

PEER INFLUENCE ON ATTITUDES TOWARD CABLE NEWS CHANNEL CREDIBILITY

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN MASS COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2010

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To Mom, Daddy, Chip, and Jonathan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ronald Rodgers, Ph.D., David Ostroff, Ph.D., Cynthia Morton, Ph.D., and Kathryn Gerlach for their enormous help and advice throughout this process. Your efforts brought this project to fruition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
LIST OF TABLES	7
LIST OF FIGURES	8
ABSTRACT.....	9
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	10
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	13
Credibility	13
Medium Credibility	14
Source Credibility	19
Cable News and Credibility.....	24
Cable News Viewership	26
Credibility Polling Data.....	29
Party Affiliation/Political Ideology and Attitudes Toward Cable News Credibility.....	35
Peer Influence Studies	40
Peer Influence on Individuals' Attitudes	47
Peer Influence on Attitudes Toward Media Credibility	50
Resistance to Peer Influence with Age	50
Theories Used in Peer Influence Studies	51
Social Cognitive Theory	53
Social Cognitive Theory in Peer Influence Studies.....	58
Justification for Using SCT	60
Research Questions.....	61
3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS.....	63
Data Collection	63
Instrument and Measures	65
Independent Variable.....	65
Outcome Variable.....	67
Data Analysis.....	69
4 RESULTS	70
Descriptive Statistics	70
Research Question 1	71
Research Question 2	72

Research Question 3 and Hypothesis 1	73
Linear Regression for CNN	74
Linear Regression for MSNBC	76
Linear Regression for Fox News	78
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	88
Summary	88
Explanation	91
Limitations	93
Suggestions for Future Research	94
Closing	95
APPENDIX	
A SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE A	97
B IRB DOCUMENTATION	102
LIST OF REFERENCES	104
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	114

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>		<u>page</u>
5-1	Results of Linear Regressions Predicting Effect of Independent Variables on Respondents' Credibility Ratings for CNN	85
5-2	Results of Linear Regressions Predicting Effect of Independent Variables on Respondents' Credibility Ratings for MSNBC.....	86
5-3	Results of Linear Regressions Predicting Effect of Independent Variables on Respondents' Credibility Ratings for Fox News	87

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>page</u>
5-1 Distribution of Respondents' Credibility Ratings for CNN	82
5-2 Distribution of Respondents' Credibility Ratings for MSNBC	82
5-3 Distribution of Respondents' Credibility Ratings for Fox News.....	83
5-4 Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Peers' Credibility Ratings for CNN	83
5-5 Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Peers' Credibility Ratings for MSNBC.....	84
5-6 Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Peers' Credibility Ratings for Fox News....	84

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Mass Communication

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December 2010

Chair: Ronald Rodgers
Major: Mass Communication

Though much scholarly research has been devoted to media credibility, no studies have explored peers' potential influence on individuals' assessments of cable news channels' objectivity and trustworthiness. The current study examines respondents' relative credibility ratings for the three most popular cable news channels (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News) and explores the relationship between respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings and respondents own credibility ratings. A total of 562 questionnaires were obtained from undergraduate students attending the University of Florida (UF). Results indicate that respondents find CNN and Fox News to be most and least credible, respectively. Their perceptions of peers' credibility ratings mirror their own credibility assessments. A series of linear regressions for each of the three channels show respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings to be the single best predictor of respondents own credibility ratings.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of journal articles and numerous scholarly books have explored media credibility. Additionally, the topic has received considerable attention outside academia. For example, with few exceptions, the Pew Research Center releases annual media credibility polling data. These polls cover a broad range of issues, running the gamut from comparing broadcast networks' nightly news programs' credibility ratings to investigating highly specific inquiries – such as how critical Fox News' viewers are of the news media at-large (Pew Research Center, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009). Results of these media credibility polls are far from encouraging. A recent Pew report revealed that Americans' assessments of media credibility have reached an all-time low (Pew Research Center, 2009). Among a nationally-representative sample of American adults, only 29% agreed that the media “get the facts straight,” a 26% drop from when the poll was first conducted in 1985 (Pew Research Center, 2009).

Across the board, Pew data have consistently shown waning credibility ratings for the U.S. news media (Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009). Evidence demonstrates that credibility ratings often suffer when the media's “constructions of reality . . . contradict the existential and social realities” (Tehranian, 2002, p. 76). These false constructions of reality directly oppose journalism's primary objective: “seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues” (“SPJ Code of Ethics,” 1996). This disconnect between espoused tenets and actual practices should alarm those in the communications field since “without credibility, media lose their legitimacy, audiences, power, and – ultimately – money” (Tehranian, 2002, p. 72). Furthermore, audience shrinkage subsequent to growing skepticism will invariably lead to a less informed public. An

understanding of current events is held to be a “forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy” (“SPJ Code of Ethics,” 1996). Thus, the public’s loss of faith in news media may represent a crack in the foundation of our democratic society.

In light of such concerns, the topic of media credibility is both consequential and timely. The current study explores the role of peer influence in assessments of three cable news channels (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC). Specifically, UF undergraduate students were surveyed to determine if a statistically significant relationship exists between respondents’ perceptions of peers’ credibility ratings and respondents’ own ratings. By querying students regarding their attitudes toward the news media, this study offered greater insight into an important segment of the population: highly-educated young adults. Some research suggests that college students are particularly disenchanted with the mainstream media and are less likely than other groups to acquire their knowledge about current events from newspapers or cable news programs (Diddi & LaRose, 2006). Furthermore, Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) predict that Internet-based news sources “may complement traditional media use for older, less educated, and lower socioeconomic status groups, but it may displace offline news consumption for younger and more educated users” (p. 4). College students’ attitudes towards cable news networks are influenced by many variables – some of which have received inadequate research attention.

Despite an abundance of media credibility studies and a plethora of peer influence research, intersections between these two fields of inquiry have not been investigated. Peer influence literature as a whole has tended to focus on how and to what extent people’s attitudes towards drug use, body image, and risk-taking behaviors as well as their decisions as consumers are affected by others (Bauman & Ennett, 1994, p. 820; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006, p. 929; Childers & Rao, 1992, p. 198; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005, p. 625). No studies could be located

concerning the role of peer influence in the formation of individuals' attitudes toward news media. Not only does a gap exist in the academic literature, but, surprisingly, the topic has not been addressed in media credibility polls conducted by non-profit organizations, for-profit organizations, and news outlets (Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2010). One of this study's most significant contributions is the fact that it connects two disparate (yet related) bodies of literature.

This research project procured data regarding respondents' perceptions of their peers' credibility ratings for CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC as well as respondents' personal ratings of these major cable news channels. When studying the role of peer influence, knowledge of respondents' perceptions of their peers' attitudes is perhaps of greater value than knowledge of their peers' actual attitudes. This study's survey was designed specifically to elicit information from the respondent's perspective – which may or may not accurately reflect reality. Although causality cannot be established, a statistically significant relationship between respondents' credibility assessments and respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility assessments suggests that peer influence may contribute to flagging media credibility ratings. A deeper understanding of the process by which undergraduate students form attitudes toward cable news channels is achieved through examining the extent to which these attitudes correlate with perceptions of their peers' credibility assessments.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Credibility

Although media credibility has been separated into a few different subsets by the communication literature, it is typically parsed into two distinct categories: source credibility and medium credibility (Stroud & Lee, 2008). In general terms, “credibility” references the “judgmental space” wherein listeners, readers, viewers, etc. “judge” the “communication and the communicator on the basis of several internally held criteria, e.g., honesty, trustworthiness, ability, and so forth” (Markham, 1968, p. 58). One of the most salient and recurring factors used to define media credibility is trust. Indeed, the concepts “credibility” and “trust” overlap to such an extent that, at times, they have been used interchangeably (Kiousis, 2001; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Public Policy Polling, 2010). Kohring and Matthes (2007) assert that trust is a hierarchal factor on the second order, comprised of four first-order factors which media consumers cognitively perceive and group under the umbrella of “trust in news media” (p. 247). These first-order factors include: trust in the selectivity of topics,” “trust in the selectivity of facts,” “trust in the accuracy of depictions,” and “trust in journalistic assessment” (p. 247).

Source credibility is determined by the sum of all communicator characteristics that can “influence the processing of a message” (Kiousis, 2001, p. 382). Alternatively, medium credibility refers to the “channel through which the content is delivered rather than the sender (or senders) of that content” (Kiousis, 2001, p. 382). Some researchers have taken a macro-level approach to source credibility by examining the media industry as whole, analyzing credibility across all channels (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999, p. 150, 151). Research has established that both individuals and groups can function as sources/communicators. It is, perhaps, more

intuitive to identify “an individual speaker who communicates directly to the audience and gives his own views on an issue” as a spokesperson deserving of credibility assessment (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953, p. 19). Nevertheless, when organizations are segmented into their various components, two primary entities relevant to source credibility emerge: channel/institutional credibility and individual credibility (Watts et al., 1999, p. 150, 151; Oyedeji, 2007, p. 118).

While the primary goal of source credibility research is to discover the impact that factors like presentation style, quality/sound of voice, and word choice have on the judgment of the communicator’s credibility (Addington, 1971; Markham, 1968), the study of medium credibility concerns determining the role publications or channels play in how messages are received and assessed. Lucas and Britt (1950) were among the first scholars to note the importance of medium credibility. They maintained that advertisements’ credibility is tied to the media channels, magazines, and televisions networks that carry them (Lucas & Britt, 1950, p. 660). Similarly, Hovland et al. (1953) claimed that “the impact of a message probably depends . . . upon the particular publication or channel through which it is transmitted” (p. 19).

Medium Credibility

In 1964, Westley and Severin noted that “very little attention” had been given “to the relative credibility of the media which carry the message” (p. 325). They attempted to address this gap in the literature by conducting a credibility experiment across multiple media channels. At the time of publication, the researchers wrote: “We find no previous studies of the correlates of media credibility. We believe such knowledge will shed some light on the question of why the media are trusted or distrusted” (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 327). Their seminal study examined respondents’ beliefs concerning the credibility of television, radio, and newspapers, while accounting for key demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, income, education, urban/rural) (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 326-330). These scholars used the following question

to assess the concept of credibility: “As between television, radio, and the newspapers, which one do you feel gives the most accurate and truthful news?” (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 326). Thus, Westley and Severin (1964) used accuracy and truthfulness as the two primary dimensions for defining media credibility and sought to discover which medium was the most credible (p. 326). Their study revealed that respondents considered television to be the “most credible,” while radio was rated least credible (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 326). Findings indicated that respondents with higher levels of education considered newspapers to be more credible than television and radio (Westley & Severin, 1964). Additionally, greater education was associated with lower television credibility ratings compared to the study average (Westley & Severin, 1964). Interestingly, the best predictor of credibility was “place of residence”; urbanites found newspapers to be more credible while those who lived in rural areas ascribed greater credibility to television (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 330). Farmers, in particular, gave low credibility ratings to newspapers, but assigned high credibility ratings to television (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 334). Additionally, the study revealed that the amount of time spent with a given media channel was positively related to its subsequent credibility ratings; in other words, “those who use a medium more and say they prefer it as their chief news source also tend to assign it greater credibility” (Westley & Severin, 1964, p. 333).

Similarly, a study conducted by Abel and Wirth (1977) comparing the credibility of local television news and local newspapers found that respondents perceived television news to be significantly more credible than newspapers. This survey of Detroit residents analyzed credibility according to three dimensions: believability, truthfulness, and importance (Abel & Wirth, 1977, p. 374). The authors concluded that “television is perceived to be a more credible, truthful, and important source of local news than the newspaper” (p. 375).

Lee (1978) provided further evidence of the higher perceived credibility of television news. In this study, college students completed a survey to ascertain what news medium they trusted most (p. 283, 284). These respondents – in a three-to-one ratio – ranked television news to be more credible than print news (p. 287). The researchers found that “college students appeared to perceive TV news as more ‘trustworthy,’ ‘authentic,’ ‘dynamic,’ ‘expert,’ ‘objective,’ ‘intimate,’ ‘convenient,’ ‘easy,’ etc. than newspaper news” (Lee, 1978, p. 287).

Similarly, Ibelema and Powell’s (2001) findings ranked cable news as the most credible source of news (measured as “trustworthiness”). In fact, among the various news outlets – broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX), local television news, national newspapers (like *USA Today* and *The New York Times*), cable networks (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News), and local daily newspapers – all components of television news outranked the remaining media. Cable news was rated highest in credibility, followed by local news, and then network news (p. 46). National newspapers came next in terms of credibility, then radio, and, finally, local newspapers were considered least credible (Ibelema & Powell, 2001, p. 46). The authors conjectured that cable news “stands out” as particularly credible because of “its ubiquitous ability to provide information constantly” (p. 49).

Greenberg (1966) defined media credibility according to the sole dimension of “believability”; respondents were asked which medium they would trust if television, radio, and newspapers gave conflicting reports (p. 667). In Greenberg’s (1966) study, television news was judged to be the most credible medium when compared to television news and newspapers (p. 667). Data revealed that gender, age, and education were significantly associated with the outcome variable. While 78% of women trusted television news more than newspapers, only 61% of men concurred (Greenberg, 1966, p. 667). With regards to age, the researchers found that

younger respondents were more trusting of television news. Specifically, 72% of participants under 50 reported that television is the most credible medium; 63% of those aged 50 and older agreed (Greenberg, 1966, p. 668). Educational attainment also predicted respondents' credibility ratings; 80% of the respondents who had not finished high school trusted television news more than newspapers, but only 63% of college-educated respondents trusted television news more than newspapers (Greenberg, 1966 p. 668). In this study "believability" is synonymous with credibility. As mentioned previously, ideas such as "believability" and "trust" are frequently used to represent the concept of credibility and such terminology is considered by some to be interchangeable (Stroud & Lee, 2008, p. 1).

An Edelstein and Tefft (1974) study revealed that more Americans trusted television news over newspaper and radio news during the Watergate scandal (p. 434). Overall, the literature suggests television was considered the most credible medium until about the 1980s, when perceptions began to shift. By the late 1980s, television may have lost its credibility edge. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) performed a media credibility study in which respondents were called via telephone and sent self-administered questionnaires. While respondents reported that they found television news to be more factual than newspapers, overall the respondents had "similar attitudes" toward the two media (p. 460, 461).

Myriad studies have been conducted comparing television news, print news and radio news; however, very few studies have compared those traditional media outlets with the Internet. Johnson and Kaye (1998) surveyed politically-minded Internet-users, asking them to rate the credibility of online newspapers alongside traditional hard-copy newspapers and online magazines with traditional hard-copy magazines (p. 328, 329). Respondents rate "online newspapers . . . as more credible than their traditionally-delivered counterparts while no

differences exist for news magazines and issue-oriented sources” (p. 334). The study also reaffirmed “that a medium’s credibility is strongly linked to the degree to which people rely on it,” and the researchers stated emphatically that “indeed, in this study, reliance is linked to credibility” (p. 334). Also, this study revealed a marked increase in the amount of credibility given to the Internet, showing that credibility can rapidly fluctuate (p. 335) However, Johnson and Kaye (1998) speculated that this increase in credibility may be due to the fact that Internet-users were surveyed exclusively, for they likely rely on the Internet a great deal (p. 335).

In a comparison study of the 21st century’s three primary medium channels (i.e. newspapers, television, and the Internet), Kiouisis (2001) found that respondents viewed newspapers as being significantly more credible than television news programs, the reverse of findings from research conducted in previous decades (p. 393). In this study, respondents’ credibility ratings did not vary dramatically by medium, as all three channels fell within the questionnaire’s “moderately credible” response category (p. 394).

Another study, Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, and Casey (2002), compared the credibility of television news, newspapers, and online news (p. 3). The researchers followed the same model which Gaziano and McGrath (1986) created – a 12-item Likert news credibility scale, with factors on the scale including trustworthiness, currency, bias, fairness, completeness, objectivity, honesty, up-to-date, believability, balance, accuracy, and timeliness (p.14). The study found that of the three mediums, users rated online news as the most credible (p. 16). This article, coupled with Johnson and Kaye’s (2004) “Wag the Blog” study, suggest that media consumers’ credibility evaluations for online news and journalism are becoming increasingly more positive over time. Johnson and Kaye (2004) created a credibility index based on four components – “believable, fair, accurate, [and] depth.” Not surprisingly, this research revealed a

positive relationship between media usage and credibility ratings: those who used Weblogs judged them as “highly credible” and even “significantly more credible than other media” (p. 634). Furthermore, “almost three-quarters of respondents view Weblogs as moderately to very credible,” while only 3.5% of respondents rate Weblogs as “not very” or “not at all” credible (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 633). Of all news mediums – including television, internet, radio, and print – Weblogs rate as the most credible news source (p. 630). Credibility ratings for cable news are intermediate (lower than print news and online versions of print news, but higher than radio news and broadcast television news sources) (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 631). Again, reliance is a determining factor in Weblog credibility, explaining between 12.7% and 14.6% of variation in respondents’ ratings of Weblog credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 632). Conversely, a survey of print journalists reveals that Weblogs and other forms of online news are only thought to be “moderately credible” (Cassidy, 2007, p. 154).

In recent years, newspapers outrank television in terms of credibility. A study by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) reveals that “newspapers were rated significantly higher in credibility than the other media” (p. 524). Similarly, a Kiouisis (2001) study shows that when respondents compare newspapers and television news side-by-side, they perceive newspapers to be significantly more credible (p. 393).

Source Credibility

The basic relationship of communication – between source and receiver – defines a system wherein “a source, influences the states or actions of another system – the destination or receiver – by selecting among the alternative signals that can be carried in the channel connecting them” (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957, p. 272).

One of the earliest source credibility studies, conducted by Hovland and Weiss (1951), demonstrates that trustworthiness is an essential dimension of source credibility; so much so that

they discovered “changes in (viewers/readers) opinion[s] are significantly related to the trustworthiness of the source used in the communication” (p. 647). A follow-up study revealed a second prominent dimension of source credibility, coined “expertness” (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 20). Hovland et al. (1953) concluded that “when acceptance is sought by using arguments in support of the advocate view, the perceived expertness and trustworthiness of the communicator may determine the credence given them” (p. 20). Hovland et al. (1953) discovered that trustworthiness was an essential ingredient to source credibility because recipients may “still be inclined to reject the communication if he suspects the communicator is motivated to make nonvalid assertions” (p. 21). Trustworthiness was affected by “beliefs about (the source’s) knowledge, intelligence, and sincerity” (p. 20). Furthermore, “perceptions of the communicator’s intentions to persuade his audience may affect judgments of his credibility” (p. 25). Factors affecting perceptions of expertness include the communicator’s age, whether he/she is in a “position of leadership” within a group, and similarities between the communicator and recipient in terms of status, values, and interests (p. 22).

