HOW MESSAGE EVALUATION AND SOURCE ATTRIBUTES MAY INFLUENCE CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT AND BELIEF CHANGE

By Michael D. Slater and Donna Rouner

Although source credibility's importance in communication, particularly in persuasion, is well documented, audience processes in assessing source credibility and the resulting impact are inadequately specified. We hypothesize message quality will have direct effects and mediate partially the effects of initial credibility assessments on subsequent source credibility assessments and on belief change. Also, subsequent credibility assessments are expected to mediate effects of initial credibility assessments and message quality assessments on belief change. Reanalyses of experimental data (N=74) support the hypothesized direct effects and several proposed mediating relationships.

News writers frequently rely on sources to provide readers with information and opinions from experts. Other writers in mass communication, particularly commercial advertisers, public relations practitioners, and proponents of public information campaigns, use sources, often celebrities whom audiences admire, to provide viewpoints and for testimonials.

Most of our empirical knowledge about the importance of source credibility comes from persuasion research, which began in the 1940s. Source credibility is one of the first- and most-studied variables in the persuasion and message effects literatures. Many different dimensions of source credibility - such as expertise, bias, and attractiveness - have been found to influence the impact of a message on audience beliefs. Nonetheless, the process by which audience members assess source credibility, and the resulting impact of credibility on the persuasion process, as well as learning processes, may well be inadequately conceptualized and specified. There is a large body of research documenting various circumstances that moderate the effects of credibility cues, including situational factors such as involvement or personal stake in the message topic, knowledge and direct experience, and dispositional factors such as incredulity and cognitive complexity. Although these factors help define the parameters of source credibility influence, they do not serve to describe a process of such influence, leaving the nature of these processing strategies unspecified in persuasion studies.

This study provides initial tests of a more complex model of how audience members assess source credibility, and how these assessments mediate message impact on audience beliefs.

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It seems self-evident that if a message originates with, for example, an expert and objective person, that message should influence audience beliefs more than the same message from an inexpert and biased person. Presumably, the audience member is cued by that source attribution to employ different processing strategies that result in the subsequent message arguments' being more readily accepted or rejected. The nature of these processing strategies, however, is not specified in persuasion studies.

Three sources of data exist concerning the source's credibility. First is the audience member's prior knowledge and impressions concerning the source. A statement such as "Service to the people is more valuable than life itself" might be approached differently if attributed to Mother Theresa or Saddam Hussein. Credibility judgments based on prior beliefs concerning, and prior affective responses to, the source are likely to be powerful in shaping message impact. A well-integrated cognitive structure about the source already exists.

Often, however, audience members have little or no prior familiarity with a source. In news stories audience members must assess a spokesperson's credibility from the source's credentials. Similarly, stimuli in persuasion experiments typically provide credentials describing an unfamiliar source; audience members infer source credibility.

A third way for audience members to determine source credibility comes from the message itself. When confronted with a message, especially one from a source one knows nothing about other than some credentials, one would reasonably make inferences about the source's credibility based on the perceived quality of the message. If the message is well presented, plausible, with convincing specifics, examples, or data, that message could possibly have more impact on assessments of credibility, as initial credibility assessments have on judgments about the message.

A variety of research findings support this argument that audience evaluation of the message influences source credibility judgments. As with the classic persuasion studies, source credibility is manipulated experimentally by varying the apparent source of a message. Audience perceptions of source credibility are normally measured (if at all) only as a manipulation check, after message exposure. In rare cases — i.e., in only 2 of 235 source credibility studies identified in an extensive literature search — source credibility has been measured both before and after message exposure. In such cases, one often finds both statistically significant and, in an absolute sense, large changes in source credibility assessments as a result of message exposure.

This evidence suggests that, although source credibility is supposed to influence perceptions about the message, in fact, messages also influence perceptions concerning the credibility of the source. If credibility is a composite product of evaluation of source credentials and of the message itself, audience evaluation of message content has a great deal more to do with source credibility judgments and subsequent belief change than previously assumed.

Further evidence can be found in a recent study by Austin and Dong. In attempting to distinguish judgments about source credibility and judgments about the credibility of the message, they found message judgments more strongly associated with overall assessments of credibility than were judgments about the source.
Because messages are complex, researchers have difficulty in determining those aspects of message content that audience members may use to evaluate source credibility. Some candidates might include the type of data or rhetorical argumentation used, number of arguments, argument quality or rigor, vividness, or use of exemplars or anecdotes. Indeed, a variety of studies in the speech communication literature have found evidence that stylistic and presentational variables like disorganization and lack of fluency decrease perceptions of source credibility and can decrease attitude change. An alternative approach is to identify more general evaluation criteria. Audience members who may not recognize specific rhetorical characteristics of a message may easily judge the overall quality of its presentation.

