of editor"	06:30: "Bush and Maliki probe Saddam death Source: *Reuters*

	Source: *The Star*	
10:40: "Body of missing tourist found" Source*: Sapa*	8:30: "Wife reportedly suspect in hijack of editor" Source: *The Star*	08h30: "Drunk McBride : police seek evidence" Source: *Pretoria News*
11:40: "Guards held after CBD killings" Source: *Daily News.* *(*Link to Daily news provided but requires subscription)	10:00: "Couple mourn son's death after accident" Source: *The Star*	09h20: "Security delays Mbeki's speech" Source: *The Mercury*
14:30: "Motorists cannot escape New Year roadblocks" Source*: Daily News (*Link to Daily news provided but requires subscription)	13:00: "Editor's family shocked at widow's arrest" 02/01/07 13:49 Source: *The Star*	10h30: "Teens abducted during hijacking" Source: *Sapa*
16h00: "Search for pipe bombs continues" Source: *The Argus*		
Breakdown of sources Wire services: 4 out of 13 Partner newspapers: 9 out of 13		

Reliance on brand: *IOL's* orange and grey logo appears prominently on the site, however in terms of brand it relies on brand-association with its partner newspaper brands. The *IOL* brand appears throughout the site particularly in the specialist sections linked in the left-hand column of the home page, that is, *IOL* Travel, *IOL* Weather, *IOL* Motoring, *IOL* HIV Aids and others. The site offers a "make *IOL* my homepage link" at the top of the home page as well as promoting *IOL* newsletters, RSS feeds, mobile content and an *IOL* blog written by *IOL* editorial staff, all of which contributes to branding. The site has prominent links to partner newspapers.

Advertising: Most advertising on *IOL* was clearly marked as such and the division between advertising and editorial was clear. A small advertisement posing as an information box was the exception. When clicked, the information box linked to an advertisement opens in a new window. What is unclear about the camouflaged advertisement is whether the advertiser sponsors the information box or if it is straight advertising as it stands.

The placement of advertising follows standard practice on news sites, that is, banners along the top, columns down the right hand side and a few smaller advertisements on the lower half of the page. No conflicts or insensitivities between advertising content and editorial content were noted.

Accuracy: A "feedback" link appears in the list of links on the bottom left of the home page. It takes users to a webform for complaints or letters. No link is offered or mention made of an ombudsman, reader's editor or corrections page. A link to *IOL's* terms and conditions can be found at the bottom of the page and lead to this mention relating to dealing with error:

> "Amendments to content and information: The website owner expressly reserves the right in its sole discretion to affect any amendment or alteration to the content and information, including pricing and rates, set out in this web site. Users acknowledge that it is their responsibility to familiarise themselves with any amendment or alteration affected."

However, apart from stating their legal position, *IOL* does not appear to encourage readers to report errors, nor do they make it easy for readers to access information on how errors might be dealt with. At the very bottom of the page in small script, the site offers the following information:

> "Independent Online is a wholly owned subsidiary of Independent News & Media. Reliance on the information this site contains is at your own risk. Please read our Terms and Conditions of Use and Privacy Policy. Write to 'Feedback'. Tel: +27 21 481 6200, Fax: +27 21 481 6294. Click here for more information on *IOL*."

When the last item is clicked, a page listing the editorial staff appears. However, to contact a particular staff member, only a webform is offered. Webforms are seen to be an inferior - even false - form of interactivity. They appear to offer interactivity but in fact serve to keep readers at a distance and to protect the websites that use them from entering genuine conversations with readers. The sender has no way of keeping a record of the mail; cannot prove it was sent or arrived or find out the name of the person it is sent to, because the entire operation is controlled by the site. Websites using web forms appear to want to maintain a barrier between themselves and their readers.

Transparency: The site relies heavily on content from its partner newspapers and on wire services. While stories from these sources are clearly attributed, bylines are uncommon and the site appears to produce little original content requiring the bylines of its own writers. No links to outside documents or to added-value information opening in new windows were noted.

Interactivity: *IOL* features its own blog (not a public blog-hosting space), free newsletters, RSS feeds and links to *IOL*. However, there is little by way of conversation happening between readers and the publication. No letter's page is linked on the home page, there are no forums and it is not possible to read other people's feedback or comments. *IOL* makes no use of video, sound or hyperlinks.

Multimedia: None apparent apart from static photograph the on home page.

7.2. *Mail&Guardian Online*

Update speed: The updates were somewhat slower than on the other sites in this research. This may be attributable to the time of year, but also to the fact that *Mail&Guardian Online* appears to put a greater emphasis on major international news and less local news, with the result that breaking news happens less frequently. The pages show timestamps for stories posted. New content was posted to the home page with time gaps of anything from 20 minutes to 12 hours. As with other sites, it was observed that the site used news items from the previous day to fill the front page in the early morning.

Day one: 29/12/ 2006	**Day two: 02/01/2007**	**Day three: 05/02/2007**
07:12: "Somali government to seize Mogadishu" *28/12/06 20:23*	08h00: "Indonesian jetliner crash kills 90" *1/1/07 08:27*	06h30: "Fears of chaos revived in Somalia" *4/1/07 17:45*
10:30 "Government troops march into Mogadishu" 28/12/06 23:21	11h15: "Deposed MP blamed for Bangkok bombs" *2/1/07 8:50*	08h00: "Ncube: I'm seen as an enemy" *5/1/07 07:01*
12:00: "Government troops march into Mogadishu" 28/12/06 23:21	14h30: "Wife is sixth suspect in Netshisaulu killing" *2/1/07 11:11*	09h20: "Ncube: I'm seen as an enemy" *5/1/07 07:01*
14:30 "Probe continues into McBride's car smash" *29/12/06 13:11*		09h20: "Ncube: I'm seen as an enemy" *5/1/07 07:01*
18:00: "Probe continues into McBride's car smash" *29/12/06 13:11*		

Wire copy vs. original content: The amount of wire copy used on *Mail&Guardian Online* exceeds that on other sites; however, the use of original copy is no less than other sites. All copy is clearly attributed.