Additionally, when test subjects received information from a communicator with a high level of credibility, they generally experienced some level of “opinion change” based on the information communicated. Specifically, the greater the communicator’s perceived credibility the more “opinion change” was expected to occur (p. 40). Public relations professionals are acutely aware of these findings and seek to maximize the perceived credibility of those who relay their organizations’ messages. For instance, they actively seek out highly credible journalists to report on their companies’ news stories and recognize that advertisements are not as effective as positive press from third parties since the latter are thought to be more impartial – and hence more credible (p. 23).

Schweitzer and Ginsburg (1966) maintain that, while Hovland et al.'s (1953) dimensions of credibility (i.e. "trustworthiness" and "expertness") are valid, such an operationalization is overly simplistic. Schweitzer and Ginsburg (1966) wrote that "it does seem clear that the Hovland, Janis, and Kelley model is incomplete" (p. 99). They went on to speculate that perhaps the aforementioned factors might serve as a basic foundation on which more precise studies of source credibility could be constructed. Schweitzer and Ginsburg (1966) maintained that source credibility is extremely complex – more complex than the Hovland et al. (1953) recognized – and that "the particular cues, or perceived characteristics, which influence the recipient's judgment of credibility will vary across communication contexts and across populations of recipients" (p. 99).

Building on the Hovland et al. (1953) and Schweitzer and Ginsburg (1966) studies, Whitehead (1968) performed a study which used "sixty-five bi-polar semantic differential scales" to perform a factor analysis which yielded results showing competence (or professionalism) and objectivity as part of the "underlying factor structure of source credibility" (p. 59-61). Competence was also described as having "experience" and a "professional manner," while objectivity was described as being "open-minded" (Whitehead, 1968, p. 63). The study also reinforced the presence of the trustworthiness factor found in previous source credibility studies (p. 60, 62).

Kelman and Hovland (1953) used the polar descriptions "positive" and "negative" to operationalize source credibility. "Positive" sources were described as "trustworthy, prestigious, or well-liked" and "well-informed"; conversely, "negative" sources were deemed "untrustworthy," less prestigious, or not well-liked and "poorly informed"; additionally, sources' judgment, competence, and fairness were assessed (p. 327, 328, 330). The study, which surveyed

high school students, showed that “positive” sources can persuade respondents to agree with their messages while “negative” sources’ messages are often rejected (Kelman & Hovland, 1953, p. 335). The study also built on the Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949) concept of the sleeper effect in which the impact of the communication wears off with time or has a delayed effect in changing the subject’s attitude (p. 188). Kelman and Hovland (1953) found statistically significant evidence which showed that the impact of sources, both “negative” and “positive,” fades, but a reintroduction of the source after a three week time lapse will re-establish the effects which the source originally made on the test subjects (p. 335).

Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1970) built on Hovland’s research and isolated three dimensions that receivers use “when evaluating message sources”; these dimensions of source credibility are safety, qualification, and dynamism (p. 570). Comparing their dimensions of source credibility with Hovland’s dimensions, the researchers stated that the “three-factor definition is not incompatible with Hovland, Janis, and Kelley’s earlier conceptualization of credibility as ‘expertise’ and ‘trustworthiness’” (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970, p. 574). Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1970) noted, though, that their “analytic results provide a clarification of what is meant by those (Hovland’s) terms” (p. 574). They asserted that safety is a more appropriate, all-inclusive dimension than “trustworthiness” and that qualification is “easier to interpret” and more accurate than “expertise” (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970, p. 575). Their third dimension – dynamism – “can be conceived of as an intensifier,” heightening the polarity of past judgments regarding safety and qualification, if the source is viewed as having “high dynamism” (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970, p. 575, 576). Thus, dynamism, as a dimension, reemphasizes the two previous dimensions, clearly showing whether or not the source is credible. Additionally, the authors asserted that the source’s “image” in a television newscast or the source’s voice on the

radio should only be judged subjectively according to the receiver's perceptions instead of using researcher-created operationalized measurements (Berlo, Lemert & Mertz, 1970, p. 573, 576).

Other studies built upon the initial Hovland studies and added other dimensions to source credibility, including: competence (or reliability), trustworthiness, and dynamism (or showmanship) (e.g. Addington, 1971, p. 242; Markham, 1968, p. 61-62).

For a message to be effective and believable, its source must have a high level of credibility, which “depends largely upon the willingness of the audience to accept its source as trustworthy and competent” (Addington, 1971, p. 242). Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) also made this clear by stating “the effectiveness of a communication is commonly assumed to depend to a considerable extent upon who delivers it” (p. 19). In a study during which subjects listened to audio-recordings of newscasts, Addington (1971) found no significant difference between the credibility ratings of male and female sources, indicating that “if there is a credibility difference between male and female speakers it is unlikely that the difference is due to the differences in their voices” (p. 245).

Similarly, a study by Andsager (1990) revealed that subjects ascribed no more credibility to a male author of a political column than to a female author of a political column (p. 488). In the study, Andsager used two political columns, both written by males, and attached a fictitious female name to one and a fictitious male name to the other. The study allowed Andsager (1990) to study the level of gender bias held by his sample population of college students at Kansas State University (p. 487). According to Andsager (1990), “male and female bylines received the same rating overall” (p. 488).

Source credibility can also be viewed in terms of a media outlet or organization; again, Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) explained that the source can be an individual, a group, or an

organization (p. 19). When investigating group-level source credibility, researchers began breaking television news into strata: local news, network/broadcast news, and cable news (Ibelema & Powell, 2001, p. 45). Although it excluded network news, Howard, Blick, and Edward's 1987 study found that local television news was preferred to cable news as a source for "specialized news" – news tailored to specific topics (politics, finance, entertainment, etc.), specific audiences, or specific areas (p. 622). Decades later, respondents' trust in and preference for cable news seemed to have increased, as Ibelema and Powell's 2001 study demonstrated that cable news earned the highest "trust" rating from participants in their phone survey (p. 46). The perceived trustworthiness of local news ranked second, while network news was thought least trustworthy (p.46).

These data suggest that cable news networks have progressed significantly as legitimate and credible sources of information since their inception. Henke (1985) queried college students about the frequency with which they viewed CNN (the only cable news network in existence during the mid-1980's). Results showed that the students used CNN as a supplement to their regular media consumption, rather than a replacement to broadcast news and newspapers (p. 434, 435). Later, in 1996, MSNBC and Fox News were launched, heightening competition in the cable news market (Mifflin, 1996, para. 1; Huff, 1996, para. 4).

Cable News and Credibility

Television news, in particular cable news, has increasingly become Americans' primary news source. In 2009, a Pew Research Center poll found that when Americans were asked how they learned about national and international issues, 71% of respondents listed television news as their main news source. And, of those who listed television as their main source, 40% tuned in to one of the three major cable news networks as their primary news outlet (Pew Research Center,

2009). CNN and Fox News split the lion's share of viewership – 22% and 19% respectively – while 6% of respondents indicated that they watched MSNBC (Pew Research Center, 2009).

An earlier Pew Researcher Center (2008) survey found that cable news had become a widely popular news medium, second only to local news in frequency of exposure; its consumption outranked newspaper, radio, network morning news, network evening news, and online news (Pew Research Center, 2008). Of the respondents surveyed, 39% indicated that they “regularly watched” cable news, while 52% reported that they “regularly watched” local news (Pew Research Center, 2008). Furthermore, the poll showed that between 2002 and 2008, those who “regularly watched” cable news had increased from 33% to 39% while those who “regularly watched” network evening news declined from 32% to 29% (Pew Research Center, 2008). According to Pew, cable news viewership has steadily increased and surpassed network news's regular audience, making it the primary source for information on national and international issues (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Pew research has also revealed a significant relationship between age and television news viewership, as older adults are more likely than younger adults to watch both cable and network news programs. A mere 21% of respondents aged 18-29 “regularly watched” network news; a larger proportion (36%) indicated watching cable news with regularity (Pew Research Center, 2008). Of those in the 30-49 age group, just 22% regularly watched network news, while 38% reported watching cable news on a consistent basis. In the 50-64 age bracket, 34% and 42% regularly watched network and cable news, respectively. Among respondents 65 and older, 46% watched network news and 44% reported viewing cable news routinely (Pew Research Center, 2008). In this study, 56% of the overall cable news audience was male and 44% was female (Pew Research Center, 2008). Gender distribution was similar across the three cable news

channels. Specifically, 51% of CNN's viewers were male and 49% were female (Pew Research Center, 2008). At the other channels, female audience members slightly outnumbered male audience members. Fox News' viewers were 48% male and 52% female, while 47% of MSNBC's viewers were male and 53% were female (Pew Research Center, 2008).

The greater popularity of cable news relative to network news, particularly among younger adults, may be a consequence of cable's twenty-four-hours-a-day format. The Pew Research Center concluded that "rather than setting aside time to watch the network news at a specific hour – what's known as 'appointment television' – younger adults are more likely to go to cable, which is available any time they choose to tune in"; this is very important because the sporadic nature of television viewing means that this age group will be more likely to assign credibility to a channel rather than an individual news anchor/reporter or "source" (Pew Research Center, 2004). Another report demonstrated that less than half of respondents (48%) spent 30 minutes or more watching TV news per day, averaging 54 minutes per viewer (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Cable news has allowed all viewers the opportunity to consume news at their leisure, but young people, in particular, take advantage of the flexibility that a 24-hour news cycle offers (Pew Research Center, 2008). "Dinner hour" is no longer considered the time to get informed about current events. In 1998, 59% of 18-24 year olds consumed their news during their so-called "dinner hour," but 10 years later, in 2008, only 39% of 18-24 year olds used the "dinner hour" for news consumption (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Cable News Viewership

The three most-viewed cable news channels in the 21st century have been CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC (Stroud, 2007, p. 16). Using the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey results, Stroud (2007) found that 92% of those who claimed to watch cable news watched Fox

News, CNN, and MSNBC most frequently (p. 16, 17). According to the 2004 data, “34% [of respondents] reported viewing Fox News, 45% CNN, and 12% MSNBC” (p. 17).

Pew Research Center findings also demonstrate that Fox News is substantially more popular than competing cable news networks (Pew Research Center, 2005). The survey found that “in 2004 Fox remained cable news's undisputed leader in ratings, or the number of people watching at any given time” (Pew Research Center, 2005). Fox News held about 55% of the cable news audience during the “total day” – the aggregate ratings for all 24 hours of programming – in 2004; CNN finished second with 30% of viewers for the “total day,” and MSNBC came in third with 15% (Pew Research Center, 2005). In primetime, Fox News was also the leader growing its median viewership by 10% – 1.34 million in 2003 to 1.47 million in 2004 (Pew Research Center, 2005). In primetime, CNN held second place in median viewers, though it had a drop-off of 2% – 815,000 in 2004 from 832,000 in 2003 (Pew Research Center, 2005). MSNBC’s median primetime viewership is a distant third (but growing) with 341,000 viewers in 2004, a strong 19% increase over its 287,000 viewers in 2003 (Pew Research Center, 2005).

Looking deeper into the demographics of these three cable news channels, revealed that, as of 2009, 51% of CNN’s viewers are male (49% are female) (TV Dimensions, 2009, p. 89). Twenty-two percent of its adult audience falls into the 18-34 age range, while 35-49 year olds make up 30% of the audience (p. 89). Forty-eight percent of CNN viewers are 50 and older (p. 89). The channel’s median viewer age is 49.2, while median household income is \$66,763 (p. 89). The majority (61%) of CNN’s audience has completed one or more years of college (p. 89). Fox News’ viewer demographics are similar. Specifically, half of Fox News viewers are male and half are female (p. 89). Persons aged 18-34 constitute 21% of the Fox News audience, while

an additional 30% of viewers are 35-49 years old; median viewer age is 49.7 (p. 89). The Fox News audience's median household income is \$62,964 (p. 89). More than half (54%) of Fox News viewers have completed a year or more of college (p. 89). MSNBC's audience consists of 51% males and 49% females; 23% of its viewers are between the ages of 18-34 (p. 90). Viewers aged 35-49 account for 32% of its total audience, and median viewer age is 47.7 years old (p. 90). The average household income of an MSNBC viewer is \$68,752, and 64% of its audience has completed a year or more of college (p. 90).

The most recent data show that cable news viewership is steadily increasing (State of the News, 2010). In 2009, cable news' median viewership grew by 7%, resulting in an average of 3.88 million primetime viewers compared to 3.64 million primetime viewers in 2008. However, primetime mean viewership has recently suffered a 9% decline, falling from 4.17 million viewers in 2008 to 3.81 million viewers in 2009. But daytime median viewership grew by 16% in 2009, putting it at 2.16 million viewers, up from 2008's 1.86 million viewers (State of the News, 2010). Additionally, daytime mean viewership grew by 7% to 2.19 million, up from 2.05 million in 2008. Between 1999 and 2009, the mean primetime viewership for the three cable networks grew from 1.26 million to 3.81 million viewers, an increase of over 300%. Daytime mean viewership grew at a similar rate from .75 million to 2.19 million viewers, an increase of nearly 300%.

In terms of viewership by channel, Fox News dominated CNN and MSNBC, as it averaged 2.14 million viewers in primetime during 2009, an increase of 6% over 2008's 2.02 million viewers (State of the News, 2010). Fox News' mean daytime viewership grew as well, by 17%, up to 1.2 million viewers from 2008's 1.03 viewers. In 2009, CNN followed Fox News with a mean primetime viewership of 891,000, a surprising 30% percent drop from their 1.27

million viewers in 2008. But CNN's daytime mean viewership rose 3% in 2009, up to 645,000 over 2008's 627,000. MSNBC suffered, too, with a primetime mean viewership decline of 12% – 889,000 viewers in 2008 down to 785,000 in 2009. Daytime viewership was no better; MSNBC lost 13% of their daytime viewers, registering 344,000 viewers in 2009 down from 398,000 viewers in 2008.

Websites corresponding to the three major cable news channels all ranked among the top ten news websites in terms of unique visitors in 2009 (State of the News, 2010). MSNBC's website ranked highest of the three cable networks, finishing second on the list of most popular news sites, behind Yahoo News, with 35.57 million unique visitors in 2009; CNN ranked fourth with 20.73 million unique visitors; Fox News ranked seventh with 12.65 million unique visitors. These numbers accounted for more than 68 million total unique visitors over the course of 2009.

Credibility Polling Data

According to the literature, “believability” represents a primary component of media credibility (Greenberg, 1966; Markham, 1968; Addington, 1971; Abel & Wirth, 1977; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). For 10 years, the Pew Research Center tracked believability in cable news between 1998 and 2008. In 2008, CNN attained higher credibility scores than all other cable or other media news channels and also outranked print, local, and network news in terms of credibility (Pew Research Center, 2008). In 2008, 30% of those surveyed (N=928) “believe(d) all or most” of what CNN reported. In contrast, 24% and 23% of respondents “believe(d) all or most” of information relayed by MSNBC and Fox News, respectively. Although CNN did lead all media channels in credibility in 2008, viewers' faith in the network had declined substantially from 1998 when 42% of respondents “believe(d) all or most” of what CNN reported. CNN's main competitors were not included in the 1998 poll, but in the 2000 poll, Fox News was

believed by 26% and MSNBC was believed by 28% of respondents, while CNN was believed by 39% of those surveyed that year (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Believability ratings across different news channels vary widely according to political party affiliation. Overall, Democrats find the media more believable than do Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2008). Fox News, is the exception, as only 19% of Democrats believed “all or most” of the networks’ reports, but 34% of Republicans were confident that “all or most” of the stories reported by Fox News were believable. This 15% gap in Republican/Democrat believability ratings for Fox News is the largest difference by political affiliation for any of the three main cable news networks. CNN showed a 13% gap (Republicans at 22%; Democrats at 35%); MSNBC showed an 11% gap (Republicans at 18%; Democrats at 29%).

It should be noted that Fox News’ Republican/Democrat believability gap has grown during the eight year time period for which data are available (Pew Research Center, 2008). When Fox News was first rated in 2000, more Democrats believed “all or most” of what was reported than Republicans (27% compared with 26%, respectively). In subsequent years, the responses changed 16 percentage points, with Republicans and Democrats moving in opposite directions. Meanwhile, both CNN and MSNBC showed convergence between Republican and Democrat responses. Between 2004 and 2008, the believability gap of Republicans and Democrats for CNN dropped from 19% down to 13% while MSNBC’s gap dropped from 15% down to 11%.

The Pew study also showed that the cable news networks’ viewerships have comparable gender make-ups: Fox News (48% male, 52% female), CNN (51% male, 49% female), MSNBC (47% male, 53% female) (Pew Research Center, 2008). Cable news viewers as a group tend to be intelligent, mature, and informed. In 2008, 31% were college graduates, 44% were 50-or-

older, and 25% were categorized as possessing a “high knowledge” based on their awareness of current events. MSNBC viewers had the highest numbers in two of three of these categories: 37% were college graduates, 41% were 50-or-older, and 25% possessed “high knowledge” of current events. Fox News and CNN finished with very similar numbers: 25% and 32%, respectively, were college graduates, 47% of both channels’ viewers were 50-or-older, and 19% of both channels’ viewers possessed “high knowledge” of current events.

One of the most recent studies of cable news credibility was conducted by Pew in 2009. The Pew study compared party affiliation with favorable/unfavorable ratings of the three primary cable news networks – CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC (Pew Research Center, 2009). Of the 1,506 adults surveyed on the phone, the gap between what registered Republicans found to be favorable and what registered Democrats found to be favorable was quite significant. Most polarizing was the number of Democrats who found CNN to be favorable (75%) compared to the number of Republicans who found it favorable (44%). The substantial gap of 31% suggests that media consumers perceive CNN to be more sympathetic to the Democratic party.

Fox News, widely thought to be a divisive force in cable news, yielded a similar gap between Republicans and Democrats, but in the opposite direction. Of Republicans queried, 72% gave the cable news network a favorable rating, while only 43% of Democrats labeled it as favorable, a 29 point difference (Pew Research Center, 2009).

MSNBC’s numbers nearly mirrored CNN’s statistics, as 34% of Republicans labeled it favorable compared to 60% of Democrats who labeled it favorable, a gap of 26 points (Pew Research Center, 2009). Meanwhile, 35% of Republicans labeled it unfavorable compared to just 7% of Democrats, a 28-point gap. In terms of all respondents – both Democrat and Republican –

CNN was the cable news channel with the strongest polarity, with a 41% gap in favorable and unfavorable ratings – 60% and 19% respectively.

