SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND JOURNALISM
Between visceral and discretional judgment

Zvi Reich

The extent to which information sources, that stand behind virtually all the news, are perceived by journalists as credible is a key determinant of the likelihood of their obtaining news access and public voice. The nature of source credibility judgment in journalism, however, is disputed between two major schools: while the "visceral" camp contends that it is highly subjective, intuitive and biased, the "discretional" camp perceives it as a far more reasonable and legitimate journalistic tool. The present study attempts to uncover evidence of both "visceral" and "discretional" judgment by studying the conceptual credibility (trustworthiness ratings) and practical credibility (practices indicating trust or skepticism, such as cross-checking and attribution) and the congruence between the two in a sample of 840 news items based on 1870 news sources. Findings were gleaned in face-to-face reconstruction interviews with reporters from nine leading Israeli news organizations, who reconstructed, source by source, the processes behind their items, shortly after their publication. Pro-discretional evidence shows that while journalists perceive their own experience as more credible than that of any other human agent, they do tend to stick with sources they perceive as more credible, the majority of which were relied on in the past, granting them more ready acceptance. Pro-visceral evidence, in turn, demonstrates that even the least credible sources receive substantial news space, some without any cross-checking. Furthermore, reporters ranked their sources' credibility even when they had no former record of trustworthiness. The paper suggests interpreting the composite of these findings as discretional logic with islands of visceral judgment.

KEYWORDS Israel; journalism; newsmaking; news production; source credibility; trust

Introduction

One key criterion determining a person's chances of becoming a news source and having a public voice is the extent to which he or she is assessed by journalists as credible (Detjen et al., 2000; Gans, 1979; Goldenberg, 1975). According to one survey, journalists consider credibility to be the most influential factor in source selection, followed by source accessibility and time pressure (Powers and Fico, 1994).

Following Yoon (2005, p. 283), source credibility may be defined as a person's believability as a source of information or as the degree to which information from a source is perceived by a journalist as accurate, fair, unbiased and trustworthy. The importance of source credibility research, however, extends far beyond the believability of one actor or another, encompassing four major types of reasoning:

- *Epistemological*: Source credibility may have a substantial role in outlining the journalistic borderlines between versions and facts, truth and "truthiness," objectivity and bias, trust and skepticism (Cottle, 2000; Reich, 2009; Schudson, 2001, 2009). Hence, the standards of source credibility shape the capacity of the press to produce truthful, accurate, fair,

Journalism Practice, Vol. 5, No 1, 2011, 51–67
ISSN 1751-2786 print/1751-2794 online
 DOI: 10.1080/17512781003760519
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

unbiased accounts of news and protect themselves, their organizations—and eventually their consumers—from erroneous information.

- *Political*: ''News access'' differs according to source (Cottle, 2000; Goldenberg, 1975; Hall et al., 1978; Manning, 2001): while ''upper''-class sources are granted regular coverage, ''lower'' ones are constantly deprived. As such, the extent to which source credibility plays a role in increasing this inequality renders it an issue of political concern, especially considering the claim that the degree of credibility determines which party—the reporter or the source—controls the story (Altheide, 1978).
- *Professional-ethical*: Credibility is a major professional value and a central tenet of codes of ethics, playing a quadruple role ''as a goal, a tool, an asset and a rationale behind most professional creeds'' (Tsfati, 2008, p. 2598). Furthermore, source credibility is generally implemented in a context of news organizations that have limited tolerance for credibility misjudgments as they struggle to preserve their own status and image as trustworthy channels for news.
- *Pervasiveness*: As human agents stand behind virtually all news (Reich, 2009; Sigal, 1986; Strömbäck and Nord, 2005), the role played by credibility judgment in their selection is relevant to virtually all news information.

As detailed below, the different approaches to the issue of source credibility in journalism may be conflated into two major camps: ''Visceral,'' that considers source credibility judgment highly subjective and biased—and ''Discretional,'' that believes such judgment to be more reasonable and coherent, based on such source traits as previous trustworthiness record. Otherwise, journalists would not be able to minimize publication of erroneous information or would have to investigate every bit of information in a manner that hampers their ability to obtain enough raw material on deadline. While the former perceive source credibility as an apparatus for discrimination, the latter consider it a necessary and legitimate working tool. The former are normative and critical, whereas the latter are descriptive and more relaxed about it. This paper seeks evidence in support of the two opposing camps according to the extent of their conceptual credibility (the degree of trustworthiness as perceived by journalists) and practical credibility (the practices employed by these journalists that indicate credibility or skepticism, respectively) and the congruence between the two. Furthermore, while previous research, facing the severe constraints of sourcing studies, focused on generic and faceless sources (e.g. senior or scientific sources), the current study developed a method enabling the study of specific sources who exchanged specific information under specific news circumstances.

The study involved newsbeat reporters, who are probably the most interesting species of journalists for a source credibility study. They are the only ones assigned to regular domains of coverage and are consequently given extensive space to develop enduring relationships with a fixed scenery of contacts. Moreover, they employ the most prevalent method around which newsrooms are organized worldwide (Becker and Vlad, 2009).

Four caveats are necessary before examining the issue in greater depth. First, source credibility inside and outside journalism is always a perceived phenomenon (hence ''credibility'' is used hereinafter to mean ''perceived credibility''). Second, as a perceived concept whose study may infringe source confidentiality, source credibility judgment in journalism can hardly be researched in real time and under real news circumstances. Third, although this paper focuses on source credibility, it does not suggest that journalists

actually use it as an exclusive criterion for selection of sources. Finally, the author is not naïve enough to believe that human judgment, including journalistic judgment, can truly be fully rational and free of bias.

Data were gleaned in a series of face-to-face reconstruction interviews in which a sample of reporters from nine leading national news organizations ranked, contact by contact, the conceptual and practical credibility measures in a sample of 1840 news sources on which they had relied recently. These data enable testing of several generalizations suggested in the literature.

