

# Trust and Credibility from Desktop to Handheld

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## Abstract

A discussion of the responsibilities of both the rhetorician and audience regarding issues of trust and credibility, this essay lays an historical background of rhetoric dating from ancient Greece through to modern-day rhetorical applications. Traditional oral rhetoric is juxtaposed with written and multi-media rhetoric. Following the advancements to modern-day rhetoric, audience responsibility is demonstrated as applied to various historical contexts and rhetorical situations. Issues of usability and trust come into play as empirical studies of iPad and email newsletter usability tests are discussed including how usability serves to create trust. Everyday trust and credibility is also noted through the mention of daily web usage and common preferences for visiting the same websites frequently as opposed to venturing out to new ones regularly. Collectively this research suggests that both the rhetorician and the audience carry the burden of responsibility regarding trust and credibility.

*Keywords: rhetoric, audience responsibility, usability, trust, credibility*

## Introduction

As the world grows smaller through faster and more frequent connections, it becomes easier to deceive anonymously, forcing the audience to sift through credible sources. One Google search can yield thousands of results. As a reader, selecting the most credible, useful link is not always an easy task. As a writer, making sure one's work appears as the right choice is not always an easy task. Amplifying these challenges is the fact that students from elementary school through college are often charged with the task of research assignments, the first step for which is often-times exploring information of varying

quality and credibility on the web with a search engine like Google. For example, a Google query for George Washington will invariably lead to various Wikipedia articles on the first president of the United States; while some of these may be legitimate sources created by reputable historians, some may also be a hodgepodge of fallacies in the guise of legitimate facts. Such complex reading and writing issues leads to the following question: how does the writer instill trust online, also, how does the audience discern credibility online?

Through heightened attention to usability issues on the part of the writer and increased knowledge of legitimate sources on the part of the audience, a proper balance of trust and credibility can be established. The plethora of information available on the Web serves to inform, and with that, persuade. People write to influence other people—whether that’s to buy a certain product, follow a certain belief or philosophy, or just for entertainment. This idea of a purpose to the message ties in well with rhetorical theory. Rhetoric then becomes a powerful tool used to achieve a purpose no matter the cost. According to Michael Eidenmuller (2010), Kenneth Burke states that “[t]he most characteristic concern of rhetoric [is] the manipulation of men’s beliefs for political ends...the basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents.” Rhetoric is a powerful tool that is used in politics as Burke states, but the scope continues further as technology continues to expand. Gerard Hauser explains it well when he says “rhetoric is an instrumental use of language. One person engages another person in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal. It is not communication for communication’s sake. Rhetoric is communication that attempts to coordinate social action. For this reason, rhetorical communication is explicitly pragmatic. Its goal is to influence human choices on specific matters that require immediate attention” (Eidenmuller, 2010). While not necessarily always as urgent as Hauser implies, rhetoric is an all-encompassing art utilizing whatever symbols necessary to convey the message at hand. Because of the power of rhetoric, trust and credibility are sought in a thick sea of multi-dimensional, fast-paced, multimedia rhetoric.

Evolving technology affects trust and credibility on the web, placing

increased responsibility on both rhetorician and audience. Beginning with a brief overview of the historical evolution of rhetoric, this paper will explore the role of usability and trust, as well as the importance of audience awareness in both specific instances, and in daily web usage.

### Historical Background

Throughout time, rhetoric has evolved and with that also the trust and credibility that accompany it. At its birth, rhetoric was a simple and pure tool that served to enlighten and persuade. According to Eidenmuller (2010), Greek philosopher Aristotle sees rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion.” This straightforward, yet progressive, definition of rhetoric serves as the foundation for an evolving art that morphs with the technology utilizing it. As society progresses further into a multi-media driven organism, rhetoric grows to encompass a broader scope which creates questions regarding trust and credibility of the rhetorician. Dr. Mokhtar Aftat (2010) discusses how “[w]e are constantly inundated by messages and information of so many different kinds...[t]he Internet, a television program, a radio announcement, a newspaper article, a painting, a piece of music, a memo from the boss all have one common goal: to get us to do something, to act or to feel in a certain way in order to help advance a cause, an idea, an ideology, or just appreciate the work of others for personal satisfaction or aesthetic purposes.”