Day one: 29/12/ 2006	**Day two: 02/01/2007**	**Day three: 05/02/2007**
07:12: "Somali government to seize Mogadishu" Source: *Reuters*	08h00: "Indonesian jetliner crash kills 90" Source: *Sapa-AP*	06h30: "Fears of chaos revived in Somalia" Source: *Reuters*
10:30 "Government troops march into Mogadishu"	11h15: "Deposed MP blamed for Bangkok bombs" Source: *Guardian*	08h00: "Ncube: I'm seen as an enemy" *Source:*

Source: *Reuters*	*Unlimited* (UK)	*Mail&Guardian* reporter
12:00: "Government troops march into Mogadishu" Source: *Reuters*	14h30: "Wife is sixth suspect in Netshisaulu killing" Source: *Sapa*	09h20: "Ncube: I'm seen as an enemy" *Mail&Guardian* reporter
14:30 "Probe continues into McBride's car smash" Source: *Sapa*		09h20: "Ncube: I'm seen as an enemy" *Mail&Guardian* reporter
18:00: "Probe continues into McBride's car smash" Source: *Sapa*		
Wires services: 6 Partner newspapers: 2		

Reliance on brand: *Mail&Guardian Online* is the only site that specifically refers to the relationship between the site and the *Mail&Guardian* newspaper in their brand name, colours and logo. While all three sites have strong and apparent media networks and relationships with print brands, *Mail&Guardian Online* is easily identified with a single print publication. The site promotes itself with branded links, RSS and Java feeds as well as free news feeds to other sites, mobile news alerts, a blogosphere, forums (one open and another requiring subscription) and a weekly podcast, which commits to focus "on the main news stories of the week as reported in the *M&G* newspaper and on *Mail&Guardian Online*". The site features a link to the print newspaper's columnists and to the print edition's letters page, clearly leveraging the existing *M&G* brand to back up the site's own brand and credibility. Without the backing of the *M&G* brand and history, the online version would, arguably, enjoy less credibility than it now does.

Advertising: This is clearly recognisable and the division between advertising and editorial is easily distinguished. The site has a lot of white space and a less cluttered appearance than the other two, which adds to a sense that there is less advertising. Standard advertising links run down the right hand side column. The main page has a large, mid-page advertising box and a smaller box advertisement on the lower right. No offensive or inappropriate advertising was noted. The juxtaposition of advertising and text was not insensitive to the editorial content on the page. All the advertising was "clickable" and opened in new windows. The placement and choice of advertising was not found to undermine the site's credibility.

Mail&Guardian Online was found to be the only website in this research to have a dedicated corrections page, on a par with the best international news sites. This factor immediately adds to the site's credibility, as research strongly points out that accuracy and transparency are high on the list of importance for online readers.

Accuracy: The "Contact Us" link opens a page that explains the relationship between the website and the newspaper. It also gives the names of staff. Clicking on a link to send a letter to the editor, for example, opens the reader's own email browser and the

email address of the recipient appears in the address box. By this means, readers are able to keep a record of their letters. The same page also invites readers to send complaints to the ombudsman. This is the only site examined that mentions an ombudsman, invites feedback to this entity and supplies an email address.

Transparency: Several articles feature *Mail&Guardian* writers without clarifying whether they work for the website or the newspaper. Other pieces were clearly attributed to news agencies; both at the start of the article and with the news agency logo at the end of the article. Photographs were occasionally given a by-line as well as the name of the news agency.

Interactivity: The site offers a great deal of interactivity with readers. This is supported by Cohen's comments that the site launched a forum early on in its history, which helped forge a strong community of interest among *Mail&Guardian Online* readers. Today the site offers a "Notes & Queries" section, moderated discussion forums (one open one that requires registration) and a blog hosting service, newsletters, RSS and Java feeds and mobile news alerts. A "Contact Us" link at the bottom of the home page takes readers to a comprehensive list of feed back options and an explanation stating, "The *M&G* is both a newspaper and a website, the *M&G Online*. Ferial Haffajee is the editor of the newspaper, and Riaan Wolmarans is the editor of the website" and readers are able to send emails from their own email rather than a webform.

Multimedia: This is the only site offering sound in the form of a podcast. However there is no video content and a dearth of hyperlinks or depth was noted, putting *Mail &Guardian Online* on a par with the relatively poor efforts seen by the other sites.

7.3. *News24*

Update speed: The main news article was updated with breaking news and with other news on average every hour to two hours, except after midnight. The table below shows the time of the site being viewed, the story in the headlines and the time stamp for that story.

Day one: 29/12/ 2006	**Day two: 02/01/2007**	**Day three: 05/02/2007**
07h50: "Survivor gets 7 As" ***28/12/06 23:18***	08h30: Fat woman trapped in Cango caves" *2/1/07 08:12*	08h00: "Yengeni's lavish Xmas bash" ***4/1/07 23:00***
10h30 "Mogodishu awaits Gedi" *29/12/06 09:47*	11h00: "Netshisauu murder: wife in court" *2/1/07 10:55*	09h20: "Bush eyes new Iraq strategy" *5/1/07 09:11*
12h00 "Sadam still in US custody" *20/12/06 11:36*	14h30: "Iraq probes grisly Saddam video" *2/1/07 14:16*	11h00: "Bush eyes new Iraq strategy" *5/1/07 09:11*
18h00 "Have fun but don't break the law" *29/12/06 14:26*		11h20:"Gang rapists carried on braaing" ***4/1/07/ 10:32***

The main news item on the front page was frequently replaced with new content. Each story showed a timestamp giving the exact time of the update. In general, it was found that the site used stories from the previous day for its morning pages. With some local news exceptions, the last update of the news day was normally at around 23h00 and would appear as the first story of the following day. The first fresh news of the day normally updated at mid-morning.

Wire copy vs. original content:

Day one: 29/12/ 2006	**Day two: 02/01/2007**	**Day three: 05/02/2007**
07h50: "Survivor gets 7 A's" Source: *Beeld.*	08h30: Fat woman trapped in Cango caves" Source: Sapa.	08h00: "Yengeni's lavish Xmas bash" Source: *Die Burger*
10h30 "Mogodishu awaits Gedi" Source: *Sapa.* 29/12/06 09:47	11h00: "Netshisauu murder: wife in court" Source: *Sapa*	09h20: "Bush eyes new Iraq strategy" Source: *Associated Press (AP)*
12h00 "Saddam still in US custody" Source: *Agence France Presse (AFP)*	14h30: "Iraq probes grisly Saddam video" Source*: AFP*	11h00: "Bush eyes new Iraq strategy" Source: *Associated Press (AP)*

18h00 "Have fun but don't break the law" Source: *Sapa.*		11h20:"Gang rapists carried on braaing" Source: *The Witness*
Wire service: 8 Partner newspapers: 3		

A daily tally of main news stories was done, sourced from wire copy and the company's stable of print newspapers. Only the main news items and images on the front page were examined. In all cases, the images used on the front page were attributed to *Associated Press* (AP).