Credibility and News Work

Since modern credibility studies began to appear during the 1940s, the topic has become one of the most widely studied concepts in communication (Rouner, 2008), with hundreds of empirical studies published (Metzger, 2003). Nevertheless, in the specific context of journalism, credibility studies remain scarce (Flynn, 2002; Tsfati, 2008). Most of the literature focuses on audiences as addressees of different speakers, writers, messages and media (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; Metzger et al., 2003; Johnson and Kaye, 2000; Rouner, 2008; Self, 1996; Wanta and Hu, 1994). Studies of a broader scope, however, typically those concerning sourcing and news work, developed viewpoints regarding source credibility judgment in journalism. These studies may be assigned to two principal categories, according to their authors' respective outlooks.

The *visceral* camp comprises scholars who indeed perceive source credibility judgment in journalism to be "visceral" (Dunwoody and Ryan, 1987, p. 21) in nature (Altheide, 1978; Goldenberg, 1975), as it is based on cognitive biases (Stocking and Gross, 1989, cited by Self, 1996, p. 429). Members of this camp perceive source credibility as "an assumption rather than a judgment to be made about a source [. . .] not a quality inherent in a source but instead [. . .] levied onto a source by the media" (Dunwoody and Ryan, 1987, p. 21). "[I]t is style and presentation rather than truthful information which gives some sources more control over their messages. In this context, journalistic truth is but a by-product of familiarity and legitimacy" (Altheide, 1978, p. 375). According to Hall et al., sources are accredited not because of their record of trustworthiness, but rather because of their representative status, institutional power and position (1978, p. 58). Members of this critical camp believe that source credibility is a "higher order resource" of organizations and institutions, resulting "in part from other resources such as size, cohesion, knowledge, intensity of feeling and perhaps money or votes" (Goldenberg, 1975, p. 46).

The *discretional* camp, on the other hand, is much less critical of source credibility judgment. Without adopting the naïve view that credibility judgment can be fully rational and free of bias, its members do perceive it as a legitimate journalistic process that is employed reasonably by journalists (Gans, 1979; Manning, 2001; Tuchman, 1978; Yoon, 2005). According to this camp, source credibility judgment can protect journalists from publishing erroneous information, help select suitable contacts and act as an efficiency measure in a manner that "avoid[s] engaging in arduous investigations to find evidence for the trustworthiness of a specific source" (Jackob, 2008, p. 1045). Tuchman claims that "Viewing all sources as questionable, news reporters must spend time verifying their statements" (1978, p. 84), while Gans notes:

> Story selectors want reliable sources whose information requires the least amount of checking [. . .] When reliability cannot be checked quickly enough, story selectors look for trustworthy [. . .] Journalists often have difficulty in judging the trustworthiness of their sources. Those they talk with frequently can be evaluated over time, which is another reason why story selectors prefer regular sources. (1979, pp. 129–30)

According to the literature, there are three major source characteristics that may increase coverage inequality based on source credibility judgment:

- *Previous contacts*: more ''familiar'' news sources (Altheide, 1978; Dunwoody and Ryan, 1987) or sources with more ''past suitability'' (Gans, 1979) may be perceived as more credible, especially in the realm of newsbeat coverage, in which reporters might develop recurring relationships with their news sources. While discretionalists could consider recurring reliance on the same sources to be a hallmark of healthy credibility judgment, as only previous contacts have a track record of believability based on evidence, visceralists will perceive it as a bias in which familiar contacts also acquire an aura of credibility (Altheide, 1978; Dunwoody and Ryan, 1987; Goldenberg 1975).
- *Source types*: Reporters perceive senior sources as more credible (Becker, 1970; Cohen, 1963) and PR practitioners as less credible (Aronoff, 1975; Jeffers, 1977).
- *Source affiliation*: Journalists tend to see government officials as more credible than other sources (Fishman, 1980; Sigal, 1986; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2009).

Hypotheses

To test the extent to which journalists are discretional or visceral in their source credibility judgment and treatment, this paper developed three concepts:

- *Conceptual source credibility*: The extent to which a journalist perceives a person believable as a news source. The natural witness—and actually the only one—to the perceived credibility of an assortment of sources is the reporter, who can be simply asked how credible did he or she consider a certain source relied on recently. While lower levels of credibility may reflect visceral judgment, higher ones may be perceived as bias by the visceral camp.
- *Practical source credibility*: The extent to which a reporter employed a series of specific practices during the stages of news gathering and construction of the news item, manifesting skepticism or trust, including cross-checking, use of additional sources (that obviously exhibit some partial overlap), clear attribution (versus anonymity or hinted identity) and allocation of space in the final item. High congruence between conceptual credibility and practical credibility may be considered evidence of discretional judgment (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979), although visceralists may see it as a systematic bias.
- *Source credibility inclinations*: The extent to which sources with certain characteristics are systematically considered more credible or less credible than others. While discretionalists may agree that these are ''inclinations,'' visceralists will insist on calling them ''biases.''

The main reason that this study prefers the discretionalist view as a basis for the next series of hypotheses is that newsbeat reporters of the type studied here, at least, are compelled to act discretionally. As news actors who play the source credibility game for their living, they may lose face and sometimes even lose their jobs when misjudging the

credibility of their sources. This is a game played publicly in highly responsive and competitive environments in which different stakeholders (such as sources, competitors and audiences) let them know about right and wrong credibility judgments. Moreover, it is played repeatedly, thus allowing reporters to evaluate their sources over time (Gans, 1979). Finally, its venue is situated within news organizations with limited tolerance toward credibility misjudgments that are struggling to preserve their own credibility as providers of news.