Austin and Dong modify a concept from the social reality literature, apparent reality, or the extent to which a message is judged to accurately reflect social reality or fact. It seems intuitive that this assessment of the credibility of the message, similar to a construct called believability in the advertising literature, would influence message acceptance.

We propose a less obvious but plausible message assessment that will also influence assessments of source credibility and subsequent message acceptance or rejection: the subjective, affective response to the message as a whole, or message quality evaluation. Message quality evaluation refers to what we believe is a typical message processing heuristic: the rendering of an overall assessment of message stylistic quality. Is the message perceived to be well written, well produced? This is not a purely affective response to the message, simple liking or disliking. After all, one may disagree with a message or dislike a position taken therein while finding its presentation interesting or well done. Interest may be affective and cognitive: A message may bring a reader close emotionally and strike the reader in such a way that it draws and sustains attention. Message evaluation here refers to a cognitive and affective, valenced response to the presentation of the message, not necessarily to the message arguments. Some characteristics of message presentation that may evoke a favorable evaluation include appropriateness of organization and style. Style may consist of consistency of tone, uniqueness of voice, presence of attitude (although journalistic news style would call for absence, or neutrality, of attitude), level of formality, creativity, and more. A favorable evaluation of a message may mean it is perceived as well written, and it brings the reader closer emotionally and cognitively.

Why should evaluations of message quality influence source credibility judgments and subsequent acceptance or rejection of a message? Such a proposition can be supported from several social-scientific perspectives. First, there is the argument advocated by Zajonc, that affective judgments typically precede cognitive judgments. Thus, if an audience member favorably evaluates the message promulgated by a source, that audience member will also judge the source and the source’s arguments more favorably. Second, research results in advertising suggest that audience attitude to the ad—liking of an ad’s presentation—transfers to the liking of the product. Similarly, appreciation of message quality may transfer to positive regard for the source and to the message argument. The third perspective is heuristic, and represents a modification of elaboration-likelihood theory. In exceptional cases, audience members may be motivated enough and expert enough to scrupulously assess and weigh message arguments and source credentials against one another. More often, though, audience members are likely to seek
heuristically useful cues to assess a message leading to at least temporary belief change. Such heuristic or peripheral cues have typically been described as contextual – such as source credibility and attractiveness – though the possibility of peripheral cues within the message is also acknowledged.19 Subjective evaluations of message quality may operate as a powerful peripheral cue, disposing audience members to evaluate sources more positively or negatively as well as inclining them to accept or reject message arguments, at least when the message topic is not highly consequential to the recipient.20

Language intensity in a message has been found to increase audience ratings of the message’s discrepancy from their beliefs and to lead to rating the message source as more extreme than initially believed.21 Hamilton and Stewart22 manipulated the message quality measure of language intensity; thus lending support for time ordering message quality assessment in predicting source credibility. This research demonstrates a causal chain in source evaluations, whereby message characteristics of intensity and extremity of issue position had a positive effect on post-message expertise. Further, this effect was found to be mediated by source dynamism. They labeled this a “charismatic” sequence, which means source dynamism improved overall assessments of source credibility, as a result of triggering by the intensity of the language in the message.

We have argued that perceived message quality, as well as believability, should influence source expertise judgments and subsequent beliefs. Conversely, source expertise judgments might influence quality judgments as well as influencing beliefs.

These proposed direct and mediated relationships can be described in a series of hypotheses. First, we proposed that message quality evaluation modifies source expertise assessments. Therefore:

H1: Message quality evaluation should (a) predict source expertise assessments subsequent to message exposure (even when controlling for initial expertise assessment), and (b) partially mediate (i.e., attenuate but not eliminate) the relationship between initial and subsequent source expertise assessments.

Second, we proposed that message quality evaluation will have a direct effect on belief change, independent of the effects on the audience of source attributes and credentials. To the extent that message quality evaluation is influenced by initial source assessments, those quality evaluations should at least in part mediate the relationship between initial source assessment and belief change. Therefore:

H2: Message quality evaluation should (a) predict belief change (even when source expertise assessment prior to message exposure is controlled) and (b) partially mediate (i.e., attenuate but not eliminate) the relationship between initial source expertise assessments and belief change.