The ancient Greeks laid the foundations of present-day rhetoric. Since it was so infused in daily life, rules were established for the practice of good rhetoric. Aristotle contributes immensely to this study with his book *The Art of Rhetoric*. In his book, *An Introduction to Classical Rhetoric: Essential Readings*, James Williams (2009) outlines Aristotle’s “artificial proofs [that] ‘make a man a master of rhetorical argument’ ...*ethos* (character), *logos* (reason or the speech itself), and *pathos* (emotion)” (p. 228). Of these three, *ethos* is likely the most influential regarding trust and credibility. Williams (2009) ties *ethos* with the idea of “ethical virtue” showing that “[the] moral character necessary to utilize *ethos* in a speech derives from living within the well-ordered community, from which one

can learn justice and proper conduct, and from performing ethical actions as part of that community” (p. 229). Trust was built simply on the presence and reputation of the rhetorician. This presence is established through a “knowledgeable, charismatic, savvy, precise, persuasive, polished, non-confrontational, reflective, lyrical, and respectful” rhetorician (Aftat, 2010). Quite possibly, the audience could have determined the credibility of the speaker before a single word was uttered from their mouth. In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle says “[f]or the orator to produce conviction, three qualities are necessary...independently of demonstrations...[t]hese qualities are good sense, virtue, and goodwill” (Williams, 2009, p. 240). Aristotle attempted to infuse his ideas of proper rhetoric into Greek society, seeing it as an important element in cultural tradition and growth.

The liberal arts tradition, rooted in Greek history, was an important vehicle for promoting the study of rhetoric. Eric Skopec (1978) discusses this tradition in his article *Shifting Conceptions of Rhetoric in the Eighteenth Century* as it was “formulated by Varro in the first century BC, this pattern became the ordering notion of the scholastic curriculum and persisted well into the eighteenth century” (p. 2-3). With rhetoric so closely tied to the world of academia, trust and credibility is seemingly a non-issue. It is a channel to advance ones place in society and to fulfill cultural expectations as “a means of achieving social dominance—a characteristic it shared with Grammar, Logic, Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy” (Skopec, 1978, p. 3). In the context of ancient Greece, rhetoric is an esteemed practice to be learned and respected, leaving little room for subterfuge and ulterior motives. Seen as a virtue to be practiced daily, “[r]hetoric was contrasted to logic as the open hand to the closed fist. Thus the distinctive characteristic of rhetoric was the exercise of control through persuasion” (Skopec, 1978, p. 5). The idealistic, virtuous view the ancient Greeks have of rhetoric fades with the progression of communication technologies, but the scope of rhetoric continues to expand. In his article, *Reading as Rhetorical Invention: Knowledge, Persuasion, and the Teaching of Research-Based Writing*, Doug Brent (2010) reiterates, “modern rhetoricians...Wayne Booth and Kenneth Burke [agree that] rhetoric [is] epistemic—that it participates not just

in the conveying of knowledge already formulated but also in the making of knowledge through symbolic interaction” (p. 9-10). This dynamic view of rhetoric is the perfect catapult into the present-day world of non-linear multi-dimensional rhetoric stressing audience awareness, through interaction, to determine trust and credibility.

### **Usability & Trust: iPad and Email Newsletters**

In the present-day world of rhetoric, where technology-driven outlets are governed by audience experience, trust is established through ease of usability. As audiences navigate multi-media documents, they have certain expectations that have created a standard for Web design and etiquette. These practices are refined and honed through endless usability testing. If the standards a user has become accustomed to are no longer in place, trust and credibility falter and the rhetoric being presented suffers. This idea is made quite apparent with the advent of the new Apple iPad. Jakob Nielsen (2010) conducted a usability study with this new interactive product and outlined his findings in his monthly Alertbox column. Nielsen (2010) addresses four main user aspects: interface, design consistency, use of print metaphor, and screen layout. Many of Nielsen’s conclusions seem to be, in part, due to a lack of regulation on iPad applications. Audiences are used to a level of security and familiarity on the Web that is not present on the iPad leading to frustration and in the end, a certain sense of mistrust.