Four hypotheses were formed according to this reasoning:

1. A decisive majority of the news sources, who journalists relied upon in their published items, will be ranked as credible or highly credible.
2. A decisive majority of the news sources will comprise those who were relied upon in the past by the journalist being interviewed. Significant and positive correlation is expected between regularity of contacts with sources and their perceived credibility.
3. Congruence between conceptual credibility and practical credibility is expected to be high. Hence, less credible sources will be accompanied with more strict production practices: more cross-checking, more additional sources, more clear attribution of their versions, and allocation of less space in the final item.
4. Reporters will perceive senior sources and government officials as more credible than other sources and PR practitioners as less credible.

Methodology

To address the severe limitations and sensitivities of source work, even the few studies that did focus on source credibility asked journalists to rank different types of sources (Detjen et al. 2000; Flynn 2002; Yoon 2005)—all of which were hypothetical, generic and decontextualized. In real-life situations, on the other hand, journalists never encounter a generic source, but rather specific personae who offer specific information under specific contexts of newsworthiness, competition, risk of error and availability of time, resources and accessibility required for checking suspected sources or dubious information. In some studies, journalists were even asked to rank the credibility of entire organizations (Yoon, 2005) or clusters of sources (Detjen et al., 2000; Powers and Fico, 1994; Rouner et al., 1999), each of which may incorporate notorious liars and reputable truth tellers alongside one another.

To test the credibility judgment of specific news sources in real-life contexts, the current study chose a sample of 80 reporters from 10 different beats in nine leading Israeli national news organizations[1] and asked them to reconstruct, source by source, the credibility they ascribe to each of the sources[2] in a sample of their recently published items.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face: the reporter (with a pile of sampled stories) and interviewer (with a pile of questionnaires) sat on opposite sides of a table with a screen between them to avoid infringement of source confidentiality. Each time, the reporter was asked to pick one item (the interviewer could not see which) and answer a series of questions regarding the conceptual and practical credibility of each source.

Data were created by assigning interviewees' oral replies to *categories* in a closed quantitative questionnaire. Source characteristics in the questionnaire were outlined as general categories (such as senior source or PR practitioner, affiliated with the government or the private sector, etc.) to avoid exposure of identifying details. It is important to note

that interviewees were addressing real and specific sources and it is only their descriptions that were formulated and documented in a generic format.

The key question to the reporter was: How would you rank the credibility of each of the sources you specified? Please choose one of the following options: 1. Highly credible. 2. Credible. 3. Fairly credible. 4. Not very credible. 5. Not credible. 6. Not credible at all (as very few cases were assigned to categories 4–6, these categories were combined into one—Not very credible or less—in the data analysis stage). The question was not accompanied by any definition, assuming that as experts and daily judges of source credibility, reporters need no one to define it for them. Moreover, it is their perceptions, rather than those of the researcher, that are being studied (for a more detailed discussion of the methodology and full version of the questionnaire, with minor modifications, see Reich, 2009, pp. 19–34, 195–200).

The interviews, that took place during December 2006 and January 2007, were preceded by three steps:

1. *Random selection of beats and reporters*: A full list of newsbeats in each of the studied news outlets was prepared and those not shared by all outlets were deleted, leaving only the comparable beats. The 10 final newsbeats for study were chosen randomly, representing three major beat clusters—politics and security, domestic affairs and business affairs—in proportion to their share of overall reporting personnel. The final selection comprised 80 reporters, as in one case (*Haaretz*), the same reporters work for the paper and its affiliated website. Fourteen reporters were replaced with others from their beat cluster after refusing to participate or having published fewer items than the stipulated minimum.
2. *Identification of all published items*: The sampling period extended over four weeks, reflecting an attempt to achieve a fair balance between variety among stories and use of material still fresh in reporters' memories. News websites were visited four times a day.[3]
3. *Random sampling of news items*: Ten items per reporter were selected randomly, providing a sample large enough to allay reporters' concerns that their ethical demand for source confidentiality could be infringed by matching their descriptions with the respective stories, but not so large as to tax reporters' focus and patience.

Theoretically, contextual examination of source credibility judgment could be achieved by newsroom observations, some of which contributed substantial insights regarding news work (Altheide, 1978; Berkowitz, 1991; Domingo and Paterson, 2008; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Source credibility, however, is hardly observable because it is of an abstract, evasive and fragmented nature, spread across different locations inside and outside newsrooms and across different channels of communication. Furthermore, observations of sourcing practices infringes source confidentiality and do not allow any quantitative measurement.

The experiments used in early studies and the interviews conducted in more recent ones (Tsfati, 2008) tend to decontextualize source credibility judgment, focusing, as indicated, on generic and faceless news sources. Some studies used content analysis (Flynn, 2002; Stempel and Culbertson, 1984), that is highly speculative in its association with source credibility, as news products rarely bear unequivocal traces of news processes (Brown et al., 1987; Hallin et al., 1993; Manning, 2001 p. 48).

Obviously, reconstruction interviews are not free of shortcomings, the most prominent of which are the self-reports, that are subject to biases, the limits of recollection and overall blindness toward sources and entire items that were eventually dismissed during the selection phase. Some of these weaknesses are largely unavoidable

in a study that concerns perceived phenomena and attempts to examine it in a real-life context. Other weaknesses are somewhat counterbalanced by anchoring of reporters' testimonies in a sample of specific sources and items, by asking interviewees to report specific actions rather than evaluate their own performance and by focusing on freshly published materials, thereby minimizing possible memory gaps.

Another undeniable methodological weakness is the percentage of item space dedicated to each source that ideally should have been based on objective word count rather than reporters' estimations. Independent counts were unthinkable, however, given the study's design and source confidentiality preservation arrangements, requiring strict separation between the published items and the deciphering of the processes by which they were obtained. Nevertheless, the reporters' estimations may be considered fairly reliable, for three reasons: (1) journalists are used to estimating word counts regularly; (2) calculations were conducted while the respective items were in front of their eyes; and (3) even straightforward counts cannot be totally precise here, as coders find it difficult to decide where the contribution of a specific source begins and ends (Hallin et al., 1993).