Third, we believe message quality evaluation should indirectly influence belief change due to its impact on source assessments subsequent to message exposure, which presumably influences belief change. Therefore:
H3: Source credibility (expertise and bias) assessments should (a) predict belief change (even when message quality evaluation is controlled) and source expertise should (b) partially mediate (i.e., attenuate but not eliminate) the relationship between message quality evaluation and belief change.

Fourth, in addition to arguing that initial source credibility will predict belief change, we suggest that initial assessments of source credibility are mediated by assessments subsequent to message exposure. A stronger version of this claim would suggest that this is perfect mediation: that there is no effect of initial source credibility assessments on belief change independent of source credibility as modified by message exposure. Therefore:

H4: Initial source credibility estimates should (a) predict belief change, but (b) subsequent credibility assessments should partially or fully mediate the predictive relationship between initial assessments and belief change.

Competing theoretical perspectives would predict differences between initial and subsequent credibility assessments, and that may predict greater or less impact of message quality evaluations based on contingent conditions. Congruity theory suggests that if message content is inconsistent with audience members' existing beliefs, they should tend to denigrate the source as a way to protect those existing beliefs. In other words, the more discrepant the message is from previous audience beliefs, and the more involved or committed the audience is with respect to the beliefs addressed by the message, the more source credibility should change as a result of message exposure. Discrepancy and involvement should be better predictors of source credibility assessment change than should message evaluation. Because discrepancy might influence source credibility assessment change, perhaps more so than message evaluation, we can ask:

Research question 1: How does message quality evaluation compare with discrepancy as a predictor of change in source credibility assessment from before to after message exposure?

Method

This study is a re-analysis of a mixed between- and within-subjects experimental design. Bias and expertise were the crossed, two-level, between-subject factors. The within-subject factor was message topic: one set of messages was about people, the other about technical, environmental topics. The two types of message topic were analyzed separately, however, because of conceptual and statistical problems associated with using variables comprised of message types. An appropriate solution, then, is to use separate experimental analyses to address the two message types and to attempt to replicate the results. The data in this study, therefore, were analyzed as if collected in two separate experiments. The order of messages was counterbalanced, and primacy/recency effects were further controlled by including the serial position in which the message appeared as a factor in the analyses of variance.

Stimuli Selection and Manipulations. The message topics (Saudi-Arabian women, Southern women, electric cars, and disposable diapers)
were selected based on pretesting indicating reasonably consistent pre-
existing beliefs regarding these topics. Messages, selected from magazines,
were edited to be moderately counter to existing beliefs.27

The social group messages (about Saudi Arabian and United States 
Southern women) were descriptions about each group, including economic, 
political, social, educational, and psychological changes the women have 
recently experienced. Specific information was added to the text based on 
pretesting of the study population's beliefs about these groups. This 
information, which was moderately incongruent with the students' beliefs 
(see below under Dependent Measures: Belief Change), was inserted into each 
excerpt in such a way that style characteristics like flow, tone, and voice 
remained consistent. These excerpts were pretested over several trials to 
ascertain similarity of quality and style.

All excerpts were 400 to 500 words long, to approximate the length of 
a short feature article. Source expertise and source bias were manipulated 
by including a page before each excerpt, explaining the background of the excerpt's author and the publication in which it appeared. With four 
conditions (high and low expertise crossed with high and low bias) and four 
messages, sixteen sources were invented. Graduate students and faculty 
associated with the project created the sources for the bias and expert 
manipulations on this project. These manipulations were then pretested 
empirically for validity purposes to determine high and low levels. Expertise 
manipulations would use, for example, an engineering professor who was a 
nationally known author and consultant to government, nonprofits, and 
business or an office-supply clerk; bias manipulations would contrast, for 
example, someone funded by a lobbying group identified as attempting to 
influence public policy on the issue with an independent person writing for 
a news publication. Some of the publications included in the bias and expert 
source manipulations used were fictional, although they appeared as realistic 
publications (e.g., High Country, a quarterly newsletter of the Boise (Idaho) 
Homeowners Association).28

Measurement of Independent Variables. So as not to obscure 
assessments of source credibility before and after a message, we had 
manipulation checks on source expertise and bias taken before and after 
message exposure. While this necessitates a reliance on single-item mea-

suration, the items are commonly used in persuasion studies, thus have 
apparent face validity: "How expert or inexpert about [the message topic] do 
you expect this author to be?" (1-very expert to 11-not at all expert) and "How 
biasied or unbiased would you expect this author to be concerning [the 
message topic]?" (1-very biased to 11-very unbiased).