With the iPad’s applications “anything you can show and touch can be a user interface” leaving the user confused as to where to go on the screen with “no standards and no expectations” (Nielsen, 2010). Trust that was established on traditional Web user interfaces through tools like raised buttons and scrollbars is tested by a new aesthetic appeal on the iPad, however, Nielsen (2010) warns that the “penalty for this beauty is the re-emergence of a usability problem we haven’t seen since the mid-1990’s: Users don’t know where they can click.”

This setback is further magnified by design inconsistencies. With the inability to transfer skills from one application to the next, the user expends time and effort trying to decode the application rather than taking in the information provided by it. Nielsen (2010) explains how “[i]n different applications, touching a picture could produce

any of the following 5 results: nothing happens, enlarging the picture, hyperlinking to a more detailed page about that item, flipping the image to reveal additional pictures in the same place, [or] popping up a set of navigation choices.” Through this guessing game of inconsistent features the “iPad user interfaces suffer under a triple threat that causes significant user confusion [resulting in]: low discoverability: the user interface is mostly hidden within the etched-glass aesthetic without perceived affordances; low memorability: gestures are inherently ephemeral and difficult to learn when they’re not employed consistently across applications; [and] accidental activation: [occurring] when users touch things by mistake or make a gesture that unexpectedly initiates a feature” (Nielsen, 2010). All of these problems contribute to an overall sense of initial confusion and mistrust.

Adding to user complications, many applications are reverting back to a retro “print metaphor” meaning that the reader cannot jump from article to article, but must swipe from one to the next in a very linear fashion. Nielsen (2010) cites a major “issue for iPad user experience design is whether to emphasize user empowerment or author authority ...[because] using the Web has given people an appreciation for freedom and control, and they’re unlikely to happily revert back to a linear experience” (Nielsen).

The final element of Nielsen’s iPad usability test is screen layout. He divides presentation into two main camps: “card sharks” and “holy-scrollers.” Cards utilize a fixed dimension “allowing for beautiful layouts,” but also forcing users to jump from screen to screen to get more information. Scrolls allow for limit-less information to be presented on a single page, but in turn limit the visual effect as “the designer can’t control what users are seeing at any given time” (Nielsen, 2010). While the Web primarily uses scrolling and the iPad cards, there will likely be a shift and the “Web’s interaction style will prove so powerful that users will demand it on the iPad as well” (Nielsen, 2010).

With new technology come expanding trust and credibility issues revolving around the expanding scope of rhetoric. The interplay of new and innovative media versus familiarity and trust is a delicate balance that is played out daily in a continual push for establishing credibility and infusing persuasion. The user experience is a powerful,

often underrated, element of any rhetorical effort. An excellent realization of this concept is Jakob Nielsen's usability analysis of the United Kingdom election newsletters. Using four main criteria Nielsen (2010) rates the email newsletters of the three major political parties in the United Kingdom, Conservative, Labor and Liberal Democrat party, a month before their election in May 2010. The four criteria he uses are: subscription interface, newsletter content and presentation, subscription maintenance and unsubscribing, and differentiation from junk mail. When drawing the reader in, Nielsen stresses a distraction-free subscription interface, that is, a sign-up page purely for adding users to the mail list, not to lead them to other links on the site. Simple graphical guidelines like this aid significantly in establishing trust and credibility through giving the user a positive hassle-free experience. Also based primarily in a graphical focus, the actual content of the newsletters must be visually pleasing to ensure a good user experience. This includes elements like "prominent links to the parties' Facebook pages and Twitter feeds" as well as "scannable" readability utilizing "highlighted keywords [and] stills from (linked) video clips to break up the text" (Nielsen, 2010). These practices in conjunction with best writing practices, which according to Nielsen should include writing at about an 8th grade reading level, all come together to form a user experience that is satisfying and informing.

In the case of political newsletters this will lead to effective use of rhetoric resulting in votes for a given party. The power of newsletter usability is tantalizing. Nielsen (2010) notes that the outcomes of both the Bill Clinton vs. Bob Dole election in 1996 and the George W. Bush vs. John Kerry election coincide with their email newsletter and website usability scores. Politicians understand the force of their rhetoric and how it is presented. At the time Nielsen completed his usability study for the United Kingdom election in April the Conservatives rated the highest for usability. Just this week it was announced that David Cameron of the Conservative party will be the new Prime Minister (Nielsen, 2010). As the Internet continues to grow and new media technologies become infused into daily life the role of usability becomes an integral part of establishing trust and credibility in rhetoric of all forms.