Findings

The data elucidate some of the nature of source credibility judgment, as conducted by journalists who cover regular news beats in a (reconstructed) real-life context where specific news sources exchanged specific information under specific circumstances. This may produce new evidence for the theoretical dispute regarding the extent to which source credibility judgment is visceral or discretional by nature.

All in all, the study analyzed a sample of 2080 news sources involved in 840 news items. However, in 210 cases (10 percent) reporters refused to or could not specify the perceived credibility of the source. Hence the study is based on 1870 source evaluations.[4]

Findings concerning the first and the second hypotheses are presented in Table 1.

Distribution of Credibility

Findings confirm the first hypothesis, according to which a vast majority of news sources relied on by journalists for their published news items will be ranked as credible or

TABLE 1
Source credibility and regularity of contact between parties (%)

	Regularity of contact			
Source credibility	**First in this item ($N=169$)**	**Several previous contacts ($N=296$)**	**On a monthly/weekly basis ($N=901$)**	**On a daily basis ($N=476$)**
Not very credible or less*	5	4	3	2
Fairly credible	13	12	11	7
Credible	49	44	43	35
Highly credible	33	40	43	56
Total	100	100	100	100

The correlation between credibility and regularity was significant (Spearman's $r=0.146$, $p=0.000$).
*Including the category ''not credible at all''.

highly credible. Of the 1870 news sources in the sample, 45 percent were ranked by reporters as highly credible and 41 percent as credible. Only about 13 percent of the sources were perceived as fairly credible at most.

In discretional eyes, the overwhelming dominance of sources with relatively high credibility indicates a journalistic methodology in which reporters stick to news sources they perceive as credible enough to help them avoid publication of erroneous information. It also shows that despite all constraints, reporters managed to implement that methodology in a vast majority of cases. Only very rarely would journalists rely on sources whom they themselves do not consider as credible. These findings also allow for a visceralist reading, however, according to which the high credibility ranking helps reporters narrow their cognitive dissonance.

Credibility and Regularity

Findings also confirm the second hypothesis. The first part of the hypothesis, according to which a vast majority of the news sources that were ranked more credible were also formerly contacted, is confirmed by a simple calculation. Of all sources in Table 1, only 187 (10 percent) were contacted for the first time. This means that in more than 90 percent of the contacts, reporters had at least some experience with the source. Moreover, 74 percent of the contacts involve regular sources, which are contacted at least once a month, 26 percent even once a day (!).

Discretional theorists may see this as an indication that news beat reporters do take advantage of their fixed domain to evaluate their sources over time (Gans, 1979, p. 130) and constantly distill their reservoir of sources based on their track record of trustworthiness. This may be true even though many of these contacts were probably initiated by the sources (Reich, 2006, 2009), as journalists always have the last word about their sources' suitability for the respective items, regardless of who initiated each contact. Even discretionalists will find it hard to explain the following exception, however: as shown in the left column of Table 1, journalists were prepared to judge the credibility of their sources even when they have no previous record, as they were contacted for the first time regarding the given item, ranking many of them as highly credible (although less credible than older contacts). Visceralists may consider this to be evidence that journalists rely on gut feeling, and the whole method of using past contacts is nothing but a bias toward the familiar (Altheide, 1978). They will find it harder, however, to explain the second part of this hypothesis, according to which more credible sources retain more regular reporter–source contacts. According to the findings, there is a positive correlation between credibility and regularity (Spearman's $r = 0.146$, $p = 0.000$).

The association between credibility and regularity is most clearly evident in the line of highly credible sources. The consistent rise in credibility according to intensity of contacts indicates that the logic of intensive reliance and the logic of source credibility judgment correlate too consistently to be dismissed as visceral judgment. This does not mean that frequent reliance is determined exclusively by credibility considerations, as source suitability involves other variables, such as past suitability, authoritativeness, articulateness, productivity, initiative, time pressures, perceived trustworthiness of the information, and availability (Gans, 1979, Powers and Fico, 1994; Reich, 2009).

The *a priori* ''typecasting'' of regular sources, whose credibility was already tested in the past, not only begins long before a certain item comes into being but also structures the entire journalistic assembly line.

Although heavy reliance on regular sources elicits newsmaking that is prone to rather coherent logic, it renders journalism an occupation that suffers from a no less severe weakness of extreme closeness, covering the new primarily by reliance on the old. This way, the news business becomes highly closed to new voices, who have to fight fiercely over a very narrow space.

Practical Credibility

To test this hypothesis, that expected high congruence between conceptual and practical credibility, news items were grouped into four clusters according to the weakest link (in terms of credibility), as displayed in Table 2. While the upper line includes no sources perceived as less than perfectly credible, the bottom line includes at least one source classified as ''not very credible'' or ''not credible at all.'' Table 2 shows the extent to which the items in each group were cross-checked and accompanied by additional news sources.