Message quality evaluation was measured by averaging two items: 
"How well or poorly written was this excerpt?" (1-poorly written to 11-well-
written) and "How interesting or uninteresting did you find this excerpt?" (1-
uninteresting to 11-interesting). The Pearson correlation between these two 
items was .42 (p < .001) for the social group messages and .45 (p < .001) for the 
environmental messages.

Message discrepancy was measured with a single item that asked 
whether any aspects of the message were different from previous beliefs 
about the topic or social group described, using the same 11-point scale, 
ranging from "Exactly what I expected" to "Not at all what I expected."

Dependent Measures: Belief Change. We developed lists of eight 
supportive and contradictory statements about each message topic. To 
generate belief items, informal interviewing of thirty to fifty students over
several trials yielded consistent sets of descriptive statements about each social group (Saudi Arabian Women and United States Southern Women) and each topic (Electric Automobiles and Disposable Diapers). These statements were also pretested en masse using convenience samples in undergraduate classes (that did not include students who would be asked to volunteer as experimental subjects) to determine the extent of variation and normative views. To create measures that included information that was moderately noncongruent, the researchers chose items on the low side of the scale from neutral, measuring how characteristically the statement described each social group or environmental issue. Pretesting before the experiment indicated that our subject population had consistent stances on these statements: typically 80% of the pretest respondents scored on the same side of neutral on the items used.

Factor analyses using varimax rotations indicated which items could be used to create reasonably consistent indices. Items loading on the strongest factor for each message topic were used to create additive indices. Typical items included "Saudi women can work as engineers, physicists, or computer technicians"; "Achievement, for a Southern woman, is much more likely to be a matter of being married to the right man rather than having professional success in her own right"; "Disposable diapers are a continual threat to the environment, even after two or three years in a landfill"; "Electric cars have little effect on hurting the ozone layer." Subjects responded to how characteristic each statement was about the phenomenon of focus (e.g., disposable diapers, electric cars). The response scale on each item was 1-Not at all characteristic to 11-Very characteristic. Items were reverse coded. Thus, increases in index scores from pretest to posttest suggested the message influenced the respondent’s beliefs.

Four items were used for the Southern women belief index, Cronbach’s alpha=.79, and for the electric car belief index, Cronbach’s alpha=.67. Three items were used for the Saudi women belief index, Cronbach’s alpha=.82, and for the disposable diaper belief index, Cronbach’s alpha=.71.

Subjects and Procedure

The subjects, seventy-six volunteer undergraduate mass communication students, completed a booklet in class. The booklet had first the belief items, then a source information page and the initial items regarding source credibility and intrinsic interest, followed by the first message. The message quality evaluation items, the discrepancy item, and the second iteration of the source credibility items, came after the message, followed by a repeat of the belief items. The same sequence was repeated for a second message, followed by demographic items. The order and sequence of message presentation was counterbalanced with respect to each of the experimental factors. Told there were no correct or incorrect answers, subjects were instructed to read the excerpts as if they had picked up a book or magazine at home.

Path model regression analysis was used to test each hypothesis twice, once for the social group message and once for the environmental message. The model (See Figure 1) was reduced by first running equations that simultaneously included all paths between hypothesized variables and removing the weakest paths. All paths with t value coefficients of 1.67 (p <.10) were retained for the analysis. Time ordering of source and message evaluation items, relative to belief change, is supported by Hamilton and Stewart, who found the message as mediator. Change variables in the analyses were
calculated by including the time 1 covariate in the regression, rather than by computing difference scores.31

Results

Descriptive statistics on the measured variables show some differences across the two types of messages studied (see Table 1).

Source expertise increased for messages about social groups and decreased for messages about environmental topics. The social groups’ messages were evaluated higher. Both showed a marked change in beliefs and a slight change in source bias.