Reliance on brand: The *News24* logo appears in the page header in company colours of blue, red and grey. The same colours are used in the site's page design and text headings. On the lower half of the front page, the site offers links to partner media websites via drop-down menus. These open in a new window if selected. The site has a visible company identity.

Advertising: Advertising is clearly recognisable as such and the division between advertising and editorial is explicit. The front page is not over-populated with advertising. Standard advertising links run down the right hand side column and the main page has a large mid-page advertising box and a smaller box advertisement in the lower right of the page. No offensive or inappropriate advertising was noted. The juxtaposition of advertising and text was not insensitive to the editorial content. All the advertising was clickable and opened in new windows.

Accuracy: No clearly evident link to an ombudsman's page, reader's editor or a corrections page was noted, neither was there a link to view the site's policy on complaints or corrections. "Your Say" and "Contact Us" links are provided. When clicked, these open generic web forms. Readers are not specifically invited to send their complaints, or informed of the site's policy.

The feedback and contact links are seen as marginally interactive. They fail in that, being web forms, they do not allow readers to keep a record of sending an email (the webform is delivered directly to the site without going via the sender's email). No names or contact details for the editor, ombudsman or other staff are provided in a clear link inviting comments or complaints, resulting in a sense of anonymity and separateness between reader and publication. Contact links are not easily visible although the site's policy on corrections was noted.

Transparency: None of the articles viewed featured a writer's byline. They were clearly attributed to news agencies; both at the start of the article and with the news agency logo at the end of the article. Photographs were occasionally given a byline as well as the name of the news agency. A link at the bottom of the page called "About Us" lists the names of editorial staff, a switchboard telephone number and a webform email. No direct email addresses are provided.

Interactivity: In the main, no links were provided to add depth to the stories. On the first day (29 December 2006) a sports article, not the main news item, about the Proteas provided links to player names which, when clicked, opened a pop-up box giving key player statistics for that player. No other links were noted. The inside pages may feature such links; however the home page is seen to be representative of the newspaper's best efforts. The site does not make use of multimedia such as video or sound. There are no forums or discussion boards. A link titled "Your Say" opens to a page of reader's letters similar to a newspaper's letter's page. These are edited and pre-moderated. The link states, "If you have a view that you'd like to air, send us a letter and we'll consider it for publication". The last item on the links down the left of the front page offers a free newsletter service, with a choice of newsletters giving morning news, afternoon news, breaking news and weather, travel and lottery news.

Multimedia: None apparent apart from static news photograph on the home page.

8. Qualitative Study: interviews and questionnaires

8.1. *IOL* techniques and strategies

Update Speeds

Rhys Johnstone, content manager for *IOL*, believes speedy updates help build audience trust. "The balance is not to rush stories out too fast," he says. Given that *IOL* relies on news agencies as much as other sites, he concedes that *IOL*, like other online news publications, relies on the agencies to get things right (R.Johnstone, personal communication, 6 March 2007).

With systems in place to check content, every story is checked by a "human interface" before being loaded onto the site. In Johnstone's view, a greater challenge lies in selecting news from "a flood of 30 or 40 sources and choosing which one to use." These would include the groups' title websites representing print newspapers, as well as agencies. *IOL's* print titles are *Cape Argus*, *Cape Times*, *Daily News*, *Isolezwe*, *Post*, *Pretoria News*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Tribune*, *The Independent on Saturday*, *The Mercury* and *The Star*. Johnstone describes the process as "cherry picking" which requires 24-hour copy tasting (R.Johnstone, personal communication, 6 March 2007).

Before copy can be loaded onto *IOL*, however, stories must be normalised for the *IOL* website. *IOL* newspapers have their own style guides as well as featuring content, which is local to their distribution area. "While some local content has relevance to *IOL* readers, this must be presented in the right way," says Johnstone (R.Johnstone, personal communication, 6 March 2007).

Brand

According to Johnstone, *IOL* has 25% market share but has never specifically marketed its brand. This, he says, has been built up over time through their print partners as well as the Internet. The existence of print brands has "given us a hand up" says Johnstone, in that visitors who visit the website of their local newspaper are exposed to *IOL's* brand. However, the Internet is seen as *IOL's* "major marketing tool" through RSS, newsletters and syndicated content (R.Johnstone, personal communication, 6 March 2007).

Advertising

Johnstone says *IOL's* advertising policies comprise a "multi-disciplinary" approach based on an unfettered relationship between editorial and advertising. What boundaries editorial managers do place on advertising is constantly being challenged because "at the end of the day they are driven and we push back", he says. Examples of such limits typically stem from new Internet technology. As an example, Johnstone describes a recent case in which *IOL's* advertising department pushed for the use of a newly developed pop-up advertisement that has no close button. This was rejected by *IOL* editorial decision makers. Pop-ups are often seen by readers as highly intrusive.

If these were used without giving readers the option to close them, it would be potentially damaging to *IOL's* credibility. "As each innovation comes up we thrash it out," says Johnstone (R. Johnstone, personal communication, 6 March 2007).

Accuracy

IOL, like other sites of its kind, appears to rely on its feeder papers and wire services for accuracy. *IOL* is a high-tech digestive system that regurgitates whatever copy is fed into the system. The justification that *IOL* is a news aggregator is fragile since the site promotes itself as a news website. The average reader, who is unlikely to have researched *IOL's* structure and business model, will be unaware that the site does not produce the news on its pages and has abdicated responsibility for accuracy.

A daily "sweep" of news is loaded by *IOL's* Cape-based online staff and appears under the appropriate newspaper brand on the Internet. The online version is an extension of the print brand whose journalists have little or no contact with the online version. By settling for this model, *IOL* fails to leverage the Internet's key characteristics – interactivity and speed. Irwin Manoim calls these online versions "the de facto public libraries" for those newspapers. The concern is that uncorrected material will find its way into these "libraries" and perpetuate errors indefinitely. Says Manoim, "the major concern here is not just whether they publish corrections, but whether the corrections are added to the page containing the original inaccuracy." (I. Manoim, personal communication, 2004)

Staff

IOL staff is divided into news and sports staff. The total staff complement is made up of eleven people. This excludes a further ten journalists who work on *IOL's* "niche" products and produce original copy for these segments that include entertainment, technology, travel, HIV Aids, motoring and parenting. These sections produce most of the site's original content, unlike the news and sports section.