The same Pew Center survey also included two items designed to assess consumers' perceptions of journalists' credibility (Pew Research Center, 2009). The first question asked respondents "in general, do you think news organizations get the facts straight, or do you think that their stories and reports are often inaccurate?" Only 29% of respondents indicated that reporters generally get the facts straight; an astounding 63% of those sampled maintained that news stories were often inaccurate, while the remaining 8% were unsure. Longitudinal data reveal that consumers have become less trusting of the media over time. In 1985, 55% of respondents thought news organizations generally got the facts straight and only 34% suspected that stories and reports were often inaccurate. Plus, 11% of those surveyed in 1985, reported being unsure. Additionally, the results of a 2004 study revealed that about half (54%) of survey respondents "trust some (news outlets) more than others," and 45% of the sample consider all news outlets as "the same" in terms of credibility (Pew Research Center, 2004).

Whitehead (1968) concluded that professionalism is a vital component of credibility. Current data suggest that consumers find the media to be less professional than in previous decades. In 2009, when the Pew Center asked respondents if "news organizations" were "highly professional" or "not professional," only 59% of respondents chose "highly professional," while 27% thought "not professional" was a more accurate descriptor. Twenty-four years earlier (in 1985), 72% of respondents indicated that news organizations were "highly professional" – 13% higher than the most recent statistic (Pew Research Center, 2009). The number of those answering "not professional" increased by 16 points during this same period, as only 11% of the sample reported viewing news organization this way in 1985 (Pew Research Center, 2009). The

Republican/Democrat gap for those answering “not professional” grew between 1985 and 2009: 11% of Republicans in 1985 and 39% in 2009 indicated a lack of professionalism in the media; the Democratic numbers for these years are 18% and 21%, respectively.

The Pew study (2009) also revealed that the public no longer trusts the media to avoid “bias” or to practice “fairness,” and “independence.” In 1985, 36% of respondents believed the press was careful to avoid bias, but in 2009 just 26% thought this was the case. Furthermore, 60% of those surveyed in 2009 observed bias in the press, up 15% since 1985 when only 45% saw bias (Pew Research Center, 2009). Political affiliation has an influence on consumer’s perceptions on this issue. In 1985, 49% of Republicans and 43% of Democrats believed that the media was biased. In 2009, 78% of Republicans saw the media as biased, while 50% of Democrats indicated that this was the case.

This same year, only 18% of all Pew survey respondents reported feeling that the media deals “fairly with all sides” (Pew Research Center, 2009). Twenty-four years earlier, 34% agreed with this statement. Alternatively, the number of respondents who believe the media tends to “favor one side” jumped from 53% in 1985 to 74% in 2009, a 21 point increase. Those who saw the media as “independent” constituted a 37% minority in 1985; the number dropped to an abysmal 20% in 2009. Furthermore, those who thought that the media was “influenced by powerful people/organizations” accounted for 53% of the 1985 sample, but a massive 74% of the 2009 sample.

Of the respondents in the 2009 survey, 40% cited cable news as their “primary source for national and international news” (Pew Research Center, 2009). Of those obtaining news from cable channels, the Pew 2009 study revealed correlations between their party affiliation and their regular news sources. Fox News’ loyal Republican viewership increased from 31% in 2003 to

34% in 2009. Conversely, 17% of Democrats in 2003, but only 10% of Democrats in 2009, indicated that Fox News was their “main source for national and international news” (Pew Research Center, 2009). CNN saw the reverse of this trend. The number of loyal Republicans CNN viewers dropped from 26% in 2003 down to 13% in 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2009). Their Democratic viewership decreased slightly from 32% in 2003 down to 29% in 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2009). MSNBC data on this issue are unavailable.

A Public Policy Polling (2009) study, which sampled registered voters in North Carolina, found that Fox News was the most trusted cable news channel for “accurate and fair reporting of political news.” The Fox network was chosen by 42% of respondents; 39% trusted CNN, and 16% trusted MSNBC (Public Policy Polling, 2009). Of the survey’s self-identified “liberals,” 85% indicated that they trusted either CNN or MSNBC the most out of the three cable news channels (59% and 26%, respectively) (Public Policy Polling, 2009). Of the survey’s self-identified conservatives, 62% chose Fox News as the most trustworthy cable news channel (Public Policy Polling, 2009).

An even more recent poll, conducted by Public Policy Polling (2010) and released in January, reveals that Fox News was the most trusted of all television news networks, including broadcast networks. Results of the national telephone survey, which included 1,151 registered voters, show that 49% of respondents trust Fox News, while 37% do not trust the network and 15% are unsure (Public Policy Polling, 2010). Also, of the respondents queried, 39% reported trusting CNN, 41% did not trust CNN and 20% were not sure (Public Policy Polling, 2010). No questions about MSNBC were included. The poll showed a representative distribution by political party –Democrats comprised 36% of the sample; 35% were Republicans; and 29% were independents (Public Policy Polling, 2010). Age had a significant influence on perceptions of

trustworthiness. The majority of adults in the 18-29 age bracket trusted these cable news networks (61% trust Fox and 50% trust CNN) (Public Policy Polling, 2010).

A 60 Minutes/Vanity Fair poll released May 2, 2010, revealed similar results regarding viewers' trust in CNN and Fox News. MSNBC was not mentioned in the survey. When asked which was the most trustworthy of news sources in a list that included all broadcast news networks, the *New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, Fox News and CNN rated highest (60 Minutes/Vanity Fair Polling, 2010). Of those queried, 32% responded that CNN was the most trustworthy, while 29% rated Fox News as the most trustworthy, and the networks, as a whole, were chosen as the most trustworthy by just 13% of respondents (60 Minutes/Vanity Fair Polling, 2010). As expected, respondents' answers were split along party lines; 46% of those who chose CNN were Democrats, 23% were Republican, and 31% were Independent, while 50% of those who chose Fox News were Republican, 12% were Democrat, and 38% were Independent (60 Minutes/Vanity Fair Polling, 2010).

Party Affiliation/Political Ideology and Attitudes Toward Cable News Credibility

Stroud and Lee (2008) analyzed the “media use and credibility portion” of 38,443 surveys from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study taken before the 2006 midterm election (p. 11). Their analysis unequivocally revealed “that people discriminate between outlets [CNN and Fox News],” and just 6% of respondents rated CNN and Fox News identically in terms of credibility (p. 15). Additionally, the study showed that those who identified themselves as conservatives or Republicans “found FOX to be more credible while liberals and Democrats found CNN to be more credible” (p.16).

In a prior study, Stroud (2007) found that 64% of conservative Republicans “consume[d] at least one conservative media outlet”; this was contrasted by 28% of liberal Democrats who consumed at least one conservative media outlet (p. 23). Conversely, “42 percent of conservative

Republicans consume[d] at least one liberal outlet while 75 percent of liberal Democrats consume[d] at least one liberal outlet” (p. 23).

An even earlier study conducted by Lee (2005) found that those who identify themselves as conservatives and support the Republican Party trust the media less and tend to rate its credibility lower (p. 50, 51). Conversely, “liberals and strong Democrats tend to trust the news media to report news fairly” (Lee, 2005, p. 52). Another study conducted by Jones (2004) had similar findings: while 18.5% of “strong Republicans” indicate that they “almost never” trust the media to report news fairly, only 5.1% of staunch Democrats feel the same (Jones, 2004, p. 66). Of all Republicans – strong, weak and Republican-leaning independents – 40% did not trust the media, compared to just 16.5% of Democrats (i.e. strong, weak, and Democrat-leaning independents) (Jones, 2004, p. 66). A later study, which analyzed Pew Research Center data – from 1998 through 2004 – lends credence to these results (Morris, 2005). The Pew data revealed that between 2002 and 2004 a “dramatic change and stark polarization” in viewership occurred along party lines (Morris, 2005, p. 65). Democrats were “more likely” than Republicans to watch CNN, and Republicans were “much more likely” to watch Fox News (Morris, 2005, p. 65).

In the 2008 survey, 65% of conservative Republicans and 71% of liberal Democrats indicated that there were definitely some news sources which they trusted more than others (Pew Research Center, 2008). Nevertheless, 32% of conservative Republicans and 27% of liberal Democrats reported that they thought most news sources were similar (Pew Research Center, 2008). Pew survey results from 2008 showed that of those who viewed Fox News 39% were Republicans and 33% were Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2008). MSNBC and CNN were much more skewed in terms of political party affiliation. Only 18% of MSNBC’s viewers were

Republican (45% Democrat) (Pew Research Center, 2008). CNN had comparable numbers: 18% Republican and 51% Democrat (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Thus, overall, the data point to an obvious difference in cable news channel preferences by Republicans and Democrats. Studies conducted over the past few decades demonstrate increasing polarization in this regard. In 2004, 44% of Pew research participants who identified themselves as Democrats claimed that they were “regular viewers” of CNN, while only 25% of those who claimed to be Republicans watched CNN regularly (MSNBC data were not collected) (Pew Research Center, 2004). Furthermore, 41% of Republicans in this study stated that they were “regular viewers” of Fox News, while just 29% of Democrats tuned into Fox News consistently (Pew Research Center, 2004).

A recent content analysis conducted on the three primary cable news channels showed that they focus heavily on political coverage, which maximizes the potential for perceived or actual bias: On average, 9% of cable news stories (5% of network news stories) are devoted to political topics (State of the News, 2010). In election years, as much as 56% of cable news coverage focuses on politics (State of the News, 2010).

Issues affecting the United States received greater coverage on the three cable news channels compared to network news stations (State of the News, 2010). Eighty-two percent of cable news focused on domestic issues, while network news devoted 74% of their airtime to domestic issues (State of the News, 2010). Furthermore, the content analysis showed little variance in the types of stories on which the three cable news networks reported. According to study authors, “the list of the top five subjects covered by each of the channels was the same” (State of the News, 2010). Although the importance placed on each topic varied, CNN, Fox

News and MSNBC all covered “the economy, health care, the Obama administration, Afghanistan, and terrorism” (State of the News, 2010).

Just as striking as these findings were the Public Policy Polling (2010) data on trust in the media along party and political ideology lines. Seventy-four percent of Republicans indicated that they trusted Fox News while just 30% of Democrats and 41% of Independents reported trusting Fox News (State of the News, 2010). Conversely, 15% of Republicans, 52% of Democrats and 44% of Independents distrusted Fox News (Public Policy Polling, 2010). Not surprisingly, CNN’s numbers were nearly the reverse with regard to party affiliation: while 59% of Democrats, 23% of Republicans, and 33% of Independents trusted the network, 18% of Democrats, 62% of Republicans, and 45% of Independents felt they could not trust the network (Public Policy Polling, 2010). The statistics were even more disparate when the labels “conservative” and “liberal” were used: 75% of conservatives trusted Fox News while 66% of liberals did not; 63% of liberals trusted CNN while 60% of conservatives did not (Public Policy Polling, 2010).

Also, when collecting data on undergraduate student opinions throughout the country, the geographical opinion variance among the nation’s universities must be considered. Significant variance may occur according to which university is surveyed and where that university is located. Researchers who design studies that query young adults about their political affiliation and attitudes toward media credibility must be cognizant of these factors. Results of past presidential elections indicate that Northeastern states tend to favor Democratic candidates; in turn, Democratic voters have more positive attitudes toward CNN and MSNBC (President Map, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2008; State of the News, 2010; Public Policy Polling, 2010). Conversely, Southeastern states appear more favorable to Republicans candidates and

Republican voters generally regard Fox News more positively (President map, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2008; State of the News, 2010; Public Policy Polling, 2010). For example, Florida voters were split 50.9% Democratic to 48.4% Republican in the 2008 presidential election compared to voters in New York where the Democratic presidential candidate received 62.2% of the vote and Republican candidate 36.7% (President map, 2008). Also, this Northeastern partiality toward Democratic candidates is evidenced through New York's representation in Congress; the state sends two Democrats and no Republicans to the Senate for representation, and it sends twenty-six Democrats and two Republicans to the House of Representatives (U.S. Senate, 2010).

Meanwhile, Florida has one Republican senator and one Democratic senator, plus fourteen Republican representatives and ten Democratic representatives (U.S. House of Representatives, 2010). Furthermore, the Southeastern voters consistently vote Republican, particularly in presidential elections, where many Southeastern Democratic voters will cross party lines to vote for the GOP candidate (The Republican South, 2004, p. 7) Plus, Democratic majorities in the Northeast have continued to grow in recent years – evidence by the 2008 election – while the southern Republican majority has swelled, unabated, in recent years (Hopkins, 2009). Also, 2008 presidential election exit polling exemplifies the disparity between northern and southern states. Of those 18-29, who voted in New York, 76% voted for the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, and 21% voted for the Republican candidate John McCain (ElectionCenter 2008 Exit Polls, 2008). However, in Florida, 61% of those 18-29 voted Democratic in the presidential election, and 37% voted Republican (ElectionCenter 2008 Exit Polls, 2008). Data suggests that students in the Northeast are more likely to vote Democratic. Thus, they are also more likely to watch and trust cable news channels that are perceived to have

liberal leanings (i.e. CNN and MSNBC). Conversely, in the South, one would expect a greater number of students to vote Republican, as well as watch and trust Fox News.

Peer Influence Studies

Though great disparities exist in the media credibility realm, peer influence, an often studied topic, has not been analyzed juxtaposed with media credibility. However, the literature on the subject of peer influence in other areas is quite diverse. In a seminal work, Parsons (1963) defined influence as “a way of having an effect on the attitudes and opinions of others through intentional (though not necessarily rational) action,” (p. 38). He maintained that influence could be viewed “as a generalized medium of persuasion” or a “means of persuasion” (p. 44, 48). Parsons (1963) conceptualized influence as being driven by “intrinsic ‘persuaders’” which have a foundational basis in “facts” (p. 48). The intrinsic persuaders are attached to individuals whose level of influence is governed by their “reputation” (p. 50). In essence, “the same statement will carry more ‘weight’ if made by someone with a high reputation for competence, for reliability, for good judgment, etc.,” (p. 50). According to Parsons, “the critical common factor [for influence] is a mechanism of persuasion” (p. 58).

Another early study on influence looked at adolescents’ pre-marital sexual behaviors. Results showed that adolescents’ pre-marital sexual behaviors “generally” reflected the attitudes and opinions of those in their reference group (Mirande, 1968, p. 573). The author reported that respondents who had “not engaged in coitus are far more likely to have reference groups which disapprove of intercourse with anyone” and “those who have experienced coitus, on the other hand, generally provide limited or unlimited approval of premarital intercourse” (Mirande, 1968, p. 573).

Peer influence can have a profound effect on adherence to social norms, especially as individuals reach late adolescence. Biddle, Bank, and Marlin (1980) conducted a study in which

149 adolescents at a public high school were interviewed about parental and peer pressure and how it affected their alcohol consumption/academic achievement. The study found that “peer norms” usually “have more impact on older adolescents, when peers have had more time to influence their friends and when friendship ties are stronger” (Biddle, Bank, & Marlin, 1980, p. 1072).

Peer influence can also be seen in the consumer decision-making process. Bearden and Etzel (1982) performed an initial study that examined how peers influenced an individual’s purchase of public and private goods as well as luxury and necessity goods. They found that subjects relied heavily on peers for information regarding these purchases, particularly when choosing among several brands (p. 192). Childers and Rao (1992) replicated the Bearden and Etzel study. They conducted a similar survey in which respondents were queried about the level of influence peers had on their decisions to purchase specific consumer items (Childers & Rao, 1992, p. 202, 203). A total of 196 MBA graduates were questioned (p. 203). The researchers learned that peers had the largest influence on the purchase of conspicuous products – items seen by the general public such as cars, boats, houses, clothing, etc., but their influence on the purchase of private products was significantly less pronounced (p. 208). Childers and Rao (1992) concluded that “these findings demonstrate the relatively large influence of peers for public products and luxuries” (p. 208).

Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol (2004) conducted another study on consumer purchases and peer influence which demonstrated that the effects of peer influence are substantial when shopping is a group activity. In surveying high school students, they found that peers exert social pressure to conform and even create less pleasant shopping experiences when buyers purchase products the group deems psychologically or socially risky (p. 112). In fact, when making such

purchases, buyers consciously choose not to include their peers in the shopping trip (p. 112). Also, the study found peers influenced teens' decision-making when shopping through information dissemination (p. 112). In fact, information dissemination was an even more powerful influence factor than the typical pressure from peers to conform to social norms (p. 112). These findings echoed previous research in that they showed "people are influenced more by the information that groups provide rather than by group pressures to conform" (p. 112).

With regard to peers' influence on political opinions, evidence shows that when an issue has great importance to both the individual and the peer group, he or she is apt to be affected. Tedin (1980) found in a study of 183 recent high school graduates that as issues grew in perceived importance, peers' opinions became more valuable (p. 153). After reviewing data from a survey of undergraduate students' political attitudes, Dey (1996) asserted that "peer and faculty normative contexts appear to be strong significant influences on the development of student political orientations" (p. 548). Furthermore, the author found that "students with a high degree of interaction with their peers were especially likely to adopt the views of their peers" (p. 549). Interestingly, "interpersonal interaction" was only a "minor contributor" to the socialization process (p. 550). Dey (1996) suggested that other subtler peer influences like "general social trends" and the "campus media" might be more important factors in the peer influence process (p. 550).

In another study, Dey (1997) tracked University of California Los Angeles undergraduate students' political attitudes (p. 401). The study revealed that students' peers have a "strong and consistent influence upon the development of student political orientations" (p. 408). Dey added that these "peer normative contexts consistently influence the political orientation of students, regardless of the social era in which students attend college" (p. 409). Perhaps more noteworthy

is the “tendency for students to change in the direction of institutional peer norms, a finding that is consistent with the socialization process”; in essence, regardless of original political orientation, individuals tend to adjust their views to be more in line with those of fellow students and the institution at large after four years of school attendance (p. 409).

Hallinan and Williams (1990) analyzed 20,000 friendship dyads from the High School and Beyond survey; their sample consisted of high school sophomores and seniors (p. 125). After the initial surveys, follow-up surveys were conducted every two years (p.125). The researchers learned that the closer the peers’ friendships were and the more similarities between the respondents and their friends – in areas such as schooling and background – the more likely it was that peers were able to influence one another; in essence, “solidarity tends to lead to greater peer influence” (p. 130). This was especially the case when it came to planning for the future, as closer peer relationships – especially peers who shared the same school “track,” gender, and reciprocated desires for friendship – were highly influential in peers’ college aspirations and college attendance (p. 130).

Gunther and Storey (2003) found a pronounced third-person effect – in which individuals perceive that others are more influenced by media messages and peer pressure than they are (p. 212). Based on this third-person effect – in which one believes that their peers have been influenced by a media message – Gunther and Storey (2003) found that an individual will adjust his or her attitudes and opinions to closer reflect the attitudes and opinions held by his or her peers (p. 212). Similarly, Chia (2006) proposed that “adolescents develop presumptions about the media’s influence on their peers, and, because adolescents are susceptible to peer norms, they align their attitudes or behaviors with these presumptions” (p. 586).