In this section, we will summarize findings across the two tests for each hypothesis (see Figures 2 and 3). All paths coefficients with $p<.05$ are shown. The decomposition of effects is presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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<td><strong>Messages about Social Groups:</strong></td>
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<td>Time 1 Expertise</td>
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<td><strong>Messages about Environmental Topics:</strong></td>
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<td>Time 1 Expertise</td>
<td>7.51</td>
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<td>Time 2 Expertise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Message Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2 Bias</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>2.79</td>
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How Message Evaluation and Source Attributes May Influence Credibility Assessment and Belief Change
TABLE 2
Decomposition of the Effects of the Causal Variables, Social Group Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exogenous Variable</th>
<th>Endogenous Variable</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Time 2 expertise</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.64***</td>
</tr>
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<td>Time 1 expertise</td>
<td>Time 2 beliefs</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Message evaluation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.24*</td>
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<td>Time 2 bias</td>
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<td>Time 2 beliefs</td>
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<td>Time 2 bias</td>
<td>Time 2 beliefs</td>
<td>.31*</td>
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<td>.31*</td>
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*p<.05; **p<.01; ***P<.001

**H1.** Part A of the hypothesis, proposing a direct relationship between message quality evaluation and source credibility assessment subsequent to message exposure, was supported with respect to expertise in both message contexts (beta = .40, p < .05 for social messages; beta = .32, p < .05 for environmental messages), but was not supported with respect to bias. The data also support part B of H1 for messages about social groups – message quality evaluation and initial source evaluation independently predict subsequent source evaluation (message quality evaluation beta = .40, p < .05; initial source evaluation beta = .54, p < .001), and message quality evaluation is influenced by initial source assessments (.24, p < .05). Thus, it apparently mediates the relationship between initial and subsequent source assessment. For environmental messages, initial source assessments and message assessments show independent influences (initial source assessments beta = .55, p < .001; message assessments beta = .32, p < .05).

**H2.** Part A of the hypothesis, proposing a direct relationship between message quality evaluation and belief change, was supported in both tests (for social group messages, message quality beta = .35, p < .01; for environmental messages, message quality beta = .31, p < .01). Moreover, source credibility predicted belief change only in the case of the social group messages. Given this, part B of the hypothesis, concerning message quality evaluation as a mediator of initial source credibility assessment and belief change, was only relevant for the social group messages. The data (beta coefficient for initial source credibility = .54, p < .001; beta coefficient for subsequent source credibility assessment = .23, p < .05), supported the hypothesis that message quality evaluation partially mediated that relationship.
TABLE 3

Decomposition of the Effects of the Causal Variables, Environmental Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exogenous Variable</th>
<th>Endogenous Variable</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 expertise</td>
<td>Time 2 expertise</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td></td>
<td>.55***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1 expertise</td>
<td>Time 2 beliefs</td>
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<td>Message evaluation</td>
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<td>Time 1 bias</td>
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<td>Time 1 beliefs</td>
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* p<.05; ** p<.01; *** P<.001

H3. Part A, proposing a direct relationship between subsequent source credibility assessments and belief change, is supported for the social group messages (beta=.23, p<.05) but not for the environmental messages. The social group message data also tend to support part B of the hypothesis, that subsequent credibility judgments mediate the effects of message quality evaluations on belief change. Clearly, however, the models are dominated by the effect of message quality evaluation.

H4. Part A, that initial source credibility assessments will predict belief change, is not supported. However, for the case of messages about social groups, both subsequent expertise and subsequent bias assessments are shown to mediate the influence of initial source credibility assessments on belief change (expertise beta=.23, p<.01; bias beta=.31, p<.01), in support of part B of the hypothesis.

FIGURE 2

Path Model for Messages about Social Groups

- .24* Message evaluation
- .54*** Time 1 expertise → Time 2 expertise
- .40* Time 2 expertise
- .35** Time 2 beliefs
- .43*** Time 1 beliefs
- .31** Time 2 beliefs
- -.46*** Discrepancy

* p<.05; ** p<.01; *** P<.001
**FIGURE 3**

*Path Model for Messages about Environmental Topics*

- Message evaluation
- Time 1 expertise
- Time 1 beliefs
- Time 1 bias
- Discrepancy
- Time 2 expertise
- Time 2 beliefs
- Time 2 bias

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

**Research Question.** Support was not found for an influence of discrepancy on change in source credibility assessment. However, for the environmental messages test, discrepancy predicted message assessment (beta = .24, p < .05).

**Discussion**

We found message quality evaluation predicted subsequent source credibility assessments for expert sources, but not for biased sources. An expert source would presumably have generated information that is well presented, well organized, interesting to read. When a reader encounters writing that is well presented, then a natural response would seem to be to judge its author as knowledgeable, authoritative, competent – that is, more expert. Study participants, sensibly enough, did not seem to use message quality as a heuristic for judging objectivity or bias, as they did expertise.