Data support the third hypothesis, showing that source credibility is not just a matter of theoretical skepticism but rather a practical mechanism translated by journalists into real actions to verify or refute certain source versions or at least minimize dependency on their assertions. The less credible the sources, the more cross-checking they face and the more additional sources will be employed, in line with discretional views. However, there are two interesting nuances here that may serve the visceral point of view as well: even when all sources are highly credible, each third item is still cross-checked and even when sources are perceived as having the least credibility, a third of the items are not cross-checked at all. The logic behind the latter phenomenon may derive from another practice employed by reporters to protect themselves from less credible sources: clear identification of the source in the final item. While in the three upper degrees of credibility only 27 percent of the sources are identified, in the lower echelon of credibility, where sources are classified as ''not very credible'' or ''not credible at all,'' the percentage rises to

TABLE 2
Sourcing patterns according to the weakest link (in terms of credibility)

Clusters of items according to the weakest link	News items		Sourcing patterns	
	N	%	Percentage of cross-checking	No. of sources per item
All sources are highly credible	284	34	32	2.06
At least one source credible	352	42	49	2.62
At least one source fairly credible	144	17	59	3.12
At least one not very credible or less*	50	6	66	3.26
Total	830	100	46	2.56

Correlation was significant between credibility and cross-checking (Spearman's $r = 0.226$, $p = 0.000$) and between credibility and source number (Spearman's $r = 0.296$, $p = 0.000$).
*Including the category ''not credible at all''.

40. The difference between the three upper degrees of credibility grouped together and the non-credible sources was significant ($\chi^2_1 = 4.561$, $p = 0.033$).

The inevitable result of more sources and more cross-checking is another discretional practice—the allocation of less item space for the less credible, as presented in Figure 1. Percentages were based on interviewees' estimations of how the total space of each item was divided among the different news sources it described.

The correlation between credibility and item space was small but significant (Spearman's $r = 0.136$, $p = 0.000$). Allocating less item space to less credible sources supports the discretional outlook, even though the least credible ones were given some space. The conclusion maintains that reporters do not ignore even some of the least credible voices except under the rarest of circumstances. According to this reasoning, these voices would consequently be accorded at least a minimal amount of space.

Allocation of more item space to the more credible is somewhat expected but not obvious, as previous studies did not find evidence for association between credibility and news hole (Flynn, 2002; Stempel and Culbertson, 1984; Yoon, 2005). The principal contribution of the correlation between credibility and volume, however, is its ability to transform a highly evasive and abstract act of credibility judgment into a clear, measurable indication.

While percentages of space were estimated, the figures are probably more reliable than those originating in lay persons' assessments, as journalists have to estimate word counts on a daily basis and calculations were conducted meticulously with the respective items in front of the reporters' eyes.

Practical credibility can be effective, partly because the lion's share of sources is accorded to credible and highly credible sources. This reduces the amount of "problematic" sources—that require additional and expensive journalistic treatment, such as triangulation of their versions with a third party—to tolerable proportions.

Source Credibility Inclinations

The fourth hypothesis addresses the "hierarchy of credibility" (Becker, 1970) and the extent to which there is evidence for the major biases mentioned in the literature. According to this hierarchy, senior sources and government officials are perceived as more credible than other sources while PR practitioners are considered less credible.

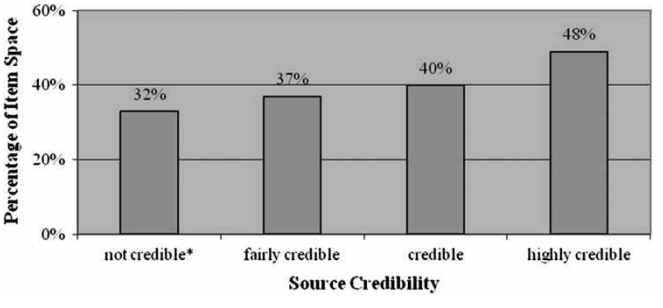

FIGURE 1

Percentage of item space allocation by source credibility.

*Including the categories "not very credible" and "not credible at all". The correlation between credibility and item space was small but significant (Spearman's $r = 0.136$, $p = 0.000$).

TABLE 3
Who are the most credible sources?

Source type	*N*	Percentage of contacts ranked as highly credible
Senior sources*	539	47
Non-senior sources	468	44
Spokespersons and PR	688	39
Reporter's observation	52	79
Other†	100	78
Total	1847	46

The overall difference between source groups was significant ($F_{(4,1842)} = 13.49$, $p = 0.000$).
*Heads of agencies and corporations, chairmen of parliamentary committees, party and faction leaders, high-ranking officers in the army (colonel+) and police (deputy commissioner+), mayors and their deputies.
†Other: media publications, newsroom updates, documents and archive.

Table 3 presents the different types of sources and ranks their credibility in one column only, indicating the percentage of sources of each type that were considered highly credible, summarizing the similarities and differences among them (although comparisons and correlations addressed all degrees of credibility).

Findings show no clear evidence to support the literature's depiction of senior sources as substantially more credible than non-senior sources and of PR practitioners as substantially less credible than other sources. PR practitioners scored only slightly less credible than senior sources ($p = 0.002$).

The most credible source (if we ignore the category "other", a mélange of miscellaneous sources) is the reporters themselves when employing their own eyewitness reports. *Post hoc* comparisons show that reporters' observations are perceived as more credible than any other human source ($p < 0.020$). Assigning significantly higher credibility to ones' own observations appears to be a discretional idea, let alone an obvious one. Despite its high credibility, however, firsthand witnessing is used in only 4 percent of coverage, while other human agents account for 91 percent of journalists' work despite their relatively limited credibility.

Table 4 presents the extent to which different sectors in society are perceived as highly credible. The data do not support the hypothesis that journalists consider government-sector sources more credible than others. The only significant difference

TABLE 4
Highly credible sources, by sectors in society

Sector in society	*N*	Percentage of sources ranked as highly credible
Government	922	46
Political	111	30
Public	296	45
Private sector	301	42
Private person	111	39
Other*	92	77
Total	1833	46

The overall difference between groups was significant ($F_{(5,1827)} = 7.75$, $p = 0.000$).
*Other: messages published by other media, academic sources, PR sources, information from the Web.

(again ignoring the ''other'' category) is between political sources and their inferior credibility compared with government ($p = 0.003$) and public-sector sources ($p = 0.0029$). Differences between private persons and other sectors were not significant. The distrust of political sources conforms with the journalistic cynicism towards politics found by several scholars (Capella and Jamieson, 1997; Schudson, 1999).