### **Audience Responsibility**

With the blossom of the multi-dimensional media facet of the Web, the door is now open wide for information sharing opportunities unique to each individual user. The antiquated expectation of linearity is quickly shoved into the shadows as interactive multimedia experiences are ushered in. With this wave of technology, a plethora of credibility and trust issues are raised. Both the rhetorician and the audience are forced to operate on a much higher level of accountability, though not always simultaneously. The website FactCheckED.org (2010) points out that “[t]he Internet can be a rich and valuable source of information—and an even richer source of misinformation. Sorting out the valuable claims from the worthless ones is tricky, since at first glance a Web site written by an expert can look a lot like one written by your next-door neighbor.” This site methodically presents tools and techniques for determining credibility on the Web. While not always foolproof, these tools assist the reader in establishing trust, or not, in a hard-to-navigate, sometimes authorless environment.

According to FactCheckED.org (2010), there are four major factors the reader needs to consider when establishing credibility on the Internet: determine a site’s top-level domain, determine the sites author (if possible), determine the author’s authority, and uncover any possible sponsorship. For websites based in the United States the domain will usually be either .com, .org, .net, .mil, .gov, or .edu. Sites outside of the U.S. “will often have a [domain] denoting their country of origin” (“Credibility,” 2009). There is a level of credibility associated with any .mil, .org, .gov, or .edu site being that they are associated with the military, a non-profit organization, the government, and an educational institution, respectively. However, the discerning reader cannot always rely on this solely as the information on these sites is not exclusively regulated. While a .edu domain does indicate an association with an institution of higher education, students often have the ability to create personal websites using space on the University/College server without any standards for the information being disseminated. The two more questionable domains, .com and .net, come with more volatile credibility as they are tied to commercial and network sites with paid sponsorship. While all large corporations have a .com domain, there are numerous less reliable sites sharing the same domain. In cases where top level domain is not entirely conclusive in

determining credibility, the audience must move on and determine the site's authorship. This can be rather complicated as "[s]ome sites have only one author. Others have many authors, who may or may not use their real names. Some sites have no obvious author—their content may be written by a number of people who do not get authorship credit" ("Credibility," 2010). If authorship can be pinpointed the next step is to reveal the authority of the particular author(s). Some things to consider are educational level; knowledge, experience, and/or research regarding the topic; and the neutrality of the author(s). Also closely related to neutrality, sponsorship is the final component that should be considered when questioning author credibility ("Credibility," 2010). If the writer is being paid to support a particular viewpoint the level of credibility is lowered significantly. In this instance, the reader must decide on a personal level if the sponsor is an organization they trust which in turn sways the level of trust for the given author and ultimately the website.

It is the rhetorician's goal to convey an image of trustworthiness, but the final judgment on his or her credibility lies solely with the audience. Depending on the media being used to express a message, the listener picks up on varying cues and utilizes certain standards to measure credibility, thus establishing trust between speaker and audience. Going back to the oral communication-based society of ancient Greece, this could be accomplished simply by the reputation and/or social standing of the rhetorician. Audiences easily trust well-known speakers with whom they are already familiar. However, as communication expands to the written word, a higher burden of responsibility is laid on the audiences to not only question the credibility of the speaker, but also just the plain ability to be literate. This idea carries into the present-day with the concept of technology literacy—being able to navigate the technology presenting the message. The written word allows transport of rhetoric, but also removes the element of audience familiarity with the speaker.

Craig Smith (2009) discusses, in his book *Rhetoric and the Human Consciousness*, Marshall McLuhan's theories on this progression of communication media outlining how "[t]ribalism was severely eroded by the development of language, writing, and then printing... [p]rinting destroyed the sense of tribe and in the process began to isolate human senses by emphasizing the mind" (p. 313). With the

loss of the intimacy of the close-knit tribal culture comes the loss of immediate trust. New expectations are formed with rhetoric in printed media as audiences begin to anticipate a “linear orientation” with people “[looking] for a ‘line of thought,’ to see whether an argument ‘follows from’ the one preceding it” (Smith, 2009, p. 313). This idea of linearity persists for many years until the dawn of the Internet.

### **Daily Trust & Credibility on the Web**

The world is a technological web of lightning-fast connectivity where daily communications occur endlessly, spanning oceans and continents. In the United States few people go a day without connecting to the Internet, watching TV, listening to a radio, or being exposed to some form of electronic rhetoric. People, though, are creatures of habit and most flock to the same few websites and channels every day. There is trust in familiarity and credibility in trust. With all of the media options available, the user must be discerning and savvy regarding reliable and reputable sources. There is the fearless Web user who navigates blindly, trusting anything and everything available to take in, and at the opposite end of the spectrum there is the paranoid Web user who is fearful of even opening an email message. However, most fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum frequenting popular sites like Facebook, Twitter and the *New York Times* on a daily basis and occasionally venturing further using educated decision-making regarding what to trust and what not to trust. There are certain fall-back cues to rely on, particularly when it comes to sites dealing with personal information such as money and/or social security numbers, where the experienced user knows to look for “https” in the url to designate a secure website. However, more vague situations are becoming highly prevalent as the “wild west” frontier of the internet is truly a battle ground for establishing trust and credibility. Large reputable sites such as Wikipedia may have individual pages that are completely off-the-wall. Some of the tools for determining credibility may be fading into the past.

In her book, *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web*, Barbara Warnick (2007) questions “our reliance on author credentials and expertise” stating that it may be “yet another passing manifestation of source credibility” (p. 47). In the evolution of rhetoric

there is a continual shift in the manner of delivery and receipt. Both rhetorician and audience must evolve to expand their knowledge and technique of interacting with each other. Warnick (2007) goes on to say that the “role [of the author] may be receding in importance because, in the absence of a stable print material or face-to-face context, users are placed in the position of making attributions from a variety of cues rather than reaching conclusions based on what is connected to an author’s credentials and known reputation” (p. 47-8). In a complete revolution from the trust and credibility standards of the early rhetoricians of ancient Greece, this theory pushes the audience, forcing them to think beyond the traditional standards. This is accomplished through analysis and experience “when the conventional signs of credibility to which we are so accustomed to are absent” (Warnick, 2007, p. 49). Some factors to consider regarding websites on a large scale are “what other sites link to the site in question, whether its content is supported by other content in the knowledge system, whether its stated motives coincide with the presumed effects of its use, how well the site functions, and whether it compares favorably with other sites in the same genre” (Warnick, 2007, p. 49). Much of this analysis is a user-centered practice dependant on the prior knowledge of the individual audience, their educational level, and current familiarity of the given subject.

Once again, the audience truly is the final judge of the credibility of the source. Warnick (2007) raises another issue with individual credibility analysis, noting that “although some people may view ethics as outside the scope of epistemology and rationality, values nonetheless play a significant role in our decisions” which in turn means that “the idea that accepted principles and values can play a role in knowledge formation in some fields is an important one to keep in mind when we contemplate the status of credibility in fields such as ethics” (p. 53). This idea, however, likely goes largely unnoticed with the average user as most of this analysis is conducted on the subconscious level in daily Internet and other media exposure.

### **Conclusion**

Trust and credibility has evolved markedly from the advent of rhetoric with the ancient Greeks to the present day. Initially a rather

simplicistic practice, establishing credibility was achieved with little effort on both the part of the rhetorician and the audience. With the passage of time though, audience responsibility, particularly, is increased, correlating directly with technological advancements in communications media. With a wide array of options for rhetoricians to choose from to deliver their rhetoric, the audience is forced to become more aware and knowledgeable. The rhetorician must now not only consider the knowledge and interest of the audience but also the ease of use of the rhetoric being presented and the vehicle by which it is being expounded. The ease of use for the audience corresponds with the level of trust being established. On a daily basis trust and credibility are being tested as new technologies are developed and presented. There are limitless possibilities for the projection of rhetoric as the scope of rhetorical means expands exponentially, and now, more than ever, the burden of responsibility weighs down on the rhetorician and the audience.

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