8.2. *Mail&Guardian Online* techniques and strategies

Riaan Wolmarans, editor of *Mail&Guardian Online*, acknowledges that revenue is the most dominant factor in the day-to-day running of his online newsroom. It affects all areas of news work and as such impacts the perceived credibility of *Mail&Guardian Online*.

Content

Mail&Guardian Online operates from the same building as the *Mail&Guardian* newspaper; however the two are distinct from one another while adding value to each other's product. *Mail&Guardian Online* is seen as a daily, breaking news product with some of the site's content derived from the weekly investigative journalism print edition and from its British counterpart, *The Guardian*, from which the site receives a daily content feed of international news. However, this makes up a minimal portion of the South African pages "maybe seven or eight stories a day" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007). "Then we are also signed up to every other news service you can imagine," he says. International news is easily obtained. "The battle

we face online in terms of credibility and to be competitive with *News24* and *IOL*, is we would rather have more unique content" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Both *News24* and *IOL* have an advantage over *Mail&Guardian Online* in the early morning because they have access to local news items from their stables of local newspapers with the result that they can quickly refresh their sites with new material. However, from mid-morning the three sites are all on an equal footing in that they all rely on the same wire news services and the resourcefulness of their newsroom staff. Wolmarans believes it is here that the upper hand can be gained as a result of how sites make use of or add value to identical wire copy.

When handling wire copy, Wolmarans believes one of the techniques differentiating *Mail&Guardian Online* from competitors is that they invest more care and effort into adding value to wire copy. Wolmarans cites the example of a one-line piece from *Sapa* reporting the death of musician Lebo Mathosa in 2006. "*News24* published a one-line lead as it arrived from *Sapa*," says Wolamrans, "…while we took maybe fifteen minutes extra to make some calls and wrote a more detailed article. We had a story up fifteen minutes after them, but it was a much better story."

Mail&Guardian Online regularly re-writes combined wire reports from several news services and may also add original research or reporting. In such instances, credit is given for all the wire copy used, as well as to the *Mail&Guardian Online* journalist. Another device they commonly use when crediting their own contribution to a wire story is to use the line "so-and-so told the *Mail&Guardian Online*..."

"It's a very clever way to make it seem like the whole story's ours even though the wire service is credited at the end of the piece and it gives us more credibility," says Wolmarans. Having their journalists expand on wire stories "is another way we can add value to wire pieces" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Staff

At the time of speaking to Wolmarans, the editorial staff complement consisted of a managing editor, a news editor, a sub-editor and a journalism intern. Completing the headcount were two advertising sales executives and a recently acquired online strategist, Vincent Maher (formerly a senior academic at the Rhodes University New Media Lab):

> "Unfortunately, budget determines that we depend on interns a lot. We get funding for interns, which helps. The intern selection process for us and print are pretty much the same – we have much the same requirements from a journalist (but) our interns get thrown into the deep end a lot sooner than those in print because we really rely on them. We provide training but they have to get on with the job otherwise it's a problem for us" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Lines between job descriptions are faintly drawn for the editorial staff. The editors multi-task with duties ranging from normal editorial decisions to writing for the site and placing content on pages. Working in a small team has its advantages in terms of advertising, says Wolmarans, since they are included in the daily running of the site

and work closely with the editorial team. “We rely on them for our livelihood. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

According to Wolmarans, the *Mail&Guardian Online* management team is very conscious of credibility issues given that all news sites are “incredibly wire-dependent. People notice that there’s very little original reporting online. In this day and age people read so many websites and obviously if there’s the same report in the same words on all the sites they pick that up” (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

The site utilises a content management system (CMR) allowing writers to interface easily with the site without needing knowledge of high level HTML code. Uploading images and adding links are simple techniques says Wolmarans, generally done by the editors rather than the journalists, who can function in the online newsroom with nothing more than ordinary PC knowledge. “Anything else they need to know we can teach in a day,” he says. This is common practice but places a large workload on staff. “On one side I’m the editor of the site with all the normal editorial duties and on the other side I’m the production manager too. It’s way too much work for one person. If we had the money I could easily employ another five fulltime people,” says Wolmarans. In his fictional scenario, new staff would be a fulltime production manager, a production assistant, a section editor, an arts editor and another journalist.

He concedes that technical problems do arise with regard to the development of the site. Their majority shareholder, MWeb, hosts and manages the site from Cape Town. This in itself is a problem, in part because MWeb does not employ enough staff dedicated to the *Mail&Guardian Online* cause, and also because the geographical distance results in “terrible” communication between the two businesses (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Audience interactivity

Mail&Guardian Online fields significant amounts of reader feedback, partly because they encourage it by publishing email addresses for their writers. Wolmarans says most people don’t expect their letters to be read, let alone answered, and sees this policy as a way to build a relationship with the audience and also enhance credibility:

> “In terms of our credibility, we take notice of what people say on our forums, which are very popular,” he says. “I like to believe we are very customer-centric. If people complain we try to rectify (the problem) if we can. For me, responding to each and every email we get from readers is very important.”

The site runs an active reader’s forum moderated by unpaid volunteers, one of whom has done the job since the site’s early days. The forum is seen as a useful strategy to promote the conversation between audience and publication. Another mechanism is the site’s blog platform, Blogmark, which is not moderated in any way. Plans exist to add a further technique by way of discussion panels at the end of articles, which is intended to further enhance interactivity with readers.

Design

Wolmarans confirms the site will be redesigned in the future, with the intention to build on its existing "unique look and feel" while making it less cluttered:

> "The problem we've had is that obviously we have to make money and so we accept more ads than *News24* and *IOL* do. The more ads we put up the more cluttered it looks. You don't want lots of little flashing ads because that detracts from the news and we're a serious, matter-of-fact site. We have pretty much reached the limit of number of ads we can take" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Advertising

The home page of the current site features advertising along the top, down both sides of the page and also a large box advertisement in prime position in the main body of the front page text, directly under the lead photograph. This has been identified by eye track studies to be the position a reader's eye will come to rest on the screen. Placing advertising under the main visual element on the screen gives it the greatest visibility. Says Wolmarans, "That ad has become the most clicked-on one of all on our site. I think people are getting used to ads on websites so they tend to ignore banners and smaller ads on the sides while an ad that's right where you're looking is more likely to attract attention."