Discussion

As the association between credibility and regularity is correlative, the direction of causality remains unclear. This situation enables not only the discretional reading according to which credible sources become regular, but also the visceral outlook according to which regular sources acquire an aura of credibility. It may occur in an attempt to narrow the cognitive dissonance that some believe to be present in source credibility judgment (Stocking and Gross, 1989, cited by Self, 1996, p. 429), as the alternative is to admit reliance on less than perfectly credible sources (that were indeed used), gut feeling, or questioning the standards of who is considered an ''authorized knower'' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 3). Cognitive dissonance may compensate for prioritizing less ''respectful'' criteria for selection of sources such as rich resources, familiarity, articulation skills or like-mindedness (Altheide, 1978; Gans, 1979; Goldenberg, 1975).

Even if the causality was in the opposite direction, however, source credibility would still play a key role as constant justification for journalists' decision making, especially regarding regular sources that capture most of the news information. This is probably the case because journalists lack more robust criteria for source selection or more solid evidence regarding their versions, considering the numerous constraints of time, access, energy, attention, routine and epistemology (Ekström, 2002; Gans, 1979; Manning, 2001; Reich, 2009).

Although correlation does not allow unequivocal determination of whether credibility leads to regularity or vice versa, it is clear that the strategic coupling of both is a basic journalistic method for news gathering: covering new stories by reliance on old sources typically perceived as credible or highly credible.

Overall findings show that ''hierarchies of credibility'' among different types of sources and sectors of sources are flatter than the accepted wisdom in the literature would dictate. Evidence was found only for slightly lower credibility of political and PR sources. Furthermore, senior sources, government officials and even PR practitioners were relied on more frequently than other sources (as the *N* columns in Tables 3 and 4 indicate), suggesting that reporters have undeniable inclinations or biases towards certain groups of sources that have little to do with their perceived credibility. The flatter hierarchies support the discretional view, according to which reporters judge their source's credibility *ad hominem* (in a positive respect)—i.e. in their own right.

Surprisingly or not, the most credible sources are the journalists themselves when witnessing events without the mediation of a third party. This seemingly obvious tendency may suggest a much less obvious insight according to which the dominant methodology for obtaining news, reliance on other human agents, is nothing but a practical compromise in terms of source credibility.

Conclusion

This study found mixed evidence regarding the nature of source credibility judgment in journalism and the extent to which it fits the discretional or visceral approaches. On the one hand, journalists present a rather coherent conceptual and practical credibility, relying almost exclusively on a nucleus of sources whom they perceive as credible and highly credible, whose trustworthiness was tested in the past. They display clear association between regularity of contacts and degree of credibility and trust their own experience more than any other human agent. When encountering a less credible source, they employ more cross-checking, rely on more additional sources, allocate them less news space in the final item and use more attribution to distance themselves from direct responsibility for their versions.

On the other hand, some patterns of their judgment and treatment of their sources' credibility raise doubts regarding their coherence. Journalists judged the credibility of first-time sources even though they lack an established record of believability and allocated considerable space to sources ranked as least credible. Items based on sources with the highest degree of credibility were cross-checked no matter what and most hazardous of all, items that involved at least one of the least credible sources were not cross-checked at all.

Many of the journalists apparently applied visceral criteria in some cases and discretional ones in others, possibly because of factors not addressed in the study. It appears plausible to perceive this mixed picture as discretional logic with some visceral islands rather than vice versa.

First, while the strengths of their credibility judgment, such as systematic cross-checking and space allocation, can hardly be explained in visceral terms, at least some of the ostensible weaknesses of source credibility judgment may be explained in discretional terms. For example, reliance on the least credible sources may be ascribed to cases in which a journalist suspects the veracity of the assertions made by a political figure or a senior official, yet considered them too prominent to be ignored (Roshco, 1975, p. 50). Even avoidance of cross-checking items involving the least credible sources may be partially explained by the higher rates of attribution of these sources. Both the seeming anomalies of cross-checking and the judgment of first-time sources' credibility are a potential indicator of yet another set of credibility considerations that is beyond the scope of the current study, possibly addressing the nature of the raw information itself and its perceived credibility, controversiality, deniability and potential risk for the journalists' own reputation or that of their news organizations.

Second, although no method, including the current one, ought to underestimate its potential biases, especially when a perceived and complex phenomenon is involved, until we have decisive evidence indicating otherwise, it is more plausible and parsimonious to assume that ''journalists regularize interactions with sources they view as credible'' (Yoon, 2005, p. 295) than vice versa.

Third, newsbeat reporters in particular, such as those comprising the research sample, are neither free of biases nor at liberty to follow their capricious and arbitrary gut feelings too far, as the visceralists may suggest, ignoring accumulating evidence regarding the previous credibility records of the sources they use time and again. As practitioners who use credibility for their livelihoods, repeatedly and publicly, in very responsive environments and within organizations with little tolerance for credibility misjudgments, their freedom is necessarily limited. Furthermore, the interviews in which journalists must present their best

judgment regarding their sources' credibility and minimize biases of different kinds are those they conduct with news sources in the practice of their profession, rather than interviews for academic purposes such as those carried out for this study.

Fourth, if this study, that largely focused on a single variable, source credibility, found considerable consistency and logic in its judgment and treatment, further variables relevant to news considerations, such a source accessibility and productivity, will probably elicit source credibility judgment as even more discretional.

Journalists' trust in sources starts where they stop checking—a phenomenon that occurs much earlier in newsbeat reporting than in investigative reporting. Hence newsbeat reporters are more in the business of trust, while investigative reporters are more in the business of mistrust. Facing their specific legal, ethical and professional standards, investigative reporters have to corroborate at least their major claims with documents and evidence and constantly suspect their sources (Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Jackman, 2010).