Also, in the case of expertise, message quality evaluation was found to partially mediate the effects of initial source credibility assessment on source credibility assessment subsequent to the message. This means that message quality evaluation accomplishes some mediation, but both predictors – initial source credibility assessment and message quality evaluation – show some independent influence on subsequent source credibility assessment. An initial, perhaps small, influence of initial source credibility assessment operated on message quality evaluation, which led to some changed assessments of the message source.

We found strong and consistent support that message factors predicted belief change, further specifying this relationship by finding message quality evaluation an important contributor. In one case, we found message quality evaluation also partially mediated the effect of initial source credibility assessments on belief change.

These findings, as proposed by H2, highlight a critical and neglected issue in persuasion research: how little attention we pay to message variables. Research has found an interaction between source characteristics and message characteristics, operationalized as the power of evidence in the message, in predicting belief change. Beyond the study of evidence strength and quality of argumentation, cogency of argument, a host of message characteristics...
could be operating in this complex process. Amount of evidence has been shown to interact with source assessment to affect attitude change. Some potential components of messages that might influence judgments of message quality evaluation include vividness and specificity of detail, and type of evidence provided, such as statistical base rate vs. exemplar data.

The differences between the two types of messages suggest the subjects may consider themselves to be relatively knowledgeable about environmental issues, compared to distal social groups. Thus, they were less concerned with source credibility and it did not predict belief change for environmental issues. This suggests a more central processing strategy, according to elaboration likelihood predictions. Message quality evaluation, however, as a peripheral cue, predicted in both cases.

Interest in and prior knowledge about the environmental topics have rendered processing less peripheral than in the case of distal social groups. However, it remains to be tested whether or not message quality evaluation will have a nontrivial effect in a classic high-involvement context, in which the messages either address issues of direct personal consequence or challenge personal value systems. The elaboration likelihood model would suggest that message quality evaluation should have a lesser impact in the high involvement context. Message quality evaluation may then become a function of agreement or disagreement with the position stated, as part of biased processing as described by Petty and Cacioppo. On the other hand, a recent study has found that message quality evaluation seems to mediate persuasive effects at least when value involvement is high and the recipient's value stance is challenged by the message. High and low outcome-relevant messages, then, should be tested for possible contingent relationships with message quality evaluation.

There may be alternative explanations for our findings. Possibly, our sources were ambiguous. Austin and Dong showed that ambiguous sources led to a significant effect on judgments. With little to guide the determination of whether or not the sources in our study are indeed experts, readers may use easy, quickly obtained and evaluated cues like interestingness, or how well written the passage seems. However, as described, the credibility information was at least as detailed as that which appears in most news stories.

The homogeneity of the populations studied limits the generalizability of findings. Students may not be completely able to determine source credibility from prior knowledge. They may not grasp professional credentials that a typical reader, who may read much more and much closer, would process. However, results from other research by the authors indicate that college students are closely comparable to the general public in their ability – or lack of ability – to assess source expertise and bias.

The problems inherent in secondary data analysis limit the findings here. Although these data utilize single item indicators for measurement of source credibility assessment and discrepancy of information, four sets of message/credibility combinations support our conclusions. Further, measurement over time for source credibility and beliefs aids in the measurement here. Clearly, variables derived from multiple items created into indices or scales with proven internal consistency would provide more solid support for the source credibility and discrepancy influences.

Manipulating rather than measuring message credibility would result in a more convincing argument for time-order. However, support for the
time-ordering of the causal paths came from prior research demonstrating message evaluations predicted source evaluations.\textsuperscript{43}

As far as implications for media organizations and professional communicators, this study suggests that source credentials may not matter to readers so much as the superficial plausibility and quality of what is said – at least when the topic is not a highly involving one.\textsuperscript{44} Under such circumstances, credentials regarding expertise and bias simply do not seem to have a very large effect on beliefs, compared to the quality of the message. This may be good news for public relations practitioners who use sources that may at times be problematic. It is more disturbing for journalists, as glib problematic sources may be seen as more credible than they deserve to be.

\begin{notes}


4. This has not been found to be the case when a message disconfirms the expectancy of bias, however (Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken, "Causal Inferences").