Numerous studies demonstrate peer influence on subjects' behavior and show that individuals act differently when observed by peers than when acting without their knowledge. Gardner and Steinberg (2005) found that individuals are more likely to take risks, view risks in a more positive light, and make riskier decisions when in the presence of their peers (p. 632). Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006) found that peers affect young girls' body satisfaction and self-esteem. The girls, who ranged in age from 5-8, perceived that their peers valued thinness, causing them to desire a thin appearance (p. 934). Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006) wrote "girls' perception of their peers' desire for thinness was significantly related to their own desire for thinness" (p. 934). Oliver and Thelen (1996) also studied body image, specifically how it relates to food consumption among third and fifth grade elementary students. The researchers collected data about dietary habits, food intake, and body image for 142 third and 122 fifth grade students (p. 28). The study found that peer influence affected these young subjects' "eating and body image concerns" (p. 35). As expected, girls were more likely than boys to espouse the idea that being thin would make them more likable among their peers (p. 35).

Ward (2009) examined peer influence on young adults' consumption of energy drinks. The survey queried 199 Utah State University students about their energy drink consumption and the factors involved in the formation of these habits (p. 77, 79). The results were not like those one would expect with a younger sample, as the data showed that "peers did not seem to influence the behavior of energy drink consumption"; in fact, respondents who claimed that they did not consume energy drinks with friends drank more of these beverages, presumably alone (p. 104). Wouters, Larson, Kremers, Dagnelie, and Geenen (2010) found that simple activities like purchasing and consuming snacks and soft drinks at school are influenced by one's peers. Based on data procured using surveys from 749 adolescents, ages 12-17, the researchers learned that

“individual snack and soft drink consumption was high when peers proximate to the adolescent had a high consumption” (p. 2, 3, 5). Peer influence effects on snack and soft drink consumption were greatest among male students and those with lower levels of education (i.e. younger students) (p. 5).

Neuwirth and Frederick (2004) surveyed 397 college students at a Midwest university about peer and social influence on “drinking-related communication behaviors” (p. 689). The study found that peers do influence college students’ “discourse surrounding drinking activities” (p. 689). They found peer influence to be a “consistent predictor” of college students’ opinions regarding excessive alcohol consumption (p. 685). Their findings indicated that peer influence is more powerful than social norms in motivating and dictating student opinion expression on binge drinking (p. 689). In fact, Neuwirth and Frederick (2004) suggested that if students were to speak out against binge drinking on campus, the campus culture could be changed and “would ultimately create an environment that would discourage excessive drinking” (p. 692).

Another study on alcohol consumption was conducted by Gaughan (2006), who studied how peer influence affects adolescent alcohol consumption by analyzing data from 2,980 “best friend” dyads collected by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent health (p. 55, 56). The study found that in same-sex friendships both individuals drinking habits are equally influenced by that friend or peer, but in male-female friendships only the female is influence in her drinking habits, while the male is not (p. 57).). Also, Larsen, Engels, Souren, Granic, and Overbeek (2010) conducted an experiment dealing with beverage consumption which analyzed how individuals were influenced by their peers when consuming both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. The test subjects included 70 women and 65 men ages 18-28, with a mean of 21 (p. 50). The study found that when participants consumed beverages – both alcoholic and non-

alcoholic – in a social situation, they imitated confederates which the researchers had surreptitiously placed in the study (p. 51). The authors also found that participants were more likely to imitate the confederates' sip-pattern when the participants were drinking alcohol (p. 51). Additionally, this study showed that “men were more inclined to imitate the sips of a same-sex partner than women” (p. 50).

Another prominently studied peer influenced behavior is smoking. Paek (2009) surveyed 519 students, who were non-current smokers – “had not smoked in the last 30 days” – at a Southeastern United States university, asking them about smoking and the injunctive norms associated with smoking (p. 439, 440). The study found that if “peers” were considered close friends, they functioned as a “significant predictor of respondents' own smoking intention,” but if the respondent defined “peers” merely as members of his or her age group, their impact on “smoking intention” was not significant” (p. 448).

Other risky behaviors have also been shown to be heavily affected by peer influence. A longitudinal survey of 714 incoming freshman college students (279 males and 435 females) examined how previously unknown roommates affected their suitemates' sexual behavior and marijuana/alcohol use after one year (Duncan, Boisjoly, Kremer, Levy, & Eccles, 2005, p. 378). The study found that these first-year roommates had no perceivable influence on marijuana-use or sexual behavior; however, “pairing up young men who binge drank in high school appears to promote binge drinking in college” (Duncan et al., 2005, p. 384). No such peer influence on binge drinking was shown among female freshmen roommates (Duncan et al., 2005, p. 384). The study mirrored Valliant's (1995) findings. In this study, first-year male college students were more susceptible to peer influence with regards to alcohol consumption than their female counterparts (42.9% versus 23.8%) (Valliant, 1995, p. 402).

Peer Influence on Individuals' Attitudes

In 1967, Reiss published a foundational study regarding peer influence on individual's attitudes. The findings of this research revealed that the best predictor of adolescents' attitudes toward sex were the attitudes which they perceived their friends to hold about the subject; respondents' attitudes aligned closer to what they perceived their friends' thought about sexuality than their perceptions of parents' attitudes (Reiss, 1967, p. 5).

In a study measuring peer influence on attitudes, behavior, and performance, researchers conducted an experiment using 39 male and 11 female subjects (mean age = 27) (Galletta, Ahuja, Hartman, Peace, and Teo, 1994, p. 233). The subjects were asked to work in groups to make calculations using computer software and subsequently complete a survey (p. 234). Though subjects were instructed to maintain silence during the computer tasks, confederates in each group would make outbursts, either in approbation of or in anger at the computer program (p. 236). The study found that "subjects who were exposed to unfavorable word-of-mouth statements appeared to adopt unfavorable attitudes toward the software" (p. 237). On the other hand, subjects who had confederates make positive statements about the software in their presence scored about the same as control group subjects (p. 237). From this, researchers concluded that "negative word of mouth comments are more potent than positive comments" (p. 237).

Eveland and Shah (2003) suggested that individuals' perceptions of their peer group are often incorrect because they have, over time, "engaged in a biased sampling" (p. 106). Nevertheless, close-knit peer groups have been shown to influence individuals' political views (MacKuen & Brown, 1987). MacKuen and Brown's (1987) study on the degree to which others' attitudes (particularly neighbors' opinions) influence individual's attitudes revealed that social influence has significant effects which begin to "stand out in individual attitude changes over

time” (p. 484). The study showed that friends in neighborhoods “rather than amorphous community norms are the proximate cause” of attitude changes (MacKuen & Brown, 1987, p. 484, 485).

Eveland and Shah (2003) concurred, stating “partisans who surround themselves with people sharing their political views may develop a distorted view of news bias” (p. 106). They also found that “we are more likely to talk with individuals with whom we agree, whether this is intentional...or simply structural (individuals tend to associate with those similar to themselves in age, race, and social status – variables that are correlated with opinions)” (Eveland & Shah, 2003, p. 106, 107). Study results caused the authors to conclude that “individuals' perceptions of media bias are at least partly shaped through their interactions with others” (Eveland & Shah, 2003, p. 113).

Larson (1972) noted that when adolescents equally value their parents' and peers' opinions, “they are distinctly less parent compliant”; in other words, they are far more influenced by their peers' opinions than their parents' opinions (p. 72). Such a finding conforms with what is known about childhood development. In what is referred to by psychologists as the “separation-individuation” process, when humans move into adolescence, they both “interact increasingly with peers” and allow peers to have a greater impact on their attitudes and opinions, while allowing their parents less influence (Meeus & Dekovic, 1995).

A study conducted in the United Kingdom analyzed 11-14 year olds views on school science and how these were impacted by their peers (Breakwell & Beardsell, 1991). The study found that both attitudes toward and performance in science class were affected by having peers who were interested in, and “liked,” science (the more one's peers liked science, the better a child's science grades) (Breakwell & Beardsell, 1992, p. 191). Conversely, being surrounded by

a peer group who did not like and did not perform well in science caused the respondent to enjoy science class less (Breakwell & Beardsell, 1992, 191). Overall, having scientific peers was “associated with both a more positive science attitude and greater science activity” (Breakwell & Beardsell, 1992, 193).

In a study of perceived social norms and adolescents’ attitudes toward sex, Chia (2006) found that “perception of peer norms affects, in turn, adolescents’ own sexual attitudes and consequent sexual behaviors” (p. 600). Chia (2006) surveyed 18-to-19 year olds and found that they believed – based on the third person effect – that their peers were impacted by sex-related television programming, and based on that belief, they altered their attitudes in order to more closely reflect their peers (p. 600).

Results from Wisdom and Agnor’s (2007) study showed that peers influence how individuals view symptoms of depressions and options for treating that depression. The researchers conducted in-depth, 90-minute interviews with 15 teenagers (ages 14-19) who had been diagnosed with depression or dysthymia (a mild, chronic mood disorder) (p. 337). Those who indicated that their peers helped guide them through the diagnosis and seeking-help process also reported that these peers were very important in the “recovery process” by “normalizing the experience of depression” (p. 340, 342). Peers who considered the depressed teen’s thoughts and ideas about their condition important and took them “seriously” had a strong impact (p. 342). Depressed individuals were, however, “more likely to deny to peers their symptoms of depression or the treatment they were receiving, if they knew the peers had negative ideas about depression” (p. 342).

Paek and Gunther (2007) found that peers influenced the attitudes that adolescents – age 11-13 – held toward smoking; more specifically, peers influenced these adolescents’ attitudes

about whether or not to initiate smoking (p. 414, 424). Paek and Gunther (2007) conducted their survey of 1,687 middle school students in Wisconsin (p. 414). The findings showed that although respondents were not motivated against smoking by antismoking media campaigns, they *were* motivated not to start smoking if they believed that their proximate peers were against smoking (p. 424). When they believed that their peers held antismoking views, the likelihood that respondents would initiate tobacco use diminished and positive thoughts, which they may have held about smoking, decreased (p. 424). Interestingly though, the study found that only proximal peers' beliefs and attitudes were of concern to, and impacted, survey respondents (p. 424).

Peer Influence on Attitudes Toward Media Credibility

Kiousis (2001) found that peer interpersonal discussions tended to cause respondents to view cable news networks as less credible, and the more frequently peers discussed the news, the lower their credibility ratings became (p. 395). However, this "negative association" had only a "modest" impact on media credibility ratings (p. 395).

Resistance to Peer Influence with Age

In order to gauge the age at which individuals become less influenced by their peers, Walker and Andrade (1996) conducted an experiment using 154 males, ages 3-17 (p. 369). The experiment consisted of a participant in a room with three confederates, during which the confederates would all give an obviously incorrect answer. This set-up allowed the researchers to test whether or not the confederates' answers influenced the participants' responses (p. 370). The study's findings demonstrated that the pressure to conform "decreases with age" (p. 371). In 2007, Steinberg and Monahan's study, examining resistance to conformity, revealed that resistance to peer influence waxes strongest between the ages of 14-18 (p. 1538). Data from more than 3,600 males and females between the ages of 10-30 showed that resistance to peer influence stagnates in early adulthood, after which "there is little evidence for growth" in

resisting peer pressure (p. 1538). According to the researchers, this “pattern is identical among males and females” (p. 1533, 1538).

A similar study, conducted by Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinburg, and Westenberg (2009), surveyed 464 children and young adults, ages 10-18 (p. 1012). Sumter et al.’s results indicate that older adolescents have greater resistance to peer influence than younger children (p. 1016). The authors concluded that “findings demonstrate a steady increase in resistance to general peer influence with age” (p. 1016).

Theories Used In Peer Influence Studies

Numerous theories inform a vast body of literature on the effects of peer influence. It is necessary to examine these theoretical frameworks, as they guide research questions and hypotheses, to reveal scholars’ assumptions about how individuals’ attitudes and behaviors are shaped by external factors, and potentially impact study designs. When Mirande (1968) examined adolescents’ pre-marital sexual behaviors, he relied on reference group theory which “proposes that the behavior of a person placed under such cross-pressure will be consistent with the expectations of the group which serves as a reference point at the time” (p. 572).

In their research concerning the modification of consumer behavior via peer influence, Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol (2004) drew upon social comparison theory. According to the authors, social comparison theory posits that “people have a basic need to evaluate themselves [and] in the absence of objective standards by which to evaluate one’s own attitudes and behaviors, people will use social bases of comparison as evaluative standards” (Mangleburg, Doney & Bristol, p. 104). In a related study on peer pressure and how it mediates the media’s influence on individuals, Chia (2006) relied on the theory of reasoned action (TRA) where “a person’s attitudes toward a behavior, jointly with subjective norms (e.g., perception of peer

norms) about performing the behavior, would predict that person's intention to engage in the behavior" (p. 590).

A study of peer influence on risk-taking, conducted by Gardner and Steinberg (2005), used group polarization theory where "group effects on risk taking depends on the risk-taking tendencies of the group members" (p. 626). The authors also noted that "relatively conservative individuals should become even more conservative when grouped together, whereas individuals who are inclined to take risks should make even more risky choices" (p. 626). Neuwirth and Frederick (2004) used the theory of planned behavior as their conceptual orientation when studying peer and social influence on communication of information about drinking behaviors among college students. In a similar study of peer influence on adolescent alcohol consumption, Gaughan (2006) employed status characteristics theory, which "posits that cultural beliefs about an ascribed status such as sex organize the pattern of interaction in goal-oriented settings" (p. 47). The hostile media effect holds that media consumers believe the press to be biased against their viewpoints and has also guided peer influence research. Eveland and Shah (2003) used the hostile media effect as their organizing framework when analyzing how friends and social networks impact individuals' perceptions of media bias.

It is not uncommon for researchers to draw upon more than one theory within a given study. For example, Paek and Gunther (2007) utilized cognitive development theory, reference group theory, the theory of reasoned action, and the theory of planned behavior to create a conceptual schema which served to guide their research concerning the impact of antismoking advertisements on middle school students' attitudes toward tobacco use. The study found that peer influence was only one of many factors that affected attitudes toward smoking and intentions to begin smoking.

Biddle, Bank, and Marlin (1980) also employed multiple theories in their study of peers' influence on high school students' alcohol consumption and academic achievement. Specifically, the authors viewed the issue of peer influence through the lens of instrumental/role conflict theory and socialization theory. According to an instrumental/role conflict perspective, "adolescents are seen as likely to conform to parental or peer pressures when those others may observe the adolescent's behavior and are deemed likely to apply sanctions to encourage conformity." Socialization theory speaks to the mechanism by which this occurs, as it holds that "the adolescent is influenced primarily because he or she internalized the other's pressure; thus what was once the parent's (or peer's) pressure has now become an expectation that is accepted by the adolescent for his or her own conduct" (p. 1059).

Social Cognitive Theory

Although myriad extant theories could serve to inform research on peer influence, this study is mainly guided by social cognitive theory (SCT). This perspective was first posited by psychologist Albert Bandura and introduced to the academic community in his seminal work titled *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory* (1986). This theory built upon social learning theory (SLT) – a perspective Bandura outlined decades earlier (Tragesser, Aloise-Young, Swaim, 2006). In 1963, Bandura co-authored *Social Learning and Personality Development* with Richard Walters. In this book, Bandura and Walters (1963) enumerated "a set of social learning principles that emphasize the role of social variables to a greater extent than existing learning theories" (p. vii).

Because social cognitive theory merely fine-tuned certain elements established by its predecessor, the transition from social learning theory to social cognitive theory does not represent much of a conceptual departure. Bandura (1985) referred to SLT in terms of "triadic reciprocity" – the theorist continued to use this terminology when discussing social cognitive

theory (p. 27). The three factors which comprise the triad include: the individual's behavior, his or her cognition, and the person's environment. Bandura (1985) also forwarded the notion of "reciprocal determinism" (p. 27). He maintained that "In this model of reciprocal determinism, behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interlocking determinants which affect each other bidirectionally" (p. 27). Bandura (1985) asserted that behavior, cognition, and environment interact to create the sum of human learning.

Each element of the triad, however, can be expected to affect individuals differently. In describing their differing levels of salience, Bandura (1985) noted that "the relative influence exerted by the three sources of interlocking determinants will vary for different activities, different individuals, and different circumstances" (p. 27). This variance can be attributed to dissimilarities in peer group composition, place of residence, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and the nature of individuals' social interactions. Bandura (1985) conceptualized the process of reciprocal determinism as occurring when pairs of these factors act on each other simultaneously (p. 26). In social cognitive theory, three dyads exist; these include the behavior-cognitive, behavior-environment, and cognitive-environment pairings (p. 26).

Bandura (1985) stated that each of these dyadic relationships is essential to the reciprocal model since "through their interactions . . . people influence situations, which in turn affect their thoughts, emotional reactions, and behavior. Behavior is an interacting determinant, not a detached by-product that plays no role in transactions between persons and situations" (p. 27). Behavior affects cognitive qualities in that, once a person has acted, he or she then has new information about (and, subsequently, a new appreciation of) a given situation. Additionally, behavior influences the environment since individuals' actions change the course of future

events. Thus, all three determinants are indispensable to SCT because, inexorably, a change in one determinant results in changes to the others.

When Bandura (1986) created SCT, he relied heavily on social learning theory's foundations. As was the case with social learning theory, SCT is couched "in terms of triadic reciprocal causation," which is used to elucidate the relationships among actions, attitudes/thoughts, and the surrounding environment (p. 12). The combination of these factors allows for human learning to occur. Under the new theory, Bandura (1986) continued to emphasize that people engage in transactional interactions at both the individual and societal levels; he elaborated on SLT by identifying personal determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants as the three factors which govern these interactions (p. 12). Of the three determinants, "cognitive," was the only element to change significantly as social learning theory evolved into social cognitive theory; it was renamed "personal."

Under SCT, the "personal determinant" is represented by "internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events" (Bandura, 2001, p. 14). The environmental determinant refers to surroundings – peers, family, society, climate, geography, etc. Bandura (2001) stated that "environment is not a monolithic entity" (p. 15). It is made up of three subsets: "imposed environment, selected environment, and constructed environment" (p. 15). The third (and final) determinant, behavior, is a composite of actions encompassed by choices and instinctive needs. In summary, Bandura (1986) based social cognitive theory on three causal relationships, which "all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bidirectionally" and thereby account for changes in individuals' behaviors, environments, and personal attitudes/opinions (p. 15). Like any valuable theoretical orientation, social cognitive theory clarifies a complex phenomenon. Its parsimonious nature makes it a particularly

appealing framework for understanding the process of peer influence: the environmental determinant accounts for peer influence, the personal determinant reveals the cognitive effects of peer influence, and the behavioral determinant demonstrates individuals' responses to peer influence.

Another component of SCT is personal agency. According to SCT, "personal agency and social structure operate as codeterminants in an integrated causal structure rather than as a disembodied duality" (Bandura, 2001, p. 266). This means social cognitive theory predicts that individuals – through their interactions with each other – both influence society and are influenced by society. Bandura (1989) asserted that "because of the bidirectionality of influence, people are both products and producers of their environment" (p. 362).