This study uses the Israeli case to answer key universal questions regarding source credibility and journalism. Nevertheless, the representativeness of the current findings requires further study in other cultural contexts. Until these are conducted, readers should bear in mind that the Western objective-neutral model is dominant among Israeli journalists (Meyers et al., 2006) and that Israeli national news organizations are small, centralized and characterized as free, commercial and highly competitive. Trust in sources is as basic a value among Israeli reporters as it is among their Western counterparts (Tsfati, 2004) and both US and Israeli journalists agree that checking the credibility of information prior to publication is the most important journalistic value of all (Arian et al., 2005).

Further research should focus on the blind spots of this study. A complementary "wastebasket" study, that must first overcome the substantial challenge of enlisting journalists' cooperation, should focus on the perceived credibility of sources for items dismissed in the gatekeeping process, thereby detecting the contribution of credibility to the decision *not* to rely on certain sources. This is particularly important if we assume that the wastebasket contains a unique source mix, with extra weight accorded to new, alternative and resource-poor sources (Gitlin, 1980; Goldenberg, 1975). Other studies should examine whether journalists distinguish between source credibility and information credibility (i.e. the extent to which journalists consider a specific piece of information as credible) and if so, how they are implemented in concert and contribute to news processes and news products.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research was supported by a grant from the Israel Foundations Trustees (2006–2008). The author thanks Sharon Ben-David, Oz Carmel and Alex Nirenburg for their help in compiling the data, Dr. Martin C. J. Elton of the Burda Center at Ben-Gurion University and Dr. Yariv Tsfati of the University of Haifa for their most beneficial remarks and Tali Avishay-Arbel for her statistical advice.

NOTES

1. The criteria for choosing organizations were as follows: (1) national news organizations; (2) market leaders; and (3) employers of dedicated reporting staffs. Beats were selected

from reporters full lists, prepared by following the reporters' bylines over a three-month period according to the following criteria: (a) mainstream beats in each of the nine news organizations; (b) output published primarily in news and business sections; (c) covered by full-time reporters; (d) reporters who publish at least 12 items per month. The fourth medium, television, was omitted to avoid overextending the scope of an already amply broad study and to eliminate the production and visual biases that television embodies (Bantz et al., 1980; Hemingway, 2008).

2. See Note 4.

3. Following the suggestion of the State of the News Media, 2006, http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2006/narrative_online_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=4, accessed 28 July 2009.

4. These sources comprise 97 percent of all contacts. The remainder consisted of contacts with sources exceeding four per item, the particulars of which were not detailed in the interviews because of time constraints.

REFERENCES

ALTHEIDE, DAVID L. (1978) ''Newsworkers and Newsmakers: a study in news use'', *Urban Life* 7, pp. 359–78.

ARIAN, ASHER, BEN-NUN, PAZIT, BARNEA, SHLOMIT and TSFATI, YARIV (2005) *The Media and Israeli Democracy from Various Vantage Points*, Jerusalem: Israeli Democratic Institute Press, http://www.idi.org.il/sites/english/PublicationsCatalog/Pages/The_Media_and_Israeli_Society_From_Various_Vantage_Points/Publications_Catalog_7765.aspx.

ARONOFF, CRAIG E. (1975) ''Credibility of Public Relations for Journalists'', *Public Relations Review* 2(4), pp. 43–57.

BANTZ, CHARLES R., MCCORKLE, SUZANNE and BAADE, ROBERTA C. (1980) ''The News Factory'', *Communication Research* 7(1), pp. 45–68.

BECKER, HOWARD S. (1970) ''Whose Side Are We On?'', in: Jack D. Douglas (Ed.), *The Relevance of Sociology*, New York: Meredith Corporation, pp. 99–111.

BECKER, LEE B. and TUDOR, VLAD (2009) ''News Organizations and Routines'', in: K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch (Eds), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, New York: Routledge, pp. 59–72.

BERKOWITZ, DAN (1991) ''Assessing Forces in the Selection of Local Television News'', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 35(2), pp. 245–51.

BROWN, JANE D., BYBEE, CARL R., WEARDEN, STANLEY T. and STRAUGHAN, DULCIE MURDOCK (1987) ''Invisible Power: newspaper news sources and the limits of diversity'', *Journalism Quarterly* 64(1), pp. 45–54.

CAPELLA, JOSEPH N. and JAMIESON, KATHLEEN H. (1997) *Spiral of Cynicism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

COHEN, BERNARD C. (1963) *The Press & Foreign Policy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

COTTLE, SIMON (2000) ''Rethinking News Access'', *Journalism Studies* 3(1), pp. 427–48.

DETJEN, JIM, FICO, FRED, LI, XIGEN and YEONSHIM, KIM (2000) ''Changing Work Environment of Environmental Reporters'', *Newspaper Research Journal* 21(1), pp. 2–12.

DIMITROVA, DANIELA V. and STRÖMBÄCK, JESPER (2009) ''Look Who's Talking: use of sources in newspaper coverage in Sweden and the United States'', *Journalism Practice* 3(1), pp. 75–91.

DOMINGO, DAVID and PATERSON, CHRIS (2008) *Making Online News. The ethnography of new media production*, New York: Peter Lang.

DUNWOODY, SHARON and RYAN, MICHAEL (1987) ''The Credible Scientific Source'', *Journalism Quarterly* 64, pp. 21–7.

EKSTRÖM, MATS (2002) ''Epistemologies of TV Journalism: a theoretical framework'', *Journalism* 3(3), pp. 259–82.

ERICSON, RICHARD V., BARANEK, PATRICIA M. and CHAN, JANET B. L. (1989) *Negotiating Control: a study of news sources*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

ETTEMA, JAMES S. and GLASSER, THEODORE LEWIS (1998) *Custodians of Conscience*, New York: Columbia University Press.