6. Erica Weintraub Austin and Qingwen Dong, "Source v. Content Effects on Judgments of News Believability," \textit{Journalism Quarterly} 71 (winter 1994): 973-83; Michael D. Slater and Donna Rouner, "Source Expertise and Bias: An Experiment" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the

\end{notes}
Moreover, it may be that researchers—and perhaps some communicators—overestimate the extent to which most audience members make inferences from credentials and affiliations. While the difference, for example, between the expertise of a Ph.D. in engineering and a grocery clerk concerning electric automobiles may be obvious to virtually anyone, there may be considerable differences in how much that difference is weighted. Making confident inferences about credibility based on credentials and affiliations requires some expertise in assessing professional backgrounds or the probable vested interests of an organization.

A substantial body of research demonstrates the importance of message discrepancy, or the extent to which message content diverges from the message receiver’s position on the issues presented in the message. The effects of source credibility on receivers’ attitudes are greater for more discrepant than for less discrepant messages (Elliot Aronson, Judith A. Turner, and J. Merrill Carlsmith, “Communicator Credibility and Communication Discrepancy as Determinants of Opinion Change,” Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 67 (1963): 31-36; Ramon J. Rhine and Laurence J. Severance, “Ego-involvement, Discrepancy, Source Credibility, and Attitude Change,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 16 (1970) 175-90. In addition, receivers have been found to respond to a message that is disconfirming, that is, the message provides information that was unexpected, given the message source. Discrepancy has been shown to influence the initial position positively, while disconfirmation does not affect the position (Stan A. Kaplowitz and Edward L. Fink, with James Mulcrone, David Atkin, and Saleh Dabil, “Disentangling the Effects of Discrepant and Disconfirming Information,” Social Psychology Quarterly 54 [1991]: 191-207).


See, for example, Rhine and Severance, “Ego-involvement”; Slater and Rouner, “Source Expertise and Bias.”


Austin and Dong, “Source v. Content Effects.”


20. A confound that lurks in much of persuasion research should be noted here. Much persuasion research uses very brief, minimal messages that provide maximum experimental control – at the expense of realistically representing messages as they are typically encountered. Longer, more extensively developed messages provide more opportunity to assess message quality; the importance of subjective evaluation of message quality should be a function of the length or development of the message.


22. Hamilton and Stewart, "Extending an Information Processing Model."


24. The elaboration likelihood model would also suggest that impact of peripheral cues such as message evaluation should be stronger when the personal relevance of the message is relatively low, which reduces the motivation to scrutinize message content carefully (Petty and Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model"). In this study we are primarily concerned, then, with messages that do not refer to topics that have immediate personal consequences, in which message evaluation is likely to be a more important heuristic in assessing the message. The majority of messages encountered in the news media, after all, are not on topics with direct and immediate potential impact on the message recipient.

25. Experimental manipulation for these messages led to stimuli that were not necessarily highly involving, particularly the social group messages about distal groups of women. Thus, involvement was not included as a variable in this study.


28. Slater and Rouner, "Source Expertise and Bias." The following source manipulations were used for the social group messages.

Southern Women, High Expertise, Low Bias: The following excerpt is from a chapter entitled "Southern Women Today" that appeared last year in *The South Approaches the 21st Century*, a collection of essays by distinguished scholars and journalists published by Harper and Row. The author of the excerpt, Dr. Kelly Taylor, is a professor of sociology at the University of Georgia, and is a widely-published authority on Southern lifestyles.

Southern Women, Low Expertise, High Bias: The following excerpt is from an article entitled "Southern Women Today" that appeared last year in *Travel Southward*, the quarterly newsletter of the Atlanta Visitors Bureau. The author of the excerpt, Kelly Taylor, is a homemaker who has become active the past few years, encouraging local organizations to develop a new image for The South.

Southern Women, High Bias, High Expertise: The following excerpt is from a chapter entitled "Southern Women Today" that appeared last year in *The South Approaches the 21st Century*, a book in a series of volumes by distinguished scholars published by Harper and Row. The author of the book, Dr. Kelly Taylor, is a professor of sociology at the University of Georgia, as well as president of the Atlanta Chapter of NOW, the National Organization for Women. Taylor is a widely-published authority on Southern lifestyles.

Southern Women, Low Bias, Low Expertise: The following excerpt is from an article entitled "Southern Women Today" that appeared last year in *High Country*, the quarterly newsletter of the Boise Homeowners Association. The author of the excerpt, Kelly Taylor, is a homemaker who spent last summer travelling in the South.

Saudi Arabian Women, High Expertise, Low Bias: The following is an excerpt from an article entitled "The Women of Saudi Arabia" that appeared last year in *The New York Times* Sunday Magazine. The author of the excerpt, Lee Croft, is a well-known American journalist who has worked for the past twelve years as the Middle East correspondent for a major U.S. news organization.