Wolmarans concedes that *Mail&Guardian Online* does not always charge full advertising rates:

> "I wouldn't say the advertisers talks us down (from the price) but we do all sorts of deals with them especially with the bigger companies where we can do barter deals with them. We don't have much of an advertising budget either, so we have to find clever ways of promoting ourselves and we do."
> (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Barters are frequently in the form of reciprocal advertisements on the advertiser's site. The other is the *Mail&Guardian Online* news headline feed, which can be a function on other sites and features the *Mail&Guardian Online* logo. This is a free service with the advantage of advertising *Mail&Guardian Online* across numerous alternative sites.

One of the biggest challenges for this publication is that they have a large international audience. While this segment of their readership adds greatly to the site's vibrant forum section and blogs, they represent no value to domestic advertisers. Consequently, the site's most important goal in the last two years has been to grow their local audience. For this, credibility is crucial. "The more we focus on good, groundbreaking local content people can trust, the more our local audience grows, " says Wolmarans (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

The placement of advertising seldom represents a serious problem, thanks in large part to the small team and close working relationship between the advertising staff and editorial staff. Exceptions have been known to arise with regard to automatically generated, content-sensitive *Google* advertisements run on the site.

"We've had to remove one of these in the past. Google advertisements for hunting lodges appeared together with an article about the evils of hunting" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

The turn-around time for removing the inappropriate advertisement was quick enough to avoid offence, however Wolmarans says, "Obviously we don't have time to check every advertisement. If I know there's a contentious topic (on the site) I will check to see what ads are popping up, but it's not something we do for every story." (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Brand

"I would say the print *Mail&Guardian's* credibility has gone up a lot in the past year with the Kebble / Selebi stories which they very much pushed this year. This translated into credibility for the website as well. We have just compiled the top 30 stories for the site for 2006 and on the national news the top visited stories were the Kebble / Selebi stories" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Mail&Guardian Online publishes an exact PDF replica of the print newspaper online. This is aimed primarily at overseas readers, and is hosted by a Canadian site. In terms of synergy with the company's print product, since October 2006 this content has been made freely available where previously online readers had to subscribe to access it. The block was lifted "finally", says Wolmarans, "We don't believe there was much value in that. We don't think enough people go to the trouble of subscribing just to read something online. The only subscription-based content now sold within the *Mail&Guardian Online* is our archive access and the newspaper's columnists." This move is in line with studies of subscription models in the US and Britain. "In the two months since we made everything open, the exposure of the newspaper on our site has risen a lot, they're getting much better exposure, " he says (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

According to Wolmarans, the move was prompted, less by financial concerns than by the fact that online readers are resistant to paying for content, especially news content:

> "You can get news anywhere. We wanted to drop the premium content subscriptions long ago, but the newspaper was very sensitive about their circulation. Luckily, I think maybe also by virtue of the Selebi stories that were coming in every week, the newspaper's circulation went to the highest it's been in something like nine years the month after we dropped the premium content" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Sensitivities that existed between the newspaper and website in the 1990's have been allayed, according to Wolmarans, largely thanks to the realisation within the group that the two products complement rather than compete with one another. "We have a weekly investigative newspaper and a daily breaking news website which I think work together very well":

> "We have tried really hard to establish *Mail&Guardian Online* as a brand. Even small things, like whenever our journalists speak to someone on the phone we make sure they say "*M&G Online"*, not *M&G*, and when they go to a press conference to make sure they introduce themselves as being from *Mail&Guardian Online*."

Wolmarans says there is minimal overlap or sense of competition between the print and the Internet newsrooms:

> "The newspaper has no interest in breaking news so we are chasing different stories. They will go the same press conference that we attend but they'll be coming from a different angle preparing an in-depth story that will go to print a week later."

Wolmarans attributes the shift in attitude in the past two years to the leadership styles of owner Trevor Ncube and *Mail&Guardian* editor Ferial Haffajee. "They both really started supporting and seeing the importance of the website. And we've been working with journalists as much as we can to convince them of the benefits of working with the website."

Rapport was established between the newsrooms once print journalists' fears of losing their jobs to the online version were overcome. This is especially evident when newspaper articles that do not make it into print due to lack of space, or pieces that are drastically cut for the same reason, can be published online in their full glory, much to the delight of the authors.

The newspaper has also taken to using the website to its advantage. If pieces are necessarily cut, says Wolmarans, the newspaper often refers readers to the website for the full story. This is especially useful for in-depth investigative reports where readers can be referred to the website to view supporting documents that apply to the article, but which would be impractical for print. Designers are in the process of creating special logos for the newspaper to indicate such online references.

Update speeds

The *Mail&Guardian Online* publishes a certain quantity of the *Mail&Guardian's* contents spread over a week. "Maybe four stories a day from the newspaper," says Wolmarans. This, in addition to the news feed from *The Guardian* and the wire services, requires the online news staff to work long hours. Officially, the site is manned from 7am until 7pm; however, this is seldom the case. The editors are able to access and update the site remotely after office hours:

> "We're signed up to all kinds of news alerts on our cell phones, so between us we check the site and keep an eye on things pretty much all the time. I think the updates on our front page add a lot to our credibility as a breaking news site because we update very frequently. I just spoke to a friend of mine who is the night editor at *Die Burger* in Cape Town. I haven't seen her for ages and I asked if she read my website. She said "all the time". They follow our website, especially in the late afternoon when they start getting their news together, because we update more often than *News24* and we have a faster turnaround time. Update speed is very important to our credibility – it gives readers the sense that we know what's going on" (R.Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

Accuracy

"We could probably do better with our corrections page, but a lot of our corrections are so small we don't go to the trouble of putting them on the corrections page, " says Wolmarans. This way of handling small errors speaks directly to issues of time and resources. "At this stage I have to say we are stretched very thin, it's very difficult at times and we don't have much budget for extra staff"(R. Wolmarans, personal communication, 9 January 2007).