It is also important to note that in SCT none of the three determinants is superior in terms of strength or influence (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) was emphatic that factor salience varies among individuals according to their previous and current experiences. Therefore, at any one time, an individual may be influenced more strongly by environmental determinants than by personal or behavioral determinants, while at another time he or she may be more influenced by personal determinants: this varies largely by person and situation (Bandura, 1986). Also, under Bandura's SCT "one person's behavior could influence the social environment, which in turn can influence the behavior of others in that environment" (Ward, 2009, p. 7).

Additionally, SCT posits that human beings are constantly analyzing their decisions, their beliefs, and their views to determine their level of accuracy (Bandura, 2001, p. 271). However, individuals are often forced to evaluate the validity of their beliefs in the absence of objective standards. Therefore, "social verification" is frequently employed, wherein people assess "the soundness of their views by checking them against what others believe" (Bandura, 2001, p. 269).

Social cognitive theory speaks to this process of social verification and has important implications for research on how peer influence might alter perceptions of media credibility. For example, news media consumers who feel unequipped to properly judge the credibility of cable news networks are apt to rely on their family and friends' opinions on this issue. The current study seeks to address the role of peer influence in such assessments through the lens of social cognitive theory. Obviously, peers make up a significant portion of the environmental determinant of the triad, but the valuable aspect of social cognitive theory is that it factors in the knowledge and awareness that a person has already been equipped with through his or her personal determinants. Additionally, any past behavior initiated by an individual regarding an issue has resulted in learning based on personal determinants (how the person thinks and feels after having acted on that issue) and environmental determinants (how the environment surrounding the issue has changed since he or she acted).

Vicarious learning is another one of SCT's tenets. Bandura (2001) stated that "virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from direct experience can be achieved vicariously by observing people's actions and its consequences for them. Much social learning occurs either designedly or unintentionally from models in one's immediate environment" (p. 270-271). However, this is not to imply that all learning can be attributed to observation of environmental norms. Bandura (2001a) was adamant that recognition of direct experience is also vitally important to our understanding of human learning.

Bandura (2001) maintained that individuals' personal determinants play an essential role in the learning process via "agentic features" (p. 6). The term "agentic" refers to all personal and behavioral determinants which "enable people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times" (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). These agentic features

include “intentionality,” “forethought,” “self-reactiveness,” and “self-reflectiveness” (Bandura, 2001, p. 6-10). Bandura (2001a) does not discount a human being’s ability to analyze information based on past behavioral choices and current environmental information, as social cognitive theory accounts for the formation of rational attitudes and opinions. Additionally, SCT explicates that a rational, introspective process occurs when personal and behavioral determinants interact, which allows for learning to take place.

Social Cognitive Theory in Peer Influence Studies

Past research provides ample justification for use of social cognitive theory (and its predecessor: social learning theory) in studies of peer influence. Wouters, Larsen, Kremers, Dagnelie, and Geenen (2010) utilized social learning theory when conducting their research on peer influence’s impact on snack and soft drink consumption. Their research was informed by a Bandura study published in 1986 which asserted that peers may influence each other when they observe, model, and imitate the behavior of persons whom they deem important in some way.

Tragesser, Aloise-Young, and Swaim (2006) drew upon SCT when they examined peer influence and pre-adolescents’ attitudes toward smokers. The study queried 292 fourth through sixth graders about their susceptibility to peer influence and personal images of smokers. The researchers utilized SCT, which posits that peers offer standards of comparison and a model of values and appropriate behaviors. Peers can intentionally or unintentionally shape individuals’ beliefs and expectations about participating in certain behaviors through the process of behavior modeling and observational learning (Bandura 1992, 2004). Tragesser, Aloise-Young, and Swaim (2006) found it appropriate to use SCT because “peers are highly influential models in early and preadolescence” (p. 312).

In a related study using SCT, Kinard and Webster (2010) researched the effects of advertising, peer and parental influence, and self-efficacy on adolescents’ alcohol consumption

and tobacco use. The authors generated two separate questionnaires to survey 190 respondents with an average age of sixteen. In describing why they chose SCT as a theoretical framework, Kinard and Webster (2010) stated that “this theory implies that research aimed at understanding any type of behavior should view possible predictors as interwoven, rather than independent, sources of influence” (p. 25). In this study, SCT dictated that advertising and peer/parental influence be considered environmental determinants, while self-efficacy was labeled a personal determinant. The results of Kinard and Webster’s (2010) study revealed peer influence to be “the strongest predictor of adolescent tobacco use and alcohol consumption” (p.39).

Denham (2008) applied SCT to research on peer influence among high school seniors (N=2542) and their perceptions of the risks associated with anabolic-androgenic steroids use (p. 9). Denham (2008) justified his use of SCT because personal determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants all impact the learning involved in adolescents’ risk perceptions on anabolic-androgenic steroids. The study found that “socializing with friends . . . showed significance as a determinant of AAS risk perceptions, with those who spent more time with their peers estimating lower levels of risk” (p. 22). Denham concluded that peer groups are important to the “formation of risk perceptions.” (p. 22).

Ward (2009) relied on SCT when studying “how an adolescent’s environment, particularly peer influence, and an adolescent’s knowledge and attitudes about energy drinks affected his or her behavior of energy drink consumption” (p. 7). Ward (2009) defended the use of SCT as the theoretical basis for a peer influence study because it “recognizes that behavior is multidimensional” and therefore can be used “to understand the influence of an individual’s knowledge and attitudes as well as their social environment on their behavior” (p. 7)

Justification for Using SCT

Bandura (2001) stated: “Much social learning occurs either designedly or unintentionally from models in one’s immediate environment” (p. 271). Therefore, “unlike learning by doing, which requires altering the actions of each individual through repeated trial-and-error experiences, in observational learning a single model can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to countless people in widely dispersed locales” (Bandura, 2001, p. 271). In essence, a large portion of human learning involves observing and modeling socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors since “the proven skills and established customs of a culture may be adopted in essentially the same form as they are exemplified because of their high functional value” (Bandura, 2001, p. 275).

Social cognitive theory recognizes the importance of social/peer pressures to conform: “People share information, give meaning by mutual feedback to the information they exchange, gain understanding of each other’s views, and influence each other” (Bandura, 2001, p. 291). In this process, SCT accounts for individuals’ tendency to analyze their thoughts and beliefs against those of others to determine their “validity and functional value” (p. 269). This is especially the case when individuals do not have enough personal experience to confirm the validity of their positions. They will then use social verification to evaluate the “soundness of their views by checking them against what others believe” (Bandura, 2001, p. 269). Of course, social verification does not preclude other avenues by which individuals may confirm validity, as people will often substantiate personal opinions/attitudes via observation and/or logical reasoning (Bandura, 2001, p. 269).

In sum, social cognitive theory’s structural framework and its recognition of peer influence situate it as the most appropriate and applicable theory for this study regarding peer influence’s impact on individuals’ perceptions of cable news channels’ credibility. It was

expected that nearly all study respondents (even those who have had limited exposure to one or more of the cable news outlets) would report having opinions about the credibility of the three cable news channels. Social cognitive theory predicted that, in the absence of personal experience, individuals would base their credibility ratings on how believable they think their peers find the channels in question. Furthermore, SCT also accounted for those who seek confirmation regarding the validity of their existing beliefs without explicitly discussing the matter with their peers. This process of “vicarious verification” occurs when an individual observes his or her peers’ opinions on and reactions to various news outlets and then allows such observation to influence his or her own cable news credibility ratings. Furthermore, the literature shows that though media as an aggregate has seen its credibility fall in the last 25 years, cable news has emerged, in that time, with CNN being consistently rated as the most credible (Pew Research Center, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2008). During this timeframe, MSNBC and Fox News came of age. Barring any dramatic changes in content or philosophy, it seems likely that CNN will continue to be rated as the most credible cable news channel.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore traditional-aged, undergraduate students’ attitudes regarding media credibility. In particular, the role of peer influence on respondents’ credibility ratings was examined. Because academic investigation into this specific topic was lacking, an analysis of resultant data was used to address a significant gap in the literature. The following research questions served as a guide:

- **RQ1:** Which cable news channel (CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC) emerges as being the most/least credible?
- **RQ2:** According to respondents, which of these cable news channels do their peers find most/least credible?

- **RQ3:** What is the relationship between respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings and respondents' own credibility ratings?

Based on a review of the literature, the following hypothesis was proposed:

- **H1:** There will be a significant, positive relationship between respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings and respondents' own credibility ratings.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Data Collection

Data for this cross-sectional study was obtained via self-administered, closed-ended questionnaires, distributed to UF undergraduates. These students were recruited from eight classes covering six disciplines; each class averaged 70 students. The classes were: Architectural History (ARC1701), History of Construction (BCN3012), a philosophy course titled: What is the Good Life? (IDS2935), Vertebrate Zoology (ZOO2303C), Integrated Principles of Biology (BSC2010), Biology for Engineers (ABE2062), Principles of Sociology (SYG2000), and Social Problems (SYG2010).

Although the non-probabilistic sample obtained for this study cannot represent all UF undergraduate students in the way a random sample would, an effort was made to survey from a wide range of disciplines to minimize selection bias. The researcher requested that professors allow the questionnaire to be distributed during class time in the first week of the fall semester (August 23-27, 2010), and all data was collected during the first two weeks of the semester. Conducting the study early in the term was preferable, as research has shown that college students' absenteeism increases and their willingness to participate in non-graded classroom activities decreases as the semester progresses (Marburger, 2001; Sharma, Mendez, O'Byrne, 2005).

As a gesture of appreciation for completing the survey, the researcher offered to all professors and arranged with one for students to receive a small amount of extra credit (one point added to their final course grades). In accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, an alternative assignment was made available for those who preferred not to participate in the study. When surveys were distributed (at the beginning and end of class), the

researcher notified the students that participation was completely voluntary. Information regarding extra credit was announced at the time the survey was administered (and was also explained in the informed consent form).

Recruitment continued until eight classes were surveyed, yielding 562 completed questionnaires. This sample size was large enough to conduct all appropriate statistical analyses. Additionally, past mass media studies, which serve as a guide to inform this research, frequently rely on N=400 as a baseline minimum when conducting survey research (Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979; Heong, Escalada, Huan, & Mai, 1998; Allen, Richard L., & Clarke, David E., 1980). Thus, a sufficient quantity of surveys was obtained. Although “there is no perfect data-collection method,” research with undergraduate student samples is well-established in academic literature (Bernard, 2000, p. 278). Furthermore, Bernard (2000) maintains that the use of self-administered questionnaires is ideal for studying certain populations and researchers can expect “a response rate of at least 70%” when surveying literate respondents (p. 278). Using a 70% response rate as an estimate, the researcher planned to contact at least 572 students in order to procure 400 surveys. Obviously, higher response rates were preferable (and were achieved), as they minimized the potential for non-response bias (Bailey, 2007).

The problem with low response rates is that subjects who agree to participate “may differ substantially” from those who do not (Bryman, 1989, p. 112). Unfortunately, because it is impossible to know how potential study participants would have answered if they had been recruited, researchers cannot measure non-response bias directly. One can, however, compare respondent demographics to existing information about the target population as a whole. In this case, it will be possible to assess whether the sample differs from UF undergraduates in general on certain demographic factors (e.g. race, gender, ethnicity) using data provided by the

University of Florida's Office of Institutional Planning and Research. If undergraduates overall and those who participate in this study are comparable on several different variables, this may indicate that the data gathered is at least somewhat representative of UF's undergraduate population at-large.

Although it is unnecessary to calculate a minimum sample size for studies that involve non-random recruitment, such calculations can still help to inform a researcher's target sample size. In this case, 380 completed surveys would have been needed to represent all 31,415 UF undergraduate students between the ages of 18-25 with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error equaling plus or minus 5% (Office of Institutional Planning and Research, 2010). As stated previously, the goal for the study was to obtain at least 400 completed questionnaires and thereby ensure an adequate sample for statistical analyses. This figure also approximated the number that would have been needed if a random sampling technique had been utilized for the purpose of generalizing findings to the entire undergraduate student body.

Instrument and Measures

Independent Variables

The key independent variables in this study are those which assess respondents' perceptions of how peers rate cable news channels' credibility (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC). Throughout the literature, researchers have mainly defined the term "peer" in one of two ways. Some references to "peers" are rather broad and include co-workers, friends, neighbors, classmates, affiliates from professional organizations and members of business/social clubs, while the narrowest conception of the term refers only to "best friends" of the same sex (Childers & Rao, 1992; Billy, Rodgers, & Udry, 1984, p. 659). For the purpose of this study, peers are defined generally as "friends." Some previous research has differentiated among different types of friendship (e.g. best friends, close friends, and casual friends), but factoring these relationship

nuances into the current project's questionnaire would have made the instrument overly long and unwieldy (Antonucci 2001; La Gaipa 1977). On the survey itself (see Appendix A), instructions clarified that the term "friends" refers to best, close, and casual friends.

Key independent variables mirrored the dependent variables designed to assess media credibility except that they queried respondents about their friends' opinions. For these items, respondents indicated their perceptions of their friends' beliefs regarding the major cable news channels (i.e. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News' credibility ratings). Respondents conveyed the extent to which they agreed with statements nearly-identical to those that assessed their own views on media credibility, except – in these items – the word "I" was replaced by "my friends." The range of answer choices spanned the same 5-point range in which 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree. As with the outcome variables, credibility composites were also developed after data collection.

In addition to the key independent variables which measured how respondents rate their peers' judgments about cable news channels' credibility, the survey included several demographic questions. Although demographic characteristics were not of primary importance for this research project, studies have shown that news consumers' backgrounds can influence their media credibility ratings (Gunther, 1992; Kiouisis, 2001). It was, therefore, important to hold these factors constant by controlling for them in linear regressions. These demographic variables included gender, age, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, the researcher accounted for: a respondent's political party affiliation; the frequency with which he/she discussed news/current events with friends; the respondent's self-assessment of how well informed he/she was about current events; the frequency with which the respondent watched the three cable news channels

(CNN, MSNBC, Fox News), and the level of value the respondent ascribed to his/her friends' opinions.

Outcome Variables

Dependent variables in this study were composites of multiple items designed to measure respondents' perceptions of credibility for the three major cable news channels (i.e CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC). Only CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News were examined in the study because they dominate cable news viewership. Stroud (2007) found that 92% of those who claimed to watch cable news watched CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News most frequently (p. 16, 17). The data, released in 2004, revealed that "34% [of respondents] watched Fox News, 45% watched CNN, and 12% watched MSNBC" (p. 17). By examining CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, the research scope was limited to a manageable number of outlets on which statistical analyses could be run.

The following statements appear on the survey questionnaire: 1.) I believe all or most of the information presented on CNN/Fox News/MSNBC. 2.) There is often biased reporting on CNN/Fox News/MSNBC. 3.) An effort is made to present all sides of the issues on CNN/Fox News/MSNBC. 4.) I distrust the reporting on CNN/Fox News/MSNBC. Respondents were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with these statements. Answer choices were measured on a 5-point Likert scale where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree. The two negative items (questions 2 and 4) were reverse coded before data analysis such that higher numbered scores (e.g. 5=Strongly Agree) indicated that respondents perceived these news outlets to be less credible. Before the outcome variables were finalized, Cronbach's alpha scores were determined for these items, and factor analyses were run to confirm that they loaded on only one component. All had an alpha greater than .70 which was considered adequate because the factor analyses also supported the idea that these items measured a single concept – in this instance "credibility" (Nunnally, 1978). These

statistics provided sufficient information to determine that all survey questions merited inclusion. Because three separate linear regressions were run in SPSS, credibility composites for each of the three channels were made to be identical so that comparisons could be made.

As mentioned previously, four types of questions were included in the final credibility composites. Each of these questions appeared multiple times, as respondents were queried separately about CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. The item that read “I believe all or most of the information presented on [cable channel X]” was one of two statements which gauged respondents’ trust in these cable news channels. The other item related to trustworthiness read “I distrust the reporting on [cable channel X].” The two remaining questionnaire statements assessed respondents’ perceptions of cable news channels’ objectivity. As was the case with the trust questions, one objectivity item was worded positively, while the other was worded negatively. These statements read as follows: “I find that an effort is made to present all sides of the issues reported on by [cable channel X]” and “I find that there is often biased reporting on [cable channel X].”

In summary, the three dependent variables are composites of the four questions designed to measure respondents’ views on media credibility for the three primary cable news channels (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News). Each of the items included in the final composites was weighted equally. Because all potential items were included, the final composites are averages of four questions that relate to trustworthiness and objectivity. Although researchers have proposed that the concept of media credibility involves various elements – including competence, knowledgeability, professionalism, believability, accuracy, expertness, etc. – trustworthiness and objectivity carry special importance, as they are mentioned with the greatest frequency (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Westley & Severin, 1964; Whitehead, 1968; Kiouisis, 2001).

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a computer program used to analyze and graphically represent data. Three nested linear regression models were used to test the effect of the key independent variables (i.e. those measuring respondents' assessments of their peers' judgments about cable news channels' credibility) on the dependent variables (respondents' own credibility ratings) while controlling for a host of background characteristics.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Data for the current study was obtained by distributing surveys in eight undergraduate-level classes, yielding a total of 562 completed questionnaires. Humanities courses, natural science courses, and social science courses were surveyed. Specifically, questionnaires were administered in “Architectural History” (ARC1701; N=94), “History of Construction” (BCN3012; N=29), a philosophy course titled “What is the Good Life?” (IDS2935; N=144), “Vertebrate Zoology” (ZOO2303C; N=57), “Integrated Principles of Biology” (BSC2010; N=118), “Biology for Engineers” (ABE2062; N=39), “Principles of Sociology” (SYG2000; N=43), and “Social Problems” (SYG2010; N=38). The sample’s gender distribution (58% female, 42% male) is similar to university-generated statistics for total undergraduate enrollment in 2009 (55% female, 45% male) (Office of Institutional Planning and Research, 2010).

In this sample, 347 respondents (62%) labeled themselves as White/European, 66 respondents (12%) identified as Black/African-American, 54 respondents (9%) reported being Asian/Pacific Islander, and 91 respondents (16%) indicated belonging to the “Other” category which includes Hispanic, American Indian, Alaskan Native, and mixed race. Four survey-takers did not answer the race question. These numbers align closely with the school’s race statistics for 2009: 60% White/European, 10% Black/African-American, 9% Asian, and 18% Other (including Hispanic and American Indian), with 3% choosing not to report their racial backgrounds (Office of Institutional Planning and Research, 2010). Slight incongruities between this study’s sample and existing data for the school’s entire undergraduate population may be due to changes over time – as the current survey was conducted in 2010, not 2009 – and/or the nonrandom selection of study participants.

With regards to political affiliation, 139 (25%) labeled themselves “Republican,” 181 (32%) labeled themselves “Democrat,” 229 (41%) claimed “No Political Affiliation,” 9 (2%) chose “Other,” and 4 students (.7%) did not respond. A total of 559 participants (99.5%) answered the age question, which yielded a mean of 19.03 years old. The youngest respondent was 18 and the oldest was 30. Eighteen-year-olds accounted for 51.42% of those surveyed, and the majority of respondents (73%) were nineteen or younger. When study participants were asked about the frequency with which they watched the three cable news channels, 154 (27%) claimed never to have watched CNN, 248 (44%) claimed never to have watched MSNBC, and 199 (35%) claimed never to have watched Fox News.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked which cable news channel (CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News) would emerge as being the most/least credible. In order, to assess survey respondents’ perceptions of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News’ credibility, three separate composites were created. Each composite is composed of the four survey questions that measure respondents’ opinions about the channels’ trustworthiness and objectivity. These same four questions were asked about CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News so that comparisons could be made across the various channels. Factor analyses confirmed that all four questions loaded on the same component for each of the three composites, and Cronbach’s alpha scores were all greater than .70 – the pre-established cutoff. It was necessary to reverse code two items before composite construction. In the final variables, higher scores indicate that respondents view a given channel as more credible.

Respondents’ credibility ratings for CNN (see Figure 5-1) revealed a composite mean of 3.13 (and SD=.647). For MSNBC (see Figure 5-2), the composite mean was 3.03 (and SD=.498). For Fox News (see Figure 5-3), the composite mean equaled 2.66 (and SD=.858). Therefore,

respondents rated CNN the most credible (mean=3.13), while Fox News was viewed as the least credible (mean=2.66). All three histograms (see Figures 5-1, 5-2, and 5-3) approximate normally distributed bell curves, though each exhibits a higher than expected peak in the number of neutral responses (i.e. the “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” category). According to this global measure of credibility, 151 respondents (27%) reported neither a positive nor a negative attitude towards CNN. A similar number of respondents (147 or 26.4%) indicated a neutral opinion of Fox News. An even larger proportion of study participants espoused dispassionate attitudes toward MSNBC’s credibility, as 262 students’ (47.2% of the sample) answers reflected that they “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” that the channel is objective and trustworthy. Standard deviations for the three channels’ credibility scores (MSNBC = 0.498; CNN = 0.647; Fox News =0.858) indicate that the distribution of answers remains closest to the mean (i.e. neutrality) for MSNBC and that the data is spread out over the largest range of values for Fox News, suggesting that study participants’ feel less strongly about the former compared to the latter.

Research Question 2

The second research question was concerned with study participants’ peers’ relative credibility ratings for the three channels (as reported by the respondents). The questionnaire asked students to indicate how credible their peers find CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. As was the case with respondents’ personal credibility ratings, three identical composites were constructed to assess respondents’ perceptions of peers’ credibility ratings for each channel. Items composing these final variables exactly matched those in the original composites except these questions instructed respondents to analyze their peers’ attitudes toward all three channels. Once again, Cronbach’s alpha scores and factor analyses confirmed the appropriateness of using all four trustworthiness and objectivity questions in the final composites. Descriptive statistics run in SPSS revealed that CNN’s mean credibility score was 3.11 with a standard deviation of

.504 (see Figure 5-4), MSNBC's mean equaled 3.04 with a standard deviation of .405 (see Figure 5-5), and Fox News' mean was 2.77 with a standard deviation of .668 (see Figure 5-6). Therefore, respondents perceived that their peers find CNN and Fox News to be the most and least credible, respectively. As was the case with respondents' personal credibility ratings, each of the histograms (see Figures 5-1, 5-2, and 5-3) appear normally distributed. Again, more responses fell into the "Neither Agree Nor Disagree" category than would be expected. In fact, an even greater percentage of respondents indicated a three (i.e. neutrality) when it came to their assessments of peers' credibility ratings. A total of 272 respondents (49% of the sample) thought their friends had neither positive nor negative attitudes toward CNN, 237 (42.9%) indicated this for Fox News, and 362 (65.6%) of study participants reported that peers' were completely neutral about MSNBC's trustworthiness and objectivity. A comparison of standard deviations shows that the range of responses varies most from the mean for Fox News and least for MSNBC. This suggests that respondents think their peers have the strongest attitudes (positive or negative) toward Fox News and that their opinions toward MSNBC are less extreme.

Research Question 3 and Hypothesis 1

The hypothesis and final research question pertain to the relationship between respondents' personal credibility ratings and their assessments of peers' credibility ratings for each of the three channels. It was predicted that the data would reveal a significant, positive relationship between respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings and respondents' own credibility ratings. Three linear regression tables were created to address this facet of the research project. In the initial models, before controlling for other factors, there is positive association between the key independent variable (i.e. "respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings") and the dependent variable (i.e. "respondents' own credibility ratings") for all three cable news channels (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News), which in all cases is significant at

the .001 level. This significant relationship is maintained across all five models in each of the three channels (see Table 5-1, Table 5-2, and Table 5-3). The hypothesis is, therefore, supported, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (i.e. that no relationship exists between the dependent and the key independent variable). The following sections describe how controlling for demographic factors, media engagement, susceptibility to peer influence, and political affiliation affects the relationship between peer and personal credibility ratings.

Linear Regression for CNN

The first model of CNN's linear regression (see Table 5-1) shows a strong significant relationship between "respondents' credibility ratings" for CNN and "perceptions of their peers' ratings" for CNN (p-value <.001). Peers' credibility rating alone explains 39% of the variation in the dependent variable (adjusted $R^2 = .39$). The standardized coefficient is .63 – higher than the standardized coefficients for MSNBC and Fox News – indicating that the key independent variable is a better predictor of respondents' personal assessments of CNN's credibility than it is of Fox News and MSNBC's credibility.

When demographic information is taken into account in the second model the only significant relationship to emerge is a difference between White/Europeans' ratings for CNN and Asian respondents' credibility ratings. Specifically, Asians rate CNN as being more credible than the White/European reference group (p<.05). The relationship between "respondents' credibility rating" and "perception of peers' credibility rating" remains strongly significant at the .001 level and the coefficient is relatively unchanged. The introduction of age, race, and gender explains only a small amount of the total variance. Taking demographic information into account only increases adjusted R^2 up from .39 to .40 and lowers the key independent variable's standardized coefficient from .63 to .62.

In Model 3, media engagement variables are introduced. There is a positive, significant relationship between watching CNN and finding it credible ($p < .001$ with a standardized coefficient of .20). Also, after controlling for media engagement, a significant relationship ($p < .05$) between age and credibility is uncovered. Its negative standardized coefficient (-.07) demonstrates that older respondents find CNN to be less credible. This is the only regression among the three channels in which age is statistically significant. The “peers’ credibility rating” variable for CNN remained significant at the .001 level with a standardized coefficient of .57. Overall, adding in the “media engagement” variables reveals only a small amount of variation in respondents’ personal credibility ratings for CNN (adjusted R^2 increases to .43 in model 3 compared to .40 in the previous model).

Model 4 controls for respondents’ susceptibility to peer influence, which includes two variables: “frequency of current event discussions with friends” and “value placed on friends’ opinions.” Neither of the variables in model 4 are statistically significant. The variable “peers’ credibility rating” remains significant ($p < .001$) in model 4 with an unchanged standardized coefficient (.57). The age variable also retains significance with its standardized coefficient remaining at -.07. Adjusted R^2 does not increase with the introduction of “media engagement” variables in model 4.

Finally, model 5 controls for respondents’ political affiliation. Because Democrats comprised the largest politically-affiliated segment, they were chosen as the reference group. Compared to the Democrat reference group, self-identified Republicans rated CNN as being significantly less credible ($p < .001$). Those indicating that they belong to some other political group or have no political affiliation also rated CNN as being significantly less credible than did self-identified Democrats ($p < .01$). The significance and strength of “age” remains unchanged in

the final model. “Peers’ credibility rating” retains significance in model 5 ($p < .001$) with a .55 standardized coefficient. When comparing the key independent variable’s standardized coefficient to those of other independent variables, it becomes apparent that peers’ credibility ratings for CNN is by-far the best single predictor of respondents’ personal credibility ratings. The introduction of political affiliation increased adjusted R^2 from .43 to .46. Even after controlling for a host of other variables, Table 5-1 shows a consistent, positive relationship between “respondents’ perceptions of peers’ credibility ratings” for CNN and “respondents’ own credibility ratings” for CNN. Data do not allow for the rejection of the Hypothesis 1 as it pertains to CNN, and it is likely that that the positive association between these variables did not occur by chance.

Linear Regression for MSNBC

Table 5-2 addresses the same relationships for MSNBC as Table 5-1 did for CNN. As was the case for linear regressions predicting respondents’ credibility ratings for CNN, peers’ credibility ratings for MSNBC are significant at the .001 level in all five models. In the first model, when “respondents’ perceptions of peers’ credibility rating” for MSNBC is entered by itself, 30% of the variation in respondents’ personal credibility ratings can be explained (standardized coefficient = .55; adjusted $R^2 = .30$). Model 2 controls for demographic factors – age, gender, and race. Gender was significant (at the .05 level) with a standardized coefficient of .08 and showed that female study participants rated MSNBC as more credible than their male counterparts. Once again, “Asian” was significant ($p < .05$), such that they assigned MSNBC higher credibility than White respondents (the reference group). The previous table showed no difference between Black and White respondents’ rating for CNN, but Table 5-2 indicates that Blacks find MSNBC to be less credible than Whites ($p < .05$). “Peers’ credibility rating” remained significant (at the .001 level) with an unchanged standardized coefficient of .55. Once again, the

introduction of demographic information in the second model explains very little of the variation in respondents' personal credibility ratings (adjusted R^2 increases only slightly from .30 to .31).

Variables relating to media engagement are controlled for in the third model. "Frequency of watching MSNBC" proved to be highly significant (at the .001 level) with a standardized coefficient of .23. Additionally, controlling for media engagement variables causes differences between Blacks and Whites credibility ratings for MSNBC to disappear. Both "female" and "Asian" maintained significance at the .05 level, though "Asian's" standardized coefficient drops from .09 to .07. The key independent variable maintains significance at the .001 level, but its standardized coefficient falls from .55 in model 2 to .50 in model 3. Overall, the third model explains 36% of the variation in respondents' credibility ratings for MSNBC (up from 31% in the previous model).

In Model 4, respondents' susceptibility to peer influence is taken into account. Neither of its variables – "discussion of current events with friends" or "value placed on friends' opinions" – were significant. All previously significant variables in the regression remain unchanged after these new variables were introduced. "Peers' credibility rating" remained significant (at the .001 level), keeping its .50 standardized coefficient from model 3. Both "female" and "Asian" remained significant (at the .05 level), and their standardized coefficients were unaltered. "Frequency of watching MSNBC" retained significance at the .001 level, while adjusted R^2 was static at .36.

The fifth and final model controls for political affiliation. Republicans, compared to Democrats (the reference group) rated MSNBC as being significantly less credible ($p < .001$). The variable "no political affiliation/other" was also significant (at a .001 level), indicating that respondents in this group assigned MSNBC lower credibility ratings than those assigned by

Democrats. This model explains 2% more variation in the dependent variable than could be explained by the previous model – R^2 increased from .36 to .38. “Peers’ credibility rating” remained significant at the .001 level, and its standardized coefficient dropped only .01 between Model 4 and Model 5, from .50 to .49. Also, with the introduction of party affiliation, “female,” which was significant since its introduction into the regression in Model 2, lost its significance in Model 5. However, “black,” which was significant when first introduced in Model 2 but lost its significance in Models 3 and 4, again becomes significant in Model 5 ($p < .05$) with a standardized coefficient of -.09. Differences between Asians and Whites remained significant in Model 5 ($p < .05$). Finally, the variable “frequency of watching MSNBC” maintained significance (at a level of .001). Table 5-2 shows a consistent, positive relationship between “respondents’ perceptions of peers’ credibility ratings” for MSNBC and “respondents’ own credibility ratings” for MSNBC even after controlling for several independent variables. Data do not allow for the rejection of the Hypothesis 1 as it pertains to MSNBC, and it is likely that that the positive association between these variables did not occur by chance.

Linear Regression for Fox News

Results for Fox News’ linear regression are shown in Table 5-3. Data reveal a highly significant, positive relationship between “peers’ credibility rating” for Fox News and respondents’ own credibility ratings ($p < .001$ in all five models). In the first model, the key independent variable by itself explains 35% of the variation in the dependent variable; its standardized coefficient is .59. Model 2 introduces the demographic variables – age, gender, and race – but none of these variables are significant. In fact, the variable “peers’ credibility rating” actually sees an increase in its standardized coefficient, from .59 to .60. The adjusted R^2 increases only marginally from .35 to .36.

The third model controls for two variables measuring media engagement. Both variables are significant at the .001 level. “Frequency of watching Fox News” has a positive coefficient, showing that those who watch Fox News more often rate it as being more credible. The variable “informed about current events” has a negative coefficient, meaning that those who consider themselves highly informed about current events rate Fox News’ credibility lower than respondents who report being less informed about current events. This is the only regression table out of the three in which this variable achieves statistical significance. Self-reports concerning knowledge about current events are unrelated to respondents’ credibility ratings for CNN and MSNBC, but the extent which respondents think they are informed about current events is related to their credibility ratings for Fox News. “Peers’ credibility rating” maintains significance at a .001 level in this model, though its standardized coefficient falls from .60 to .54. Although no demographic variables were significant in model 2, “other/mixed race” becomes significant ($p < .05$) in the third model. Its standardized coefficient is positive demonstrating that “Other” and “Mixed Race” respondents find Fox News more credible than the Whites (the reference group). Out of the three regressions, “other/mixed race” is only significant with Fox News. Adjusted R^2 is .45 in Model 3 – up from .36 in the Model 2. This is the largest increase in the adjusted R^2 between sequential models in any of the three regressions.

In Model 4, variables measuring susceptibility to peer influence are introduced. “Frequency of discussing current events with friends,” is significant at the .05 level. Its negative coefficient reveals that respondents who frequently discuss current events with their friends rate Fox News as less credible. The second variable, “value placed on friends’ opinions,” is also significant ($p < .05$). It has a positive coefficient, which indicates that those who value their friends’ opinions rate Fox News as being more credible. Out of the three channels’ regression

tables, this is only one in which either of the “susceptibility to peer influence” variables attain significance. This is not to say, however, that these variables explain much of the variation in respondents’ credibility ratings, as adjusted R^2 increases only slightly from .45 in Model 3 to .46 in Model 4. The standardized coefficient for “peers’ credibility rating” remains unchanged at .54 and the standardized coefficient for “other/mixed race” is also unaltered at .08; both variables maintain their significance levels of .001 and .05, respectively. “Frequency of watching Fox” also maintains its significance (at the .001 level), its standardized coefficient increasing from .24 to .26. The variable “informed about current events” saw its standardized coefficient change from -.17 in Model 3 to -.14 in Model 4.

In the final linear regression for Fox News, political affiliation is introduced. When comparing self-identified Republicans to Democrats, the former rate Fox News as being significantly more credible ($p < .001$). Study respondents who indicate “no political affiliation” or being part of a political party in the “other” category do not differ from Democrats in terms of their credibility ratings for Fox News. “Peers’ credibility rating” retains its significance at the .001 level in Model 5, but its standardized coefficient falls from .54 to .52. Although the demographic variables “Black” and “Asian,” were not significant in any of the previous Fox News’ regressions, they attain significance in the final model (both with p -values $< .05$). “Other/Mixed Race” gains even greater significance – changing from a p -value of less than .05 in models three and four to a p -value of less than .01 in Model 5. The variable “frequency of watching” maintains its significance (at the .001 level), but its standardized coefficient falls from .26 in Model 4 to .20 in Model 5.

The variable “informed about current events” is not significant in regression for CNN or MSNBC, but it achieves significance for each Fox News model in which it is present. In fact, the

variable maintains its significance at the .001 level throughout. Its standardized coefficient does fall slightly from -.14 in model 4 to -.13 in model 5. The variables “frequency of current event discussion with friends” and “value placed on friends’ opinions” remain significant (at the .05 level) in the final model. As stated previously, Fox News’ regressions are the only ones in which being “informed about current events,” “frequency of current event discussion with friends,” and “value placed on friends’ opinions” are significantly related to respondents’ personal credibility ratings. On the whole, Table 5-3 demonstrates a consistent, positive relationship between “respondents’ perceptions of peers’ credibility ratings” for Fox News and “respondents’ own credibility ratings” for Fox News even after controlling for several independent variables. Data do not allow for the rejection of the Hypothesis 1 as it pertains to Fox News, and it is likely that that the positive association between these variables did not occur by chance.

In conclusion, the study revealed that respondents found CNN to be the most credible, while Fox News was rated least credible. In terms of respondents’ assessments of peers’ credibility ratings, CNN emerged as most credible, and again Fox News was shown as least credible. The linear regressions for all three cable news channels demonstrated that peers’ credibility ratings were the best predictor of respondents own credibility ratings. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

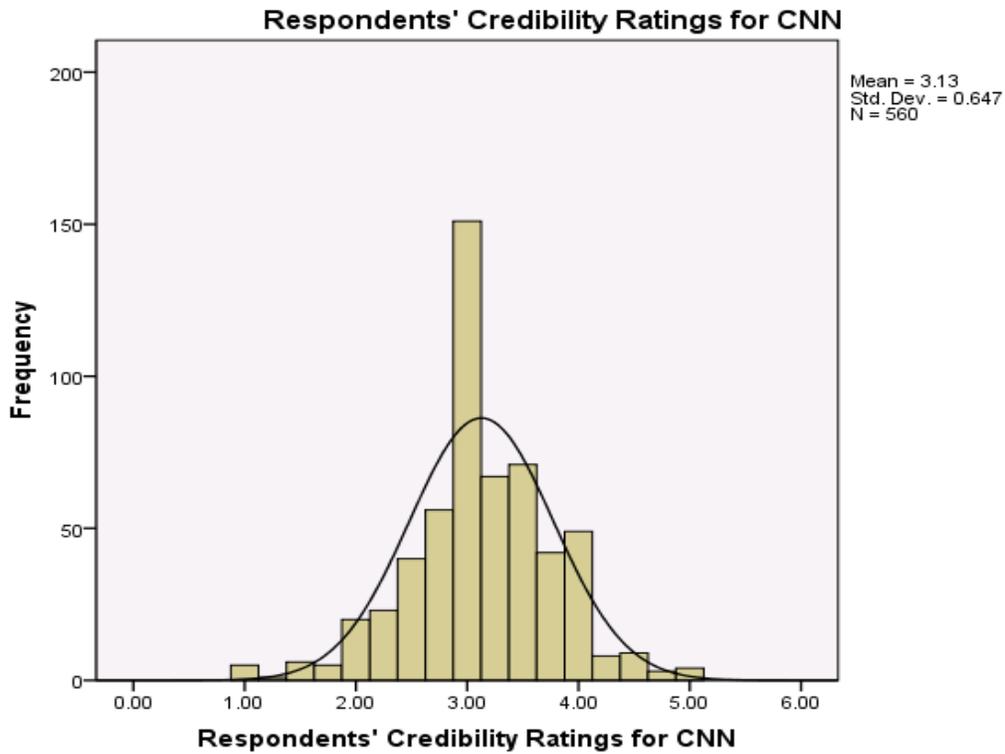


Figure 5-1. Distribution of Respondents' Credibility Ratings for CNN

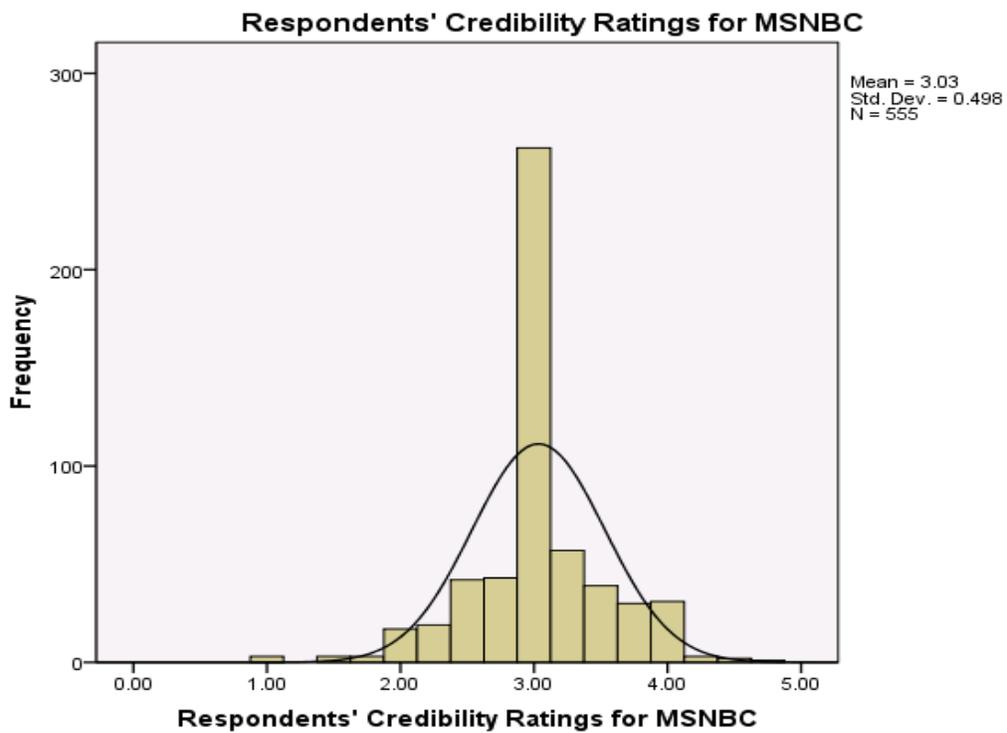


Figure 5-2. Distribution of Respondents' Credibility Ratings for MSNBC

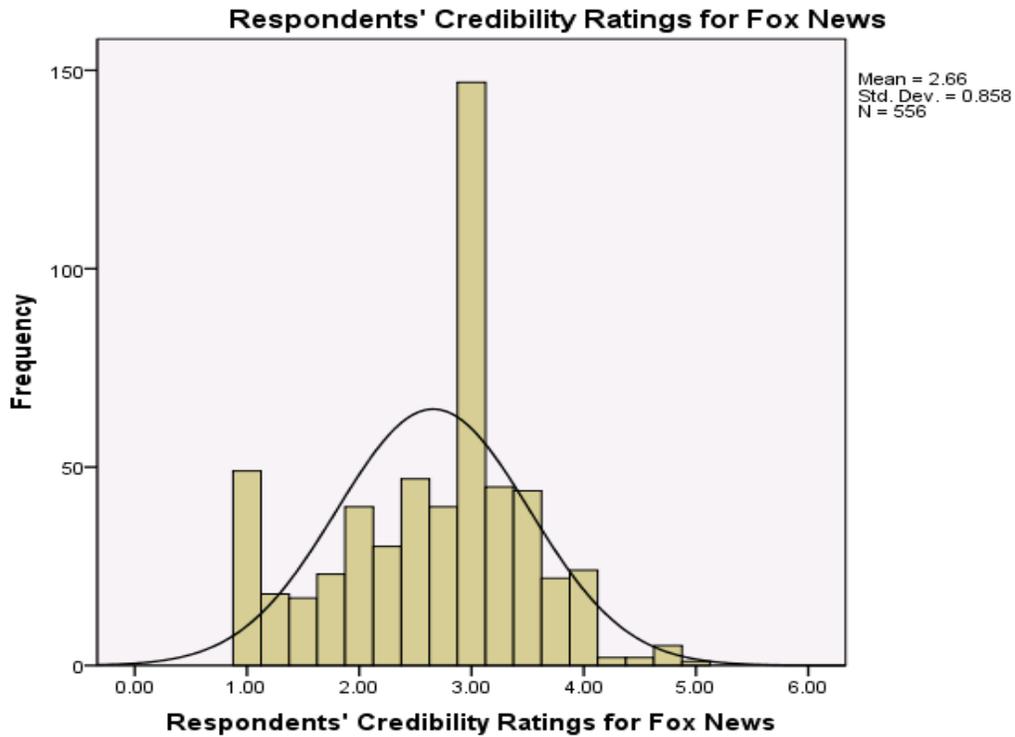


Figure 5-3. Distribution of Respondents' Credibility Ratings for Fox News

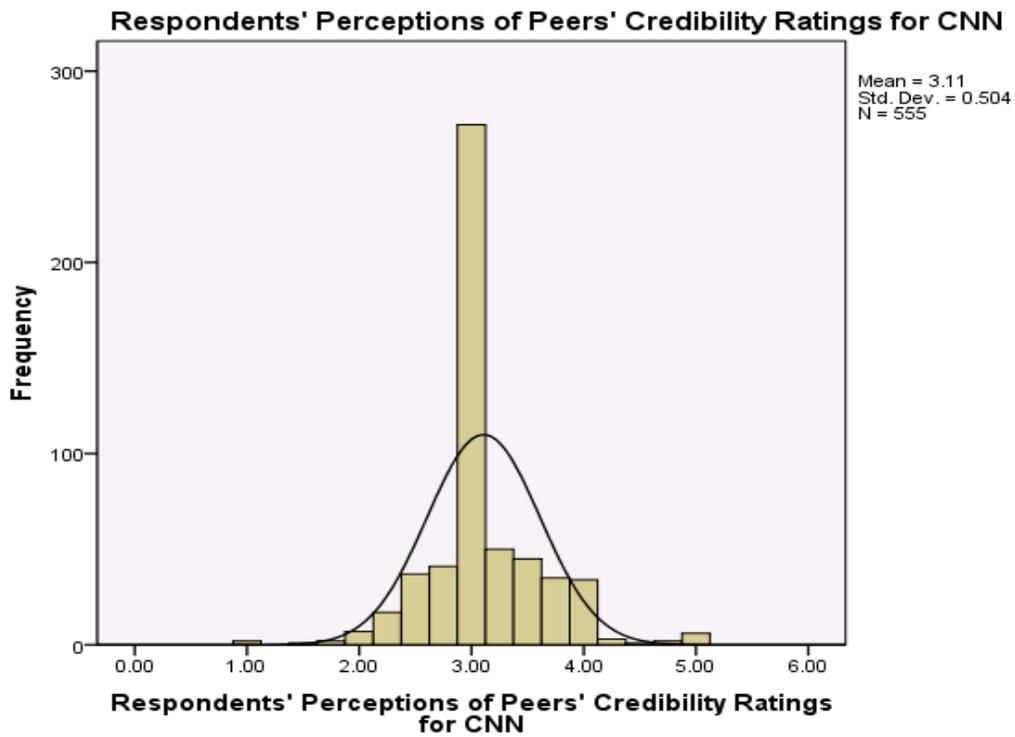


Figure 5-4. Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Peers' Credibility Ratings for CNN

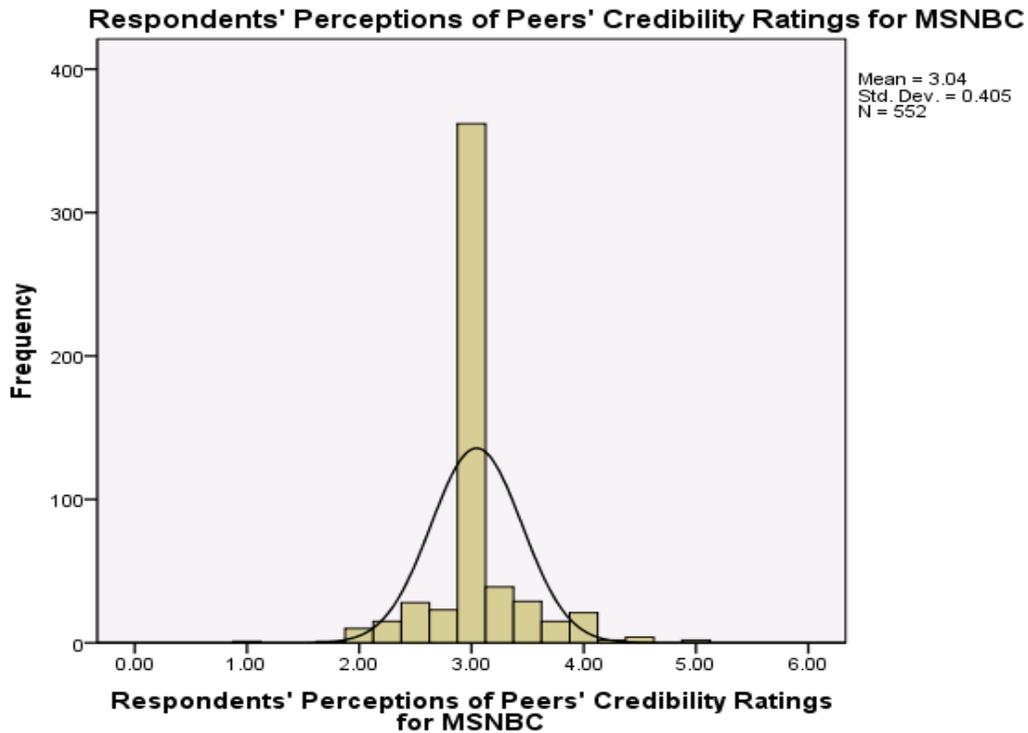


Figure 5-5. Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Peers' Credibility Ratings for MSNBC

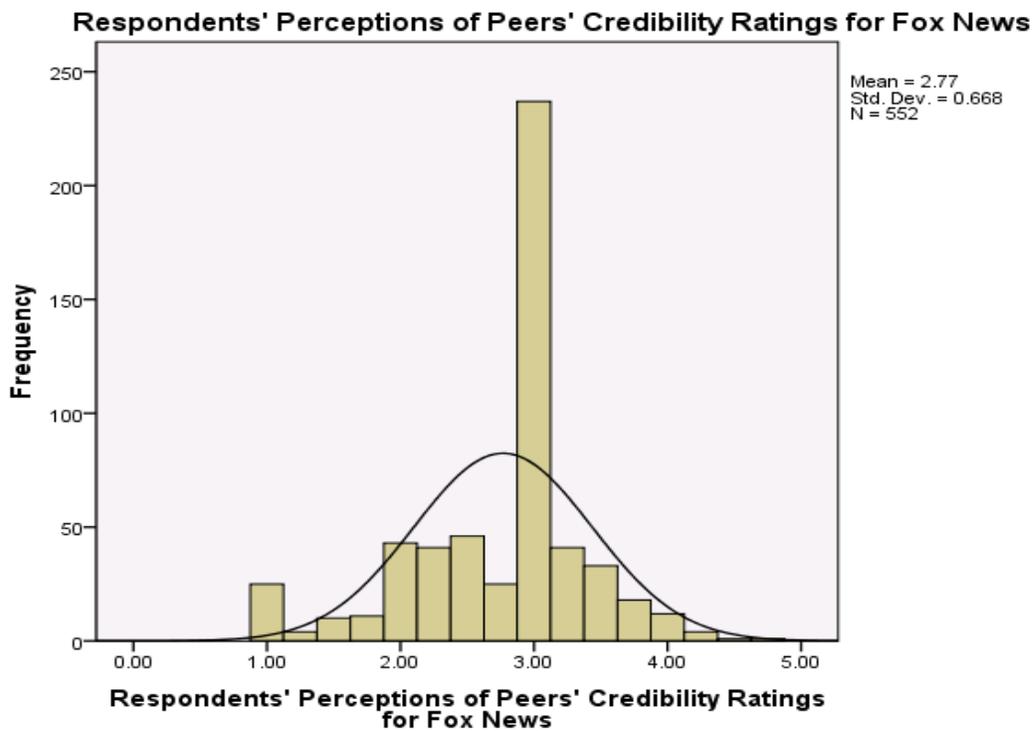


Figure 5-6. Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Peers' Credibility Ratings for Fox News

Table 5-1. Results of Linear Regressions Predicting Effect of Independent Variables on Respondents' Credibility Ratings for CNN

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Peers' Credibility Rating for CNN	.81(.63)***	.81(.62)***	.74(.57)***	.74(.57)***	.71(.55)***
<u>Demographics</u>					
Age		-.02(-.04)	-.03(-.07)*	-.03(-.07)*	-.03(-.07)*
Female		.03(.02)	.05(.04)	.05(.04)	.02(.02)
Black ^a		.04(.02)	.01(.01)	.01(.00)	-.06(-.03)
Asian ^a		.19(.09)*	.14(.06)	.14(.06)	.13(.06)
Other/Mixed Race ^a		.02(.01)	.02(.01)	.02(.01)	.02(.01)
<u>Media Engagement</u>					
Frequency of watching CNN			.10(.20)***	.10(.21)***	.09(.20)***
Informed about current events			-.00(-.00)	.01(.01)	-.00(-.00)
<u>Susceptibility to Peer Influence</u>					
Frequency of current event discussion with friends				-.02(-.04)	-.02(-.05)
Value placed on friends' opinions				.00(.01)	.00(.01)
<u>Political Affiliation</u>					
Republican ^b					-.29(-.20)***
No political affiliation/Other ^b					-.16(-.12)**
Adjusted R ²	.39	.40	.43	.43	.46
F	359.58***	61.92***	52.37***	41.81***	38.58***

Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 N= 562 (total sample); Standardized coefficients in parentheses

a. White/European is the reference group

b. Democrat is the reference group

Table 5-2. Results of Linear Regressions Predicting Effect of Independent Variables on Respondents' Credibility Ratings for MSNBC

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Peers' Credibility Rating for MSNBC	.67(.55)***	.67(.55)***	.61(.50)***	.61(.50)***	.59(.49)***
<u>Demographics</u>					
Age		-.00(-.01)	-.00(-.01)	.00(.00)	-.00(-.00)
Female		.08(.08)*	.08(.08)*	.08(.08)*	.07(.07)
Black ^a		-.11(-.07)*	-.09(-.06)	-.09(-.06)	-.13(-.09)*
Asian ^a		.15(.09)*	.13(.07)*	.13(.07)*	.13(.08)*
Other/Mixed Race ^a		.04(.03)	.05(.04)	.05(.04)	.05(.04)
<u>Media Engagement</u>					
Frequency of watching MSNBC			.10(.23)***	.10(.24)***	.10(.24)***
Informed about current events			-.03(-.04)	-.01(-.01)	-.03(-.03)
<u>Susceptibility to Peer Influence</u>					
Frequency of current event discussion with friends				-.03(-.07)	-.03(-.07)
Value placed on friends' opinions				.01(.04)	.01(.04)
<u>Political Affiliation</u>					
Republican ^b					-.18(-.16)***
No political affiliation/Other ^b					-.14(-.14)***
Adjusted R ²	.30	.31	.36	.36	.38
F	233.70***	41.89***	38.20***	30.99***	28.12***

Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 N= 562 (total sample); Standardized coefficients in parentheses

a. White/European is the reference group

b. Democrat is the reference group

Table 5-3. Results of Linear Regressions Predicting Effect of Independent Variables on Respondents' Credibility Ratings for Fox News

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Peers' Credibility Rating for Fox News	.76(.59)***	.76(.60)***	.70(.54)***	.69(.54)***	.67(.52)***
<u>Demographics</u>					
Age		-.03(-.05)	-.03(-.05)	-.02(-.05)	-.02(-.04)
Female		.03(.02)	.03(.02)	.02(.01)	.03(.02)
Black ^a		.07(.03)	.10(.04)	.10(.04)	.18(.07)*
Asian ^a		.13(.05)	.14(.05)	.14(.05)	.19(.07)*
Other/Mixed Race ^a		.15(.06)	.18(.08)*	.18(.08)*	.21(.09)**
<u>Media Engagement</u>					
Frequency of watching Fox			.16(.24)***	.17(.26)***	.13(.20)***
Informed about current events			-.20(-.17)***	-.17(-.14)***	-.16(-.13)***
<u>Susceptibility to Peer Influence</u>					
Frequency of current event discussion with friends				-.03(-.08)*	-.05(-.07)*
Value placed on friends' opinions				.03(.07)*	.03(.08)*
<u>Political Affiliation</u>					
Republican ^b					.36(.18)***
No political affiliation/Other ^b					.00(.00)
Adjusted R ²	.35	.36	.45	.46	.48
F	299.89***	53.08***	55.19***	46.12***	42.62***

Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 N= 562 (total sample); Standardized coefficients in parentheses

a. White/European is the reference group

b. Democrat is the reference group

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary

One of this study's most salient findings is that "peers' credibility rating" is highly significant ($p < .001$) in all models for all three regressions. In fact, respondents' perceptions of peers' credibility ratings are, by far, the single best predictor of respondents' own ratings. Because of this, we fail to reject Hypothesis 1. As was previously stated in the literature review and was born out in the study, Bandura's social cognitive theory informed that there was likely a link between an individual's environment and their cognitive decisions – be they on cable news' credibility or any other choice. Although causality cannot be established in cross sectional studies, we do learn that there is a correlation between how respondents rate cable news channels' credibility and how they perceive their peers to rate these same cable news channels' credibility. In each of the linear regressions tables, this independent variable, "peers' credibility rating," had the highest standardized coefficient, never dropping below .49 – more than double the standardized coefficients of all other independent variables.

Another noteworthy finding is the relatively strong relationship between "frequency of watching" and "respondents' credibility rating," which indicated that watching a channel more frequently is associated with higher credibility ratings. This variable attained significance at the .001 level for all models in CNN, MSNBC and Fox News' regressions. When comparing across all the final models, "frequency of watching" was the second-best predictor of respondents' credibility ratings after "peers' credibility rating." Specifically, standardized coefficients for this variable are as follows: CNN is .20, MSNBC is .24, and Fox News is .20.

Political affiliation also had an effect. Significant differences between Republicans and Democrats were evident in all three regressions ($p < .001$). CNN received a -.20 standardized

coefficient indicating that Republicans rate CNN as less credible than Democrats. This is expected based on numerous studies which show that Republicans rate CNN as less credible than Fox News (Pew Research Center, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2010). Interestingly, CNN had a similar disparity between the “no political affiliation/other” variable and the Democrat reference group (at .01 significance level) with a -.12 standardized coefficient. Thus, those with no political affiliation also rated CNN less credible than Democrats. MSNBC’s results for political affiliation nearly mirrored those of CNN. The variable “Republican” registered a .001 significance level with a -.16 standardized coefficient, and “no political affiliation/other” had a .001 significance level and a -.14 standardized coefficient. Thus, similar to CNN, Republicans and those with no political affiliation rated MSNBC less credible than Democrats (the reference group).

However, though Fox News, too, had a .001 significance level for Republican, with a .18 standardized coefficient, “no political affiliation/other” was not significant at any level. The “Republican” standardized coefficient was positive only in the Fox News regressions, indicating that Republicans find Fox News to be significantly more credible than Democrats (the reference group). The reverse is true for the other two channels; Democrats rate CNN and MSNBC’s credibility higher than Republicans do. This supports previous studies in which Republicans rated Fox News as more credible than both CNN and MSNBC (Pew Research Center, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2010).

Another interesting result of this study is that Blacks rated Fox News higher in terms of credibility than the White reference group. Additionally, Blacks rated MSNBC as less credible compared to Whites. Both of these racial differences remained even after controlling for political

affiliation. The literature shows that MSNBC is consistently rated by viewers to be more frequently watched and trusted by Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2010). African Americans have traditionally voted for Democrats in much higher numbers than for Republicans, including the 2008 presidential election where 95% of blacks voted Democratic (ElectionCenter, 2008). It is perhaps surprising then that after taking political party into account Blacks tended to rate Fox News as more credible and MSNBC as less credible compared to Whites.

Perhaps the most interesting and telling statistic in the entire study was the result for the variable “informed on current events,” which revealed that those who considered themselves highly informed about current events rated Fox News as significantly less credible ($p < .001$). The variable’s standardized coefficient for Fox News was $-.13$.

Also of interest is that CNN emerged as most credible, while Fox News was considered least credible, according to both respondents’ personal assessments and their perceptions of peers’ opinions regarding the channels’ trustworthiness and objectivity. This follows past research which shows CNN to be the most credible of the three channels (Pew Research Center 2004; Pew Research Center 2008). Specifically, the average personal credibility ratings for these news channels are as follows: CNN= 3.13, MSNBC= 3.03, and Fox News= 2.66. Respondents’ assessments of peers’ credibility ratings for the three news channels were similar (CNN= 3.11, MSNBC= 3.04, and Fox News= 2.77). These relative credibility ratings confirm some previous studies (Pew Research Center, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2008), but contradict others (Public Policy Polling, 2009; Public Policy Polling, 2010).

Explanation

Certainly, the most important finding in this study was that Hypothesis 1 was not rejected and, in fact, achieved significance at the .001 level. The presence of a correlation between how respondents rated the three cable news channels and how they perceived their peers would rate the three channels suggests that peers may, in fact, influence how individuals judge media credibility. Based on Bandura's (1985) social cognitive theory, these respondents' cognition (how they view and analyze the media) and their behavior (how they filled out the survey) are related to their environment (interaction with peers). Thus, according to Bandura's theory, this peer interaction may have influenced respondents' opinions regarding cable news channels' trustworthiness and objectivity. Causality, however, can only be ascertained in longitudinal studies, and, therefore, we cannot know whether respondents choose to interact with those who have similar opinions regarding media credibility or if their own opinions change over time to more closely resemble those of their peer group. Perhaps both factors are at play: respondents might be drawn to their like-minded peers, but may also alter their attitudes to align even more closely with their friends' attitudes. Though past studies show that individuals seek out those who share similar world views (Shimahara, 1983), there is also reason to believe that young adults are influenced by their friends.

When considering Fox News' regression (Table 5-3), "frequency of current event discussion with friends" is significant in both models 4 and 5. The coefficients have negative signs, indicating that those who discuss current events with friends more frequently rate Fox News as less credible. Respondents who often engage in conversations about world events have comparatively negative views regarding Fox News' credibility. Conversely, those who do not usually discuss current events with their friends rate Fox News' credibility higher. This suggests that these higher credibility ratings are due to a lack of discussion with their peers during which

their opinions on Fox News' credibility could have been modified. This variable failed to achieve significance in either the CNN or MSNBC regressions. These two channels were rated as more credible than Fox News. Avid Fox News viewers, then, would seem to be less aware of their friends' opinions regarding this channel's credibility, as individuals who find Fox News highly credible are less likely to discuss current events, and, therefore, Fox's reputation with peers. In other words, they may not have heard their peers' opinions regarding cable news channels, which, thus, would negate the possibility of peer influence.

Also, this study showed Fox News to be very polarizing. For example, Fox News has larger standard deviations than either CNN or MSNBC for both personal and peer credibility composites (see Figures 5-1 through 5-6). Additionally, 49 study participants assigned the lowest possible credibility rating for all four of the questions comprising the respondents' credibility composite for the channel (see Figure 5-3), while only eight respondents did this for CNN and MSNBC, combined (see Figure 5-1 and Figure 5-2). Furthermore, when answering questions about how their friends assess a given channel's credibility, only three respondents, for CNN and MSNBC (see Figure 5-4 and Figure 5-5) combined, gave the channels the lowest possible rating on all four questions. Twenty-five respondents, however, indicated their friends found Fox News (see Figure 5-6) to be completely devoid of credibility. Because there are such negative sentiments against Fox News, it seems likely that peers are strongly advocating against the channel, which may partially explain its comparatively low personal credibility rating.

Data indicate that greater media exposure is related to higher credibility assessments. For all three cable news channels, there was a positive correlation between channel viewing and credibility ratings ($p < .001$ in all cases). This association parallels results from several other studies (e.g. Greenberg, 1966; Whitney, 1986; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kiouisis, 2001).

Limitations

The current research project, like all studies, has limitations. The fact that a non-random sample of undergraduate students was recruited from a single university does not allow for the generalization of findings to circumstances beyond the study's context. For example, conducting the research at UF, a Southeastern university, likely resulted in an overrepresentation of students with conservative political leanings compared to students attending colleges in the Northeastern United States. Thus, study findings could overestimate credibility ratings for Fox News, as a nationally-representative sample of college students might very well have included fewer Republicans. Also, the UF Office of Institutional Planning and Research reports that 1.4% of undergraduate students are Non-Resident Aliens; persons born outside the United States may express unique attitudes toward cable news channels' credibility that are hidden by their inclusion in this study's broad racial categories (2010).

Additionally, if one is interested in peer influence throughout the life course, the use of a college student sample is particularly problematic. First, college students are more educated – or at least on their way to being more educated – than the majority of Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Second, college students tend to be more politically liberal and are more likely to identify as Democrats compared to the population as a whole. Self-selection bias can also sometimes present a problem in social science research because its voluntary nature may allow for dissimilarity between survey takers and those who decline participation. In this instance, however, very few students chose not to complete the survey. Some respondents claimed never to have viewed CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. Their answers tended toward neutrality, which pulled the mean closer to “3.” In the future, perhaps these non-viewers should either be analyzed separately or eliminated from the study. However, because these study participants may still

have opinions about the channels, even without first-hand exposure, both options have drawbacks.

It is also somewhat disconcerting that a large number of students chose the neutral or “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” option when rating the three cable news channels. Although social science research demonstrates that respondents nearly always gravitate toward the center of any Likert scale (Garland, 1991) and it is quite possible that a large number of respondents have relatively neutral attitudes regarding cable new channels’ trustworthiness and objectivity, a high concentration of response around the number “3” could also indicate that study participants did not take the time to carefully consider each and every question. It is, after all, easier to answer “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” than to expend the effort necessary to contemplate every item on a three-page survey. There is no way to know for certain if a respondent actually espoused rather neutral views regarding the three channels’ credibility or they simply tired of answering questions. Perhaps, in the future a different Likert scale could be used. A four-point scale which eliminates the “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” answer choice is a potential option because there will not be a neutral response. Also, seven-point and nine-point Likert scales could be advantageous, as they allow respondents to express opinions that vary only slightly from neutrality. Therefore, respondents may be less inclined to report neutral opinions.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study lays the groundwork for a plethora of future research. Because media credibility has not been viewed in terms of how peers impact individuals’ opinions on media credibility, there are many areas in which future research might expand on this concept. Using a similar format to that used in this study, research may be conducted on medium credibility, comparing television, radio, Internet, and print. Additionally, studies could be conducted on how peers affect respondents’ credibility assessment for different network news broadcasts or their

attitudes toward other mediums (e.g. newspapers or websites). Ideally, these future studies would employ a longitudinal design and random, nationally-representative samples, but time and cost constraints obviously make this less feasible. Finally, experiments would be useful to demonstrate the extent to which peers influence individuals' assessments of media credibility. Analyzing how a confederate's outburst against CNN, MSNBC or Fox News prior to survey administration might prove particularly illuminating. Using a scenario which allows respondents to immediately echo – or counter – the opinion of one or more confederates would be helpful in understanding the role immediacy plays in peer influence. Of course, adequate control groups would need to be put in place (perhaps by varying the amount of time between exposure to a peer's opinion and survey administration).

Closing

The current research project makes a significant contribution to the literature. Findings point to a link between individuals' assessments of media credibility and their perceptions of peers' assessments. The existence of a correlation between respondents and peers' credibility ratings for various television news sources has wide-reaching implications. For example, the cable channels in question (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News) would perhaps benefit from knowing that viewers, or potential viewers, will judge their trustworthiness and objectivity based not only on their own viewing experience but also on their friends' opinions about the channel.

The study also suggests an explanation for the correlation between individuals' and peers' opinions. It reveals that those who discuss current events with their friends rate Fox News' credibility very low which indicates that peers alter one another's credibility opinions through discourse. Conversely, those who do not discuss current events rate Fox News as being more credible, which indicates that if they were to engage in such discourse, their opinions might be

modified to converge closer toward the majority opinion (Fox News mean = 2.66). Those who engage in no such discourse, thus, remain steadfast in their minority viewpoint.

The most important accomplishment of the current research project, however, is perhaps the fact that it unites two disparate bodies of literature. Specifically, media credibility studies and peer influence research intersect as the link between individuals' and peers' credibility ratings. Furthermore, results demonstrate that it is vitally important for media companies to convince peer group leaders that their channels are credible – perhaps this is even more essential than broad appeals aimed at the entire audience, as these opinion leaders will likely affect others' attitudes. Before marketing campaigns can prove truly effective, however, news outlets must ensure that they are providing audiences with consistently credible journalism. In doing so, the media may be able to regain some of the public's faith and trust it has lost over the last quarter century.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE A

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. The following survey includes questions about your background, cable news viewing habits, and attitudes toward cable news. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. Simply mark the choices that best describe you.

PLEASE NOTE: For this survey, the term “friends” includes best friends, close friends, and casual friends.

<p>1. How often do you discuss the news/current events with your friends? <i>DISCUSS</i></p>	<p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Never 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month or less frequently 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a month 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a week 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Daily</p>
<p>2. To what extent are you informed about current events? <i>INFRMD</i></p>	<p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all Informed 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Informed 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Informed 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Informed 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Very Informed</p>
<p>3. What value do you place on your friends opinions when making decisions? <i>FR_DEC</i></p>	<p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Very Low Value 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Low Value 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Some Value 4 <input type="checkbox"/> High Value 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Very High Value</p>
<p>4. How frequently do you watch CNN <i>WAT_CNN</i></p>	<p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Never 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month or less frequently 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a month 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a week 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Daily</p>

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
5. I believe all or most of the information presented on CNN <i>CRED_01</i>	1	2	3	4	5
6. An effort is made to present all sides of the issues on CNN <i>CRED_02</i>	1	2	3	4	5
7. There is often biased reporting on CNN <i>CRED_03</i>	1	2	3	4	5
8. I often distrust the reporting on CNN <i>CRED_04</i>	1	2	3	4	5
9. My friends believe all or most of the information presented on CNN <i>CRED_05</i>	1	2	3	4	5
10. My friends think an effort is made to present all sides of the issues on CNN <i>CRED_06</i>	1	2	3	4	5
11. My friends think there is often biased reporting on CNN <i>CRED_07</i>	1	2	3	4	5
12. My friends often distrust the reporting on CNN <i>CRED_08</i>	1	2	3	4	5

13. How frequently do you watch MSNBC <i>WAT_NBC</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Never 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month or less frequently 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a month 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a week 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Daily
---	---

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
14. I believe all or most of the information presented on MSNBC <i>CRED_09</i>	1	2	3	4	5
15. An effort is made to present all sides of the issues on MSNBC <i>CRED_10</i>	1	2	3	4	5
16. There is often biased reporting on MSNBC <i>CRED_11</i>	1	2	3	4	5
17. I often distrust the reporting on MSNBC <i>CRED_12</i>	1	2	3	4	5
18. My friends believe all or most of the information presented on MSNBC <i>CRED_13</i>	1	2	3	4	5
19. My friends think an effort is made to present all sides of the issues on MSNBC <i>CRED_14</i>	1	2	3	4	5
20. My friends think there is often biased reporting on MSNBC <i>CRED_15</i>	1	2	3	4	5
21. My friends often distrust the reporting on MSNBC <i>CRED_16</i>	1	2	3	4	5
22. How frequently do you watch Fox News <i>WAT_FX</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Never 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month or less frequently 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a month 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Two or three times a week 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Daily				

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
23. I believe all or most of the information presented on Fox News <i>CRED_17</i>	1	2	3	4	5
24. An effort is made to present all sides of the issues on Fox News <i>CRED_18</i>	1	2	3	4	5
25. There is often biased reporting on Fox News <i>CRED_19</i>	1	2	3	4	5
26. I often distrust the reporting on Fox News <i>CRED_20</i>	1	2	3	4	5
27. My friends believe all or most of the information presented on Fox News <i>CRED_21</i>	1	2	3	4	5
28. My friends think an effort is made to present all sides of the issues on Fox News <i>CRED_22</i>	1	2	3	4	5
29. My friends think there is often biased reporting on Fox News <i>CRED_23</i>	1	2	3	4	5
30. My friends often distrust the reporting on Fox News <i>CRED_24</i>	1	2	3	4	5

31. Gender: <i>GENDER</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Female 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Male
32. What is your age? (please enter it in the blank) <i>AGE</i>	_____
33. Which of the following races do you consider yourself? You may select more than one and/or specify another racial group. <i>RACE</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/> White/European 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Black/African-American 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Asian or Pacific Islander 4 <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
34. What is your political affiliation? <i>POLITIC</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Republican 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Democrat 3 <input type="checkbox"/> No political affiliation 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

Thank you very much for participating in this study. I really appreciate your help!

APPENDIX B
IRB DOCUMENTATION



Matthew Beaton
Department of Journalism

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Gainesville, FL 32611-7330
Phone: (352) 392-0466
E-mail: mbeaton@ufl.edu

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are cordially invited to participate in a study on cable news viewing habits and attitudes toward cable news conducted by Matthew Beaton, a graduate student in the College of Journalism and Communications, at the University of Florida. In addition to questions about cable news, this questionnaire will ask for a variety of demographic information such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, parents' household income, and political affiliation. The survey will require approximately ten to fifteen minutes of your time.

There are no anticipated risks associated with this research project. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are not required to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. As a "thank you" for participating, you will receive one extra credit point (above the maximum of 100 credit points or its equivalent) added to your final course grade. If you do not wish to complete the survey, there is an optional activity which you may perform in lieu of the survey which will earn you one extra credit point. Please notify the researcher if you would prefer performing the activity instead of completing the survey.

After the survey's completion, your professor may direct you to add your name and/or UF ID number to a list of students who have participated. If such a list exists, it would merely serve as a way to ensure extra credit points are assigned correctly and would never be used to connect your name to your survey responses.

Any data collected in conjunction with the study will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. In order to protect your identity questionnaires will contain only random identification numbers.

By signing this form below, you indicate that you have chosen to participate in this research and that you have read and understand the information in this consent form. Your decision regarding whether or not to participate will not prejudice your relations with the College of Journalism and Communications or the University of Florida. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you have any additional questions, you may contact Matthew Beaton at 706-372-6707. Questions and concerns about your rights as a research participant can be directed to the University of Florida Institutional Review Board office, PO Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250.

Thank you very much!

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____
Principal investigator _____ Date _____

Matthew Beaton
Department of Journalism

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E-mail: mbeaton@ufl.edu

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are cordially invited to participate in a study on cable news viewing habits and attitudes toward cable news conducted by Matthew Beaton, a graduate student in the College of Journalism and Communications, at the University of Florida. In addition to questions about cable news, this questionnaire will ask for a variety of demographic information such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, parents' household income, and political affiliation. The survey will require approximately ten to fifteen minutes of your time.

There are no anticipated risks associated with this research project, but there are also no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are not required to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

After the survey's completion, your professor may direct you to add your name and/or UF ID number to a list of students who have participated. If such a list exists, it would merely serve as a way to ensure extra credit points are assigned correctly. Such extra credit would total no more than 1 extra percentage point in addition to the potential 100 percentage points a student may earn during the semester and would never be used to connect your name to your survey responses. If you do not wish to complete the assignment and extra credit is made available for completing it, an alternative assignment can be performed to earn the extra credit.

Any data collected in conjunction with the study will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. In order to protect your identity questionnaires will contain only random identification numbers.

By signing this form below, you indicate that you have chosen to participate in this research and that you have read and understand the information in this consent form. Your decision regarding whether or not to participate will not prejudice your relations with the College of Journalism and Communications or the University of Florida. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you have any additional questions, you may contact Matthew Beaton at 706-372-6707. Questions and concerns about your rights as a research participant can be directed to the University of Florida Institutional Review Board office, PO Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250.

Thank you very much!

If you have any further questions or concerns, feel free to direct them to my supervisor:

Dr. David Ostroff, Ph.D.
Department of Journalism
E-mail: dostroff@jou.ufl.edu

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____
Principal investigator _____ Date _____

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matthew Beaton was born and raised in Fernandina Beach, Florida. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from Florida Atlantic University, graduating magna cum laude. He completed his Master of Arts in Mass Communication in December 2010. Having written for numerous publications while in graduate school, he plans to work as a full-time journalist.