Saudi Arabian Women, Low Expertise, Low Bias: The following excerpt is from an article entitled "The Women of Saudi Arabia" that appeared last year in *The Desert Wind*, the Santa Fe Homeowners Association quarterly newsletter. The author of the excerpt, Lee Croft, spent last summer travelling in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabian Women, High Bias, High Expertise: The following is an excerpt from an article entitled "The Women of Saudi Arabia" that appeared last year in *The New Saudi Arabia*, a report by the Saudi Friendship Organization, used internationally to promote tourism and economic development in Saudi Arabia. The author of the excerpt, Lee Croft, is a well-known Middle-Eastern scholar and professor of Sociology who has written extensively on the people of the Middle East.
Saudi Arabian Women, Low Expertise, High Bias: The following excerpt is from an article entitled “The Women of Saudi Arabia” that appeared last year in *Travel Hints*, a tourism newsletter published by the Saudi Arabian Women's Organization of New Jersey. The author of the excerpt, Lee Croft, is an aspiring freelance writer who travelled to the Middle East last summer.

The following source manipulations were used for the issue messages.

Electric Cars, High Expertise, Low Bias: The following excerpt is from an article written by Chris Kelley, a senior environmental research scientist for the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Dr. Kelley has a Ph.D. in environmental sciences from the University of California; the article appeared in *Facts about Electric Cars*, a publication distributed to reporters and to the general public by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Electric Cars, Low Expertise, High Bias: The following is an excerpt from an article written by Lou R. Williams. Williams owns and operates a successful gasoline filling station in Santa Monica, California, just north of Los Angeles. The article appeared in *GasNotes*, the newsletter of the California Association of Gasoline and Service Station Operators.

Electric Cars, High Bias, High Expertise: The following excerpt is from an article written by Chris Kelley, a senior environmental research scientist for Exxon, America's largest refiner of gasoline and diesel fuels. Dr. Kelley has a Ph.D. in environmental sciences from the University of California; the article appeared in *Facts about Electric Cars*, a publication distributed to reporters and to the general public by the American Petroleum Institute, the voice of the American oil production and refining industry.

Electric Cars, Low Bias, Low Expertise: The following is an excerpt from an article written by Lou R. Williams. Williams manages a successful auto parts store in Santa Monica, California, just north of Los Angeles, which retails over $10,000 in automotive products each month. The article appeared in *BusinessNotes*, the newsletter of the California Association of Small Business Owners.

Disposable Diapers, High Expertise, Low Bias: The following excerpt is from an article written by Terry M. Brown, a senior environmental research scientist for the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Dr. Brown has a Ph.D. in environmental sciences from the University of California; the article appeared in *Facts about Diapers*, a publication distributed to reporters and to the general public by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Disposable Diapers, Low Expertise, High Bias: The following is an excerpt from an article written by Lou R. Williams. Williams manages a successful supermarket in Santa Monica, California, just north of Los Angeles, which retails over $10,000 in disposable diapers each month. The article appeared in *MarketNotes*, the newsletter of the California Association of Supermarkets and Grocery Stores.

Disposable Diapers, High Bias, High Expertise: The following excerpt is from an article written by Terry M. Brown, a senior environmental research scientist for the Kimberly Clark Corporation, one of America's largest
producers of disposable diapers. Dr. Brown has a Ph.D. in environmental sciences from the University of California; the article appeared in Facts about Diapers, a publication distributed to reporters and to the general public by the American Paper Products Manufacturers Association, the voice of the paper products industry.

Disposable Diapers, Low Bias, Low Expertise: The following is an excerpt from an article written by Lou R. Williams. Williams owns and operates a successful office supplies store in Santa Monica, California, just north of Los Angeles. The article appeared in BusinessNotes, the newsletter of the California Association of Small Business Owners.

40. Slater and Rouner, “Value-Affirmative and Value-Protective Processing.”
41. Austin and Dong, “Source v. Content Effects.”
42. Donna Rouner, Michael D. Slater, and Judith M. Buddenbaum, “Inability to Recognize News Source Bias and Perceptions of Media Bias” (paper presented at the annual meeting of AEJMC, Washington, DC, 1995).
43. Hamilton and Stewart, “Extending an Information Processing Model.”
44. Petty and Cacioppo, “The Elaboration Likelihood Model.”