8.3. *News24* techniques and strategies

Editor of *News24*, Jannie Momberg, responded to emailed questions about the site. Like other editors, Momberg sees update speed as paramount to credibility:

> "It can be summed up in our tagline, "Breaking News, First". The two key elements that we instil in our staff are accuracy and speed. We do the important stories first and publish it as soon as possible" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

He suggests the creation of news online is similar to print, radio and TV, saying, "The newsworthiness of a particular story is always the key deciding factor." More succinctly, he relates that the number of staff available and "technical issues" have an influence on how quickly the site is updated.

Brand

Momberg writes, "We don't have a parent print brand. We have print partners, but *News24* is a 100% digital brand. *News24* is part of *24.com*" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

The site shares marketing resources with the holding company, *24.com* and marketing, says Momberg, is done "from a *24.com* level. Resources are shared where possible. For instance *24.com* has got a bigger focus on new media. It is an avenue which we are looking at expanding" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

He adds, "We don't rely on anyone to promote our "reputation for credibility". *News24* is a stand-alone brand. We are integrating more with *24.com* and our other partner sites" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

Advertising

Momberg says the site draws a "clear line between advertising and editorial" made possible by the fact that *News24* "has a fixed placement for advertisements that are included in our rate card for ad agencies". This appears to suggest that the site uses some form of template for the placement of advertisements. In terms of the appointment of advertising agencies or media buyers, Momberg says *News24* has its own online advertising staff and operates "independently from print". Asked what everyday newsroom factors might influence the choice of advertising and the placement and position of advertising on the page, Momberg responded, "There are no everyday factors influencing the placement and positioning of

advertisements…especially from the newsroom" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

Accuracy

Acknowledgement of errors on the site is done "on rare occasions" says Momberg and takes the form of "a temporary note at the end of a story to apologise for a mistake". Other corrections, he insists, are made "immediately" however no record of these fixes is retained on the site by way of a corrections page. He says there are no workplace factors or practices influencing the correction of errors in the *News24* newsroom.

Interactivity

Similarly, Momberg claims to be unaware of everyday newsroom or managerial practices and factors that influence or dictate the use of video, sound and outside links on *News24*. These would include the technical Internet proficiency of journalistic staff and time restraints of staff given the 24/7 nature of the Internet.

He does offer comment on the difficulties of low bandwidth, saying, "The lack of decent broadband in the South African market has limited the use of new media content in this country. It is one of our aims this year to drastically increase the usage of such content on *News24*. It is difficult to answer your question directly, as we'll only look into the practicalities in the next few months" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

User Generated Content

According to Momberg, *News24* has a limited policy regarding the use of video, sound and outside links (including fact checking of outside links) and the use of unsolicited material such as cell phone images or video taken and sent in by readers.
"We confirm with all users that 1. They produced the content and 2. We get permission to publish the content" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

Staff

While *News24* employs 17 dedicated online newsroom staff, comprised of 13 editorial staff and four technical staff members, who operate completely separately to print titles, Momberg concedes that no specific guidelines exist to guide staff selection. He says staff "must be able to work in an online environment". What this entails in terms of skill or training is unclear. The absence of such guidelines suggests *News24* staff are not required to demonstrate any particular online skills or journalistic training. Without giving details, Momberg asserts that online journalists at the publication do possess academic journalism qualifications. He further states that there is no overlap whatever between the roles of journalists and technical staff in that journalists do not handle technical, design or layout tasks, and technical staff do not do journalistic work (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

Wire copy vs. original reporting

In terms of the use of wire copy, *News24*, like other sites, attempts to add value to wire copy. Says Momberg, "We try to follow up on wire stories to provide some unique content for our users. We don't have the resources to send journalists out to cover stories. It is a constant struggle from management's side to get more unique content from the staff" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

Technology and training

Momberg is unforthcoming on the influence of practical technology skill in the creation of *News24*, but allows that journalists write for the site and place copy on the site. *News24* journalists are trained in the use of multimedia and Internet technology "In a fairly limited way. Basic HTML knowledge is an advantage" (Momberg, 2007). The site relies on a content management system (CMS) which precludes the need for specialist knowledge to upload articles. Momberg states, "Everything flows from the CMS. The basics of online and offline journalism are the same. The minimum that is required is a PC and internet connection" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

He adds that while communication devices – especially mobile ones – are niceties, they are not essential and if required will be provided by the company for staff to share on a "pool basis".

Design and layout

Momberg offers no comment about the look and feel of the website, nor the message the site intends to convey through design and layout.

9. Findings

The aim of this research is to provide insight into the techniques and strategies used by serious news sites to establish and maintain their credibility. Bearing in mind the relatively limited scope of this paper, the findings show:

1. That all three sites rely to varying degrees on existing or prior media brands for their credibility.
2. Management at the sites have no specific techniques they consciously apply to create or maintain credibility, other than their shared fixation with update speeds. Some commentators note that this may be more a function of the medium and stem from professional competitiveness rather than a commitment to credibility.
3. Many of the other mechanisms that research shows to be valuable in establishing and maintaining credibility are under-utilised or ignored, such as interactivity, the non-linear nature of the medium, its capacity for multimedia, depth and transparency, and the adherence to rules about accuracy.

It is clear that the three sites are restricted in their ability to generate income due to the nature of the Internet. The high measurability of the medium allows no leeway for advertising smoke-and-mirrors in terms of returns on adspend. This is exacerbated by the low fees charged online and the caution with which the advertising industry views the Internet as an advertising vehicle, in spite of claims by some observers that the tide is turning for online advertising revenue (Buckland, 2006). This, together with the high cost of access in South Africa, helps strangle the market as discussed in an earlier section of this paper.

These factors run a thread through South Africa's online news endeavours to the extent that credibility and how to achieve or maintain it are secondary. Nevertheless, the sites researched here do practice a limited number of techniques and strategies that support their credibility. Whether these constitute deliberate efforts to bolster their credibility remains unclear. It is more likely that certain standard practices which support credibility have evolved in the online media.

9.1. Update speeds

The most common strategy used is fast updates. This feature is characteristic of broadcast news and may well have been introduced into online news simply due to technological ability and the need to compete in a perpetual news cycle.

All three sites name swift updates as important, but only *News24* truly positions itself as a breaking news site that puts speed first. *Mail&Guardian Online* takes a more cautious view, preferring to post new story updates a few minutes later if they feel it necessary to check facts.

There is an implication across all three sites that accuracy is secondary to speed, although this is never directly stated.

9.2. Wire copy vs. original reporting

Each site relies heavily on wire services and on their print partners for content. The debate about shovelware and re-used content is well-worn, but in each instance the sites report that they do a significant amount of re-writing of news and add to what comes in from wire services. In addition, each site has sections of original content dealing with niche topics, normally non-news items not supplied by news services.

Lack of resources at all three sites directly affects the amount of independent reporting online staff are able to do.

As a mechanism to build credibility, the home page "shop window" of each of the three sites tends to be populated with wire service images and copy.

These findings suggest the sites do not use original copy as a technique or mechanism to bolster credibility.

9.3. Advertising

All three sites have a similar approach to advertising. The design and flow of advertisements is dictated by content management systems. Advertisements are generated in standard sizes as agreed by the advertising industry and pages seldom deviate from the standard screen layout.

All the sites are aware of the appropriateness and juxtaposition of advertising, that is, avoiding potentially offensive advertisement placement and content.

While research shows that readers do not generally like advertising, they are accustomed to it. The three sites are aware of the need to curb advertising that may be blatantly offensive or intrusive.

As a strategy or mechanism for credibility creation, sensitivity to advertising placement and content is found to be relatively minor in the case of the three sites researched.

9.4. Accuracy

The sites rely on their partner newspapers or on commercial news services to provide accurate material. In this way they may feel absolved from taking responsibility for accuracy. Nevertheless, all sites are legally accountable for what they publish regardless of whether it originates from a news service or a partner newspaper. The use of significant wire content on the sites researched suggests their need for speed outweighs the potential risk of litigation.

Editors of both *News 24* and *IOL* staunchly refer to their feedback pages as evidence of their concerns about accuracy, however neither actively invites complaints from readers or offers corrections pages. The potential for error to live on indefinitely is therefore very great on *News24* and *IOL*. In this sense, both *News24* and *IOL* have commonalities with broadcast, that is, once the story airs there is seldom further reference to it. The most that could be expected online is a refreshed story with

updated facts, which then would not require an apology or correction if the earlier story was found to have inaccuracies.

Mail&Guardian Online is the only site researched that pays significant attention to the importance of acknowledging and correcting error and is the only one of the three sites studied with an ombudsman. Both *IOL* and *News24* correct errors online but do not have a dedicated corrections page and therefore errors cannot be tracked to the original articles where mistakes occurred. Hence, *Mail&Guardian Online* is the only site that can be seen to actively use accuracy as a strategy in building credibility.

9.5. Interactivity

Mail&Guardian Online, the oldest of the three sites, encourages the most audience participation, based on a sense of community that has its roots in the early days of the site's forum (B. Cohen, personal communication, March 2007). Interactivity takes the form of a moderated forum, a blogosphere, letters page, email address to the editor and ombudsman as well as a dedicated corrections page. *News24* offers what is essentially a letters page titled "Your Views", and a readers' gallery where some users post news photographs, such as a photo series depicting the implosion of an hotel in Maputo. *IOL* has an active poll section where users vote on a topical question with the option to add a comment about that question. The *IOL* blog is written by *IOL* staff and does not involve readers.

With *News24* and *IOL*, one has the sense that they see conversation with their audiences as a necessary evil, not as a strategy they actively pursue as a means to establish and maintain credibility.

9.6. Brand

The credibility and success of parent and partner newspaper brands is very much a cornerstone of the credibility of the three websites examined.

While *Mail&Guardian Online* intends building a separate brand from *Mail&Guardian*, the site concedes that their existing credibility relies on the newspaper and its history in South Africa. The symbiosis between the two entities is clear. *Mail&Guardian Online* publishes a virtual version of the print newspaper, they share a building if not the same newsroom and content from the newspaper is frequently published online. According to Wolmarans, the online exposure of the print version has benefited the print newspaper. There is a realisation within the group, says Wolmarans, that the two products complement rather than compete with one another

News24 insists they have "print partners" rather than leaning on their company brand. Momberg states that *News24* is a "100% digital brand". He concedes that *News24* belongs to *24.com* and that the site shares marketing and other resources with the holding company, part of media giant Naspers.

In a somewhat ambiguous comment, Momberg says *News24* does not "rely on anyone to promote our reputation for credibility. We are integrating more with *24.com* and our other partner sites." This can be taken to mean that *News24* relies on its numerous

partner sites, that is, the websites of its newspaper titles, all of which are strong brands. *News24* is by no means a stand-alone news website. Given that the site produces almost no original content, its existence depends almost entirely on the strong print brands that partner it and provide it with significant amounts of daily content.

IOL, which claims to enjoy a 25% market share in online news has "never marketed its brand" (R. Johnstone, personal communication 6 March 2007). Johnstone says the existence of the *IOL* family of print brands has provided the necessary exposure to *IOL*.

Overall, none of the three sites examined are "pure play" news sites. As such they are all founded on the existence and success of print news brands. These brands continue to provide each site with considerable support such as copy and marketing. Without the former media – the print brand – it is unlikely that any of these sites would enjoy the level of credibility or exposure to the market that they do have.

9.7. Design and Layout

All three sites rely on Content Management Systems (CMS) with predetermined templates that dictate the look and feel of the websites. None of the sites used this aspect as a feature to establish or create credibility beyond the use of their brand logo and colours.

9.8. User Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) plays an important role as a strategy to enhance credibility and is most effectively used by *Mail&Guardian Online* with is forums, discussion boards and blogs, while the feature is badly under utilised by both *News24* and *IOL*. The implication is that *IOL* and *News24* are little concerned with their credibility or with interacting with readers, and both enjoy the protection of large media brands.

9.9. Multimedia

The absence of multimedia is disappointing in all three sites. Resources and the problems of broadband access play a part in this; however, in strict terms, the sites do not make use of this characteristic of the medium to enhance credibility.

9.10. Staff

Research shows one of the recommended formulas for boosting credibility is for sites to employ professional journalists and to indicate this fact to their audience.

In the case of *Mail&Guardian Online*, the staff complement is stretched far too thin with only a managing editor, news editor, sub-editor and journalism intern manning the ship.

News24 has 17 dedicated online newsroom staff of which 13 are editorial. However the site has no specific policy for employing staff other than that "they must be able to

work in an online environment" (J. Momberg, personal communication, 17 January 2007).

IOL has a total of 21 staff and does not acknowledge any polices guiding either their appointment or offer a description of their roles, such as the possible overlap between editorial, reporting and technical work.

Online journalists are seldom identified in by-lines. Consequently, sites risk becoming faceless entities to their readers and of undermining their own credibility. None of the sites studied can be seen to use the staff factor as a means to boost or establish their credibility.

10. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, the conclusion suggests that in spite of all three sites enjoying significant credibility in the eyes of their audiences, they utilise few observable mechanisms to create or support that credibility.

In all cases the brands, derived from related print title brands and ownership, deliver a perception of credibility. The sites exist in a competitive environment and often appear driven by professional competitiveness rather than dedication to the somewhat nebulous concept of credibility.

Professor Lizette Rabe, chairperson of Stellenbosch University's post-graduate Department of Journalism, suggests the main technique or strategy for sites interested in credibility should be to seek to be credible with their users or readers:

> "…and that should be the same as with a print product. The same checks and balances should be in place, otherwise it cannot be called journalism. The company's normal accuracy tests should be applied to every single journalistic item on a news site. I think the Online Publishers' Association should also look into appointing ombuds for their websites, with a clear icon/link to the ombud for users to use. It is part of good journalistic governance … the interactive nature of online is a perfect test for credibility and should be used by readers – that's why the site's ombud or public editor should also be easily identifiable on each and every page, also the ones where you might click away from the main pages" (L. Rabe, personal communication, 8 March, 2007).

Bruce Cohen, former *Mail&Guardian* journalist and later an online media lecturer at Wits University, is of the view that while *News24* management may like to think of their site as a "pure-play" site, it is too closely integrated with Naspers properties and continually refers to and links to them, making their claim implausible. Similarly, both *Mail&Guardian Online* and *IOL* have some form of prior media heritage, which disqualifies them from the pure-play genre.

Cohen contends the biggest problem is the commoditisation of news, evidenced by the vast amount of news being re-cycled and repeated on sites and other media:

> "The real issue is: what is the differentiation? It used to be the opinion, comments and features, but not anymore. Today the biggest differentiation between sites is their communities. And that's where the credibility lies – in building up a community of interest around your brand. Retaining a customer

> is cheaper than getting a new one, so it pays for companies to lock users in to their community. The *Mail&Guardian Online* forum is a good example. The forum was one of the first things started at the *Mail&Guardian Online*. It became a very strong community of people with an interest in political discussion. These days credibility is something that is given to the media by the users. Every time a user clicks on your brand and chooses your news site out of the huge number of other choices on the Net, you are being handed credibility" (B.Cohen, personal communication, 23 March 2007).

Cohen takes the idea further, suggesting that credibility can be attributed to undeserving sites as a result of "swarming":

> "There's no human intervention in a news search like *Google News* for what makes it to the top if the page. It's based on algorithms. Wherever people go on the Net, the search follows and that story will be listed at the top of the search. All (journalistic) filtering has been removed. This is where citizen journalism and user-generated content is incredibly dangerous because they do not bring to bear the same journalistic standards as the media and for every user there's an agenda" (B.Cohen, personal communication, 23 March 2007).

Nora Paul, director of the Institute for New Media Studies in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, agrees that the attributes of credibility in print are the same for online news, reiterating, "There is a need to define credibility online. If credibility offline is defined by the brand and perception of the newspaper brand, then what is different about online?" (N. Paul, personal communication, 2 April 2007).

The differentiating factors stem directly from Internet technology and newsroom sociology. The medium's capacity for speed, interactivity, multimedia, transparency and depth are added to the characteristics that define credibility in traditional media. As with all media, the product can only be as good as the people who produce it. In search of the secret to online credibility, it is a site's staff, resources and editorial choices that complete the equation begun by new media technology.

Arant & Quitney's *Special Report: Online Ethics 2000*, found that the editors of online media in the US believed their products were not as accurate or reliable as the parent print publications. Understaffing and demands for speed and professional competitiveness were blamed. Almost a third of the editors interviewed felt the online media were not likely to follow the general ethical standards of traditional print journalism (Arant & Quitney, 2000). The findings continue to have relevance today when most sites still run on a shoestring thanks to the erroneous belief of media owners that digital media is a low-cost medium. While true in terms of technology and distribution, the product remains only as good as the journalists and editors who manage it. The calibre and numbers of staff at news sites depends on the revenue owners invest in it, which is linked to the revenue it can generate, which is in turn linked to the cost of access for readers and so on in a perpetual cycle.

The dearth of strict online policies on handling corrections, transparency about sources and background checking of articles are not, in the opinion of Mark Glaser, indicative of ethical problems in journalism. He believes it has more to do with time pressure (M. Glaser personal communication 2005). Indeed, second to complaints

about resources, lack of time is the most common rationalisation for poor quality online.

More importantly, these complaints affect the credibility of news products in the eyes of the audience. This is critical, says Janna Anderson Quitney, as the audience becomes more critical and less trusting. Replacing an incorrect version with a corrected one online is no longer slavishly accepted by the increasingly media-savvy audience. Sites that do not admit and correct error and publish clarifications in a prominent location will not earn the trust of their audience (J. Quitney Anderson, personal communication, 12 October 2005). As a credibility strategy accuracy is critical, yet it does not receive due consideration from two of South Africa's three most credible news sites, *IOL* and *News24*.

Furthermore, all the sites studied here appear to rely heavily on two other factors: public ignorance about how the online news industry functions (that is, the use of news wire services and other content providers); and reliance on the previous success of parent brands, which is essentially reflected glory or credibility-by-association. Paradoxically, much of the credibility enjoyed by the three sites relies on the values exercised by journalists working in prior media such as print and news services.

With global news media credibility under increasing scrutiny, at least two areas of future credibility research become apparent in the South African context. Firstly, there is a lack of comprehensive credibility surveys among the audiences of serious news sites. Secondly, there is a need for research into the journalism standards and credibility behind the products of the newswire services upon which the online news environment relies so heavily.

As discussed earlier in this paper, studies show that lack of credibility is the most serious issue facing the news media today, in South Africa as much as anywhere. In the case of the three sites researched in this paper, the most common strategy used to generate a sense of credibility – perhaps because it is the most easily observable and the one easiest to implement – is update speed. However, relying primarily on speedy updates as a strategy for credibility is a thin veneer for credible online news. The most respected news sites in South Africa would do well to expand their repertoire of techniques and strategies when seeking to sustain or improve their credibility.

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