FISHMAN, MARK (1980) *Manufacturing the News*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

FLYNN, TERENCE (2002) ''Source Credibility and Global Warming: a content analysis of environmental groups'', paper presented to the annual meeting of AEJMC, Miami, FL.

GANS, HERBERT J. (1979) *Deciding What's News*, New York: Pantheon Books.

GAZIANO, CECILIE and MCGRATH, KRISTIN (1986) ''Measuring the Concept of Credibility'', *Journalism Quarterly* 63, pp. 451–62.

GITLIN, TODD (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

GOLDENBERG, EDIE (1975) *Making the Papers*, Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.

HALL, STUART, CRITCHER, CHARLES, JEFFERSON, TONY, CLARKE, JOHN and ROBERT, BRIAN (1978) *Policing the Crisis*, London: Macmillan.

HALLIN, DANIEL C., MANHOFF, ROBERT K. and WEDDLE, JUDY K. (1993) ''Sourcing Patterns of National Security Reporters'', *Journalism Quarterly* 70(4), pp. 753–66.

HEMMINGWAY, EMMA (2008) *Into the Newsroom: exploring the digital production of regional television news*, London: Routledge.

JACKMAN, ODED (2010) ''Investigative Journalists' Patterns of Work in the Israeli Press'', unpublished M.A. thesis, The Department of Communication, Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

JACKOB, NIKOLAUS (2008) ''Credibility Effects'', in: Wolfgang Donsbach (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1044–7.

JEFFERS, DENNIS W. (1977) ''Performance Expectations as a Measure of Relative Status of News and PR People'', *Journalism Quarterly* 54(2), pp. 299–306.

JOHNSON, THOMAS J. and KAYE, BARBARA K. (2000) ''Using is Believing: The influence of reliance on the credibility of online political information among politically interested internet users'', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77(4), pp. 865–79.

MANNING, PAUL (2001) *News and News Sources: a critical introduction*, London: Sage.

METZGER, MIRIAM J., FLANAGIN, ANDREW J., EYAL, KEREN, LEMUS, DAISY R. and MCCANN, ROBERT N. (2003) ''Credibility for the 21st Century: integrating perspectives on source, message, and media credibility in the contemporary media environment'', *Communication Yearbook* 27, pp. 293–335.

MEYERS, OREN, PERI, YORAM and TSFATI, YARIV (2006) ''What Is Good Journalism? Comparing Israeli public and journalists' perceptions'', *Journalism* 7(2), pp. 153–74.

POWERS, ANGELA and FREDRICK, FICO (1994) ''Influences on Use of Sources at Large U.S. Newspapers'', *Newspaper Research Journal* 15(4), pp. 87–97.

REICH, ZVI (2006) ''The Process Model of News Initiative: sources lead first, reporters thereafter'', *Journalism Studies* 7(4), pp. 497–514.

REICH, ZVI (2009) *Sourcing the News: key issues in journalism: an innovative study of the Israeli press*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

ROSHCO, BERNARD (1975) *Newsmaking*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ROUNER, DONNA (2008) ''Credibility of Content'', in: Wolfgang Donsbach (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1039–44.

ROUNER, DONNA, SLATER, MICHAEL D. and BUDDENBAUM, JUDITH M. (1999) ''How Perceptions of News Bias in News Sources Relate to Beliefs About Media Bias'', *Newspaper Research Journal* 20(2), pp. 41–51.

SCHUDSON, MICHAEL (1999) ''Social Origins of Press Cynicism in Portraying Politics'', *American Behavioral Scientist* 42(6), pp. 998–1008.

SCHUDSON, MICHAEL (2001) ''The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism'', *Journalism* 2(2), pp. 149–70.

SCHUDSON, MICHAEL (2009) ''Two Cheers for Positivism: factual knowledge in the age of truthiness'', in: Barbie Zelizer (Ed.), *The Changing Faces of Journalism*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 104–13.

SELF, CHARLES C. (1996) ''Credibility'', in: Michael B. Salwen and Don W. Stacks (Eds), *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 435–57.

SIGAL, LEON V. (1986) ''Sources Make the News'', in: Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson (Eds), *Reading the News*, New York: Pantheon, pp. 9–37.

STEMPEL, GUIDO, III and CULBERTSON, HUGH M. (1984) ''The Prominence and Dominance of News Sources in Newspaper Medical Coverage'', *Journalism Quarterly* 61(3), pp. 671–6.

STOCKING, HOLLY S. and GROSS, PAGET H. (1989) *How Do Journalists Think? A proposal for the study of cognitive bias in newsmaking*, Bloomington: Smith Research Center, Indiana University.

STRÖMBÄCK, JESPER J. and NORD, LARS W. (2005) ''Who Leads the Tango? A study of the relationship between Swedish journalists and their political source'', paper presented to the Political Communication Division, International Communication Association, New York.

TSFATI, YARIV (2004) ''Exploring Possible Correlations of Journalists' Perceptions of Audience Trust'', *Journalism and Mass Communication* 81(2), pp. 274–91.

TSFATI, YARIV (2008) ''Journalists, Credibility of'', in: Wolfgang Donsbach (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 2597–600.

TUCHMAN, GAYE (1978) *Making News*, New York: Free Press.

WANTA, WAYNE and HU, YU-WEI (1994) ''The Effects of Credibility, Reliance, and Exposure on Media Agenda-setting: a path analysis model'', *Journalism Quarterly* 71(1), pp. 90–8.

YOON, YOUNGMIN (2005) ''Examining Journalists' Perceptions and News Coverage of Stem Cell and Cloning Organizations'', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82(2), pp. 281–300.

Zvi Reich, The Department of Communication Studies, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, PO Box: 653, Beer Sheva 84105, Israel. E-mail: zreich@bgu.ac.il