

JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL LEADERS' CREDIBILITY

A Comparison between Swiss and U.S. Political Journalists

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on "*Journalists' Perception of Political Leaders' Credibility. A Comparison between Swiss and U.S. Political Journalists*". The interest of this investigation lies in answering the question of how credibility is determined, especially by members of the media in evaluating political figures and what effect it has on their reporting. Credibility is therefore seen as an important factor because research has shown that politicians are concerned to increase their credibility in the public's eyes through the media channel to deliver their political programs and to remain in office as credibility is positively correlated with persuasion. Research lacks a reliable, theoretically derived measuring instrument for the analysis of credibility evaluation of journalists. That is the first goal to achieve within this dissertation.

It is assumable that the U.S. media centered political communication system may influence the evaluation insofar that U.S. political journalist are more critical about their leaders, but also focus more on their physical appearance, private lives and personal history. Swiss political journalists on the other hand, are assumed to be party-centered and their reporting due to their country is assumed to be more neutral and journalists taking on a passive role. Only a comparison can improve the knowledge of a journalism system because it highlights how much our findings have been influenced by characteristics of the respective media and political system. It may also offer an explanation why politicians are one of the least trusted professionals in the world and a comparison between Swiss and U.S. political journalists is therefore seen as the second goal of this dissertation.

Moreover, to locate credibility and its counterpart (lack of credibility) as one of the greatest influence of source usage and to answer the question of what other influences are related to the concept is the third goal of this study. The gatekeeping theory as well as interpersonal communication theories will serve as basis for this research project.

In terms of measurement a quantitative survey of Swiss and U.S. political journalists will be conducted to analyze their perception of political leaders' credibility. Based on these results, a qualitative content analysis will compare the framing of the politician in the news to the journalists' perception.

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Introduction

*“Journalists list credibility as one of the greatest influences of source usage”
(Yoon, 2005, p. 144).*

The American public followed news about the 2008 presidential campaign more closely than any presidential election in the past 20 years (Pew Research Centre, 2008, p. 2). President Obama’s rhetoric was often praised as brilliant and persuasive. He received the highest means for perceived credibility and lowest for deceptiveness in a study which analyzed the leading candidates for the presidency 2008 (Teven, 2008). That is not surprising, as research shows that high credible sources are more persuasive than low credible communicators (Drinkmann & Groeben, 1989; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Moldowan, 1984).

Credibility history is a controversial research area. Most studies lack a precise theoretical concept or an exact definition. Furthermore, the distinction between the news media and persons as sources of credibility must be critically noted. One of the few definitions can be found in the work of Bentele (2008): “Credibility is an attribute that is accredited by a receptor to human beings, institutions or communicative products in terms of an event, circumstances etc.” (p. 168). According to him, credibility is not an inherent attribute of a text, but rather a relational concept (2008, p. 168). A number of scholars have conducted studies on audience perceptions of media credibility (Kohring & Matthes, 2005; Meyer, 1988; Roper, 1985). However, less attention has been paid to journalists’ perception of credibility of their sources. But Kohring & Matthes (2004) stated that exactly with this disregard of journalistic theory and by reducing journalism to an information facilitator obliged to objectivity, its specific selectivity is disregarded (p. 11). They prefer the theoretical notion that a comparison between journalistic information and objective reality is not possible (p. 12).

In order to present more reasons why the public trusts or does not trust the media, it is important to examine the selectivity process of journalism itself and how journalists combine objectivity and credibility. Schotz (2008) argues that source credibility is part of a journalists’ duty and that its evaluation has an enormous influence on how the public perceives the news organization: “If your sources are wrong, then you are wrong” (p. 30). Journalists must be trustworthy in their reporting and disseminating of news. This includes the finding and presenting of credible sources in order to persuade the public that they - as news organization - are credible as well. Weaver (2007) underlines this strong need for credible sources: “Journalism is an occupation whose survival, more so than other professions depends on its credibility”(p. 115). Many commentators argue that journalism began the 21st century with a credibility deficit. The credibility of reporter’s sources was often under attack. For example, Jayson Blair, a fast rising young reporter on the New York Times staff had committed plagiarism, fabrication, and misrepresentation in a number of stories he had written for the *New York Times*. He was specifically found to have copied major parts of his story from an article previously published in the San Antonio Express-News.

Interest of Investigation

The interest of this investigation lies in the credibility evaluation process of journalists. This is crucial in the information seeking process of news making as it leads that process and it mediates the knowledge acquisition (Bentele, 1988, p. 409). But more than one-third of local and national print journalists rated credibility as the leading problem facing the journalism profession (Pew Research Centre, 2004, p. 7). Further, most journalists say that the press has not been critical enough in the way that it has covered the Bush administration (Pew Research Centre, 2008, p. 18). Given the fact that people get information about politicians from the media, journalists are likely to frame the public's idea about that specific political person. Although, there is a huge amount of research on selection of news, less attention has been paid to interpersonal factors such as perceived credibility. Journalists tend to see some sources as more credible than others and tend to use that categorization in selecting news stories. How the reporters' perceptions influence their source usage in news stories can have a significant influence on how the public perceives the source and can control their political decision-making. Assuming that journalists' perceptions are related to the *quality aspect of news coverage* such as regularity and valence it is essential to investigate the criteria they apply in evaluating the credibility of a political leader.

This investigation aims to fill that gap by answering the following research question:

How do journalists assess the credibility of political leaders?

No study to date has tested credibility evaluation differences between countries. Therefore, the primary objective of this explorative survey is to draw a comparative picture of Swiss and U.S. political journalist and how they ascribe credibility. In terms of differences between the two media systems, it is obvious that the United States represents the prototype of a "pure" market-based model where public broadcasting is weak and privately owned media are entirely free of state regulation. Switzerland on the other hand, has a strong public broadcaster which captures more than 40% of the national audience. The difference of the two media system leads to anticipate significant cross-national differences in terms of correlates of credibility and their influence on the reporting. In the United States, the market model is driven by consumer demand and it is therefore assumable that political sources are more credible if they are assumed to be of "consumer demand interest" (Iyengar et al., 2009). Also, the polarized U.S. politics (e.g. two party dominated systems) is assumed to have an influence on credibility of reporters' sources as TV station which favors republicans will define politicians from these parties as more credible than politicians from the Democratic Party. It will be of interest, how reporters' perceived credibility of politicians appears in their reporting on that specific politician.

Therefore, this dissertation also aims to answer the following research question:

What differences exist between the U.S. political journalists' evaluation and the Swiss evaluation of political executive leaders?

Personalization of politics, away from an issue-based reporting, has made credibility of politicians a very important requirement for staying in office. Also the politicization of the private space has been found to be a factor of the so-called Americanization of politics. It is assumed that political culture around the world adopts specific characteristics from the American role model. The construct of the “Amerikanisierungsthese” was introduced by Klaus Kamps (2000) who refers to the assumption of U.S. cultural imperialism. The concept criticizes the way in which the U.S. culture controls and determines other political systems. So far, no empirical study proofed the Americanization potential of the Swiss political system. U.S. scholars point to the fact, that physical appearance influence source credibility (e.g. Allen & Post, 2004; L. L. McCroskey et al., 2006). It is assumable that the political-cultural context of the U.S. system weights physical attraction higher than other countries and that might explain why in the United States attraction has a greater influence on credibility perceptions (Althoff, 2008, p. 97).

Chapter Outline of the Dissertation

Theoretical Approach I deals with journalism studies. It is assumable that newsroom routines as well as gatekeeping processes have a great influence on journalists’ selection of news sources as well as on source use in their reporting. Therefore, the first approach will deal with forces that shape the gatekeeping process by giving a theoretical background on the theory as a whole, but also by defining what factors may be important to explore journalists’ perception of political leaders as well as to analyze the influence of perceptions on journalists’ reporting. As this study deals with Swiss and U.S. political journalists, the first approach also includes a chapter on the social-cultural level of gatekeeping. *Theoretical Approach II* deals with the credibility construct. It outlines the three different credibility approaches that lead to different conceptualizations and includes related concepts that may have an influence on the credibility construct. This approach discusses human communication and mass communication theories. It attempts to connect the different areas because both will be useful for the empirical part of this dissertation. A last chapter gives an overview on the *research questions and rationales* for the survey study that have been developed up to now.

Theoretical Approach I: Journalism Studies

How does credibility of journalists’ sources affect their reporting? In order to define the population in question, a definition of the term *journalism* is essential. Scholl (1997) developed a very complex theoretical approach to identify the term journalism which consists of three steps: first, journalism is distinguished from other areas of public communication such as PR or fictional entertainment. Second, journalism is differentiated by the organizations providing content for print, broadcasting or online media. Finally, traditional roles that are related to the “core” of journalism have to be identified such as investigating, selecting, writing, and editing news (pp. 468-486). This definition will hereafter be the understanding of *journalism*.

Because gatekeeping theory has been useful to explain the process of journalistic selectivity, a closer look at this concept is important to better understand what forces are important in shaping the news and what factors may have an influence on the credibility evaluation of political journalists. For example, organizational rules may influence the reporters' interactions with political leaders as it gives deadlines and guidelines. Of particular interest of this study will be the question of **how** a political source will be represented in the news. It is important to note, that this study does not deal with the question whether a story is covered or not, but how a political source is represented and what perception forces mediate that process.

The Research Tradition

“The truth is that in our world the facts are infinitely many, and that no newspaper could print them all – even if they were fit to print – and nobody could read them” (Lippmann, October 1959, Birthday Address to the National Press Club).

Selection and interpretation are the elementary tools of journalism. Journalists always aim to be objective, but by selecting and rejecting stories under specific circumstances, this normative idea loses its practical relevance. It is the field of media sociology that is interested in those selective forces which set the media's agenda, compared to the agenda-setting tradition which aims to define how successful media are in setting the agenda of the public (Reese, 2001, p. 174). They try to explain how the pictures in our minds come about without direct experience (Donsbach, 2004, p. 131). News decisions are a highly complex phenomenon with many factors involved. To explain these influences on the media content several authors have developed models for the various factors involved in the process. A theory to integrate all this factors is probably a utopia due to the complexity of the process. Until today, there is no absolute guarantee of what news item is going to press as there are too many intervening variables. Nonetheless, some theories exist which may explain a specific amount of predictability. Even if scholars are always very concerned to find general rules for human reactions, it will remain a substantial question of society if human beings' behavior can be explained and explored or if their behavior is unique and therefore unexplainable (Donsbach, 2008, p. 271).

Kurt Lewin and Forces that Influence the Gatekeeping Process

The gatekeeper concept actually derived from the field of psychology, when Kurt Lewin studied the changing food habits of a population. He described how housewives played a particular role in determining food habits (Lewin, 1947, p. 143). He explained that food comes to the family table through certain “channels”. The most important channel is buying at the grocery store. The force toward buying is composed of a number of components such as the buyer's own taste, her or his knowledge of family likes and dislikes, or her ideas about which goods are ‘essential’ (Lewin, 1947, p. 144). Gatekeeping involves the process of *changing*. And as Shoemaker & Vos (2009) noted “chang-

ing them in ways to make them more appealing to the final consumer” (p. 13). The decisions of the gatekeepers depend partly on their ideology, their system of values and beliefs which determine how they perceived the particular situation (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Important in this theory of gatekeeping is the idea of forces which are responsible if one item passes through a gate. The important aspect of this study is how one item passes through a gate.

White (1950) adapted Lewin’s (1947) concept on the communication context. His Input-Output-Analysis observes the activities of one decision-making wire editor of a small Midwestern newspaper who decided upon his personnel prejudices. White’s purpose was to determine why one particular wire editor (who he called “Mr. Gates”) selected or rejected stories filed by the three press associations. For one week Mr. Gates saved every piece of wire copy he received. When his pages were made up, he went through the copies and specified the reason for why he had rejected it on the back side of every story. About one third of the time, Mr. Gates rejected stories based on his personal evaluation of the merits of the item’s content, especially whether he believed it to be true or not (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 15).

Although the theory is descriptive with a normative bent and offers almost no predictive power, it has remained a seminal piece of mass communication research. It initiated scholars to conduct similar researches. Pamela J. Shoemaker made a notable contribution to the field with her text published as part of a Sage Publication series on communication concepts. She established a new model that acknowledges individual gatekeepers, internal and external forces and feedback. It recognizes effects from the individual to the organizational to the institutional to the societal level (Roberts, 2005, p. 11). The main idea of this new gatekeeping approach is that it helps classifying influences operation both separately and in linkage with each other. The integrative model will be presented here, because it clearly stands in the tradition of the gatekeeper model. Other integrative models that were established in the 21st century will not be part of this proposal, because they do not refer to the same history than Shoemakers model does.¹

Gatekeeping – Levels of Analysis

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) apply five levels of analysis to the study of gatekeeping. Those are the individual communication workers, the routines of communication work, the organizational level (e.g. media ownerships), the social institutional level (e.g. influences from government), and the social system level (e.g. culture influences) (p. 31).

Research with a focus on *individual gatekeepers* looks at who gatekeepers are and how this affects their decisions. For example, ethnocentrism, a term that describes the tendency of the mass media to frame and shape news events according to how well they match the national practices and values,

¹ See for example: Weischenberg, S. (1992). *Journalistik. Mediensysteme, Medienethik, Medieninstitutionen* (1). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag. / Esser, F. (1998). Editorial structures and work principles in British and German newsroom. *European Journal of Communication*, 13(3), 375-405.

has been found to be important for U.S. journalists where they use their national values as the standard to evaluate all other countries (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 44). Further, individualism affects the gatekeeping process insofar as it can be an important value to perceive sources. In the United States, the media favorably present people who are self-actualized and self-sufficient and do not favorably present people who rely on others too much (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 45). Moreover, individual gatekeepers are socialized and acculturated in the way that they take on historically articulated role conceptions and come to embrace culturally articulated values.

The *routines level* structures the patterned practices that work to organize how we function within the social world and questions the norms and rules that are part of the media work (Reese, 2001, p. 181). Routines emerge from three distinct sources which are known as the journalists' orientation to the consuming audience, the external sources upon which journalists rely for news, and the organizational culture and context in which news is created (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 52).

The *organizational level* on the other hand considers the imperative which individuals are obliged to comply with. Editorial policy, for example, allows the organization to decide what stories are newsworthy and how they are reported (Reese, 2001, p. 181). The routines and the organizational level are clearly related to each other. The ownership of the organizational network can be seen as a strong force for the media content. This organizational power is not easily observed. Within the socialization process of a new journalist, it is a matter of the process that he adapts to specific editorial policies. Thus, his subsequent decisions are in compliance with the internalized organizational imperatives.

The *social institution level of analysis*, also called the *extra-media level*, by Reese (2001) includes the entire influencing factors outside the media institution. It is important to note that the power to shape the content is not the media's alone. Different institutions, for example the government, PR agencies, politicians or other interest groups, may have an impact on the content. Reese (2001) assumes that at this level, the media operate in structured relationships with other institutions that have the power to influence the media content. Sources are a highly important external influence for this research and the procedures that journalists use to identify and select sources are an important part of the gatekeeping process. The journalists' need for credible information results in a dependence on well elaborated sources, but identification with the source may be an important condition to explain how the source controls the content. At this point, it is obvious that all levels are related to each other. It is the journalist as an individual who is linked to external influences such as sources on the social institutional level.

The last level, *the social-cultural level* is particularly important for this research: Are journalists in other countries in other cultural contexts working under the same constraints? An amount of studies showed that journalists of various countries tend to endorse the concept of press freedom and they all see the news organization as having a watchdog role over governments. Galtung and Ruge (1965) argue that journalists' preferences vary with their cultural background. Peterson (1979) con-

cluded that foreign news selection was affected by different cultural backgrounds of journalists. She argues that these differences can be attributed to two factors. Homophily influences them in the sense that news from their own region is more newsworthy. Culture orientation predisposes journalists from Western countries to focus on events in which individual decisions are valued, whereas non-Western journalists prefer stories about collective decision-making. Also Weaver and Wilhoit (2007) adapted this gatekeeper model in their latest research on journalists in the United States, when they grouped the predictors of journalistic role conceptions into four categories, each representing a different level of analysis according to the framework of Shoemaker and Reese (p. 151).

The process of differentiating between the levels to outline factors that influence gatekeeping might be useful to see all influencing forces but might be one problem to conduct an empirical research because we cannot exclude concepts that are linked to each other and influence each other.

Culture makes a Difference

Because reporting is a cultural construction, this study aims to show how U.S. and Swiss journalists differ in reporting about leaders of their countries. Research shows that ethnocentrism is positively correlated with credibility and therefore it is assumable that their cultural heritage will influence their reporting and the standpoint they take within their reporting.

In making decisions in life, people often rely on the values that they are en-cultured in. These values provide us with normative and evaluative criteria (Shearman, 2008, p. 4). This also holds true for the gatekeeping process which is actually a decision-making process. The assumption manifests itself that cultural variability dimensions may also influence the process of credibility evaluation. For example, Swiss journalists share a tendency to believe in consensus and in neutral reporting and are operating in a comparably traditional, homogenous, public service TV-dominated, and party-centred media system (Marr et al., 2001). U.S. journalists, on the other hand, work in a highly fragmented, market-driven, and media centred political communication system. Also, influences stemming from the political systems are seen as most important in shaping a given country's journalistic culture. This is also supported by a historical study conducted by Hallin and Mancini (2004). They identified three models of media and politics where media systems in Western Europe and North America can be located. *The Mediterranean model* is characterized by an elite-oriented press with relatively small circulation and a corresponding centrality of broadcasting media. The news tend to have a strong political leaning and professionalization is rather weak. The press focuses on political life in which opinion-oriented journalism has a big influence. Countries which belong to this particularly model are Greece, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 89-143). The second model, *The Northern Europe or Democratic Corporatist Model* is where Switzerland is located along with Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. It is characterized by the early development of the newspaper industry and very high newspaper circulation, a history of strong party newspapers with the commercial press throughout the 20th century. Journalists increas-

ingly embrace neutral and information-oriented roles, whereas opinion-oriented journalism still persists in this system. Professionalism is marked by a high degree of formal organization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 143-198). The last model, *The North Atlantic or Liberal Model*, adopted by Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, and the United States, is known for the early emergence of a mass-circulation press, newspaper do not show a strong political leaning, information-oriented journalism predominates and journalistic autonomy is likely to be limited by commercial pressures (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 198-251).²

The well-established models offer a good basis for this research because general conditions of the Swiss and U.S. media systems are known and theoretically explained. They particularly differ in the professional journalist roles (opinion-oriented vs. information-oriented) and in the status of the press as in Switzerland the newspaper circulation is very high. Another difference is the commercial pressure in the United States compared to the long tradition of the partisan press in Switzerland.

Problems of an International Comparison

Journalism is bound to a specific society and culture. Its basic medium is the shared language (Esser, 2004, p. 154). The society and the media systems are important for an international comparison. Therefore, only a comparison can improve the knowledge of a journalism system because it highlights the factors of influence on the society by the journalism system.

The main problem of a comparison is comparability. Functional equivalence is required for a cross-cultural study (Esser, 2004, p. 156). Because social phenomena such as characters of journalists, media institutions, or media products are embedded in different national and cultural contexts, equivalence must be questioned and investigated on different levels. Cross-cultural journalism studies should ensure equivalence on five levels within their methodological design (Wirth & Kolb, 2004).

- Level of the instrument: The data collection process should be equivalent (face-to-face or online, etc.)
- Level of investigation constructs (operationalization equivalence)
- Level of the items (comparative formulation of the survey)
- Level of the population (comparative definition of the basic population)
- Level of the administration

Theoretically, one needs to identify the different levels of analysis. Hanitzsch (2005) proposed a sociological macro-meso-micro distinction (p. 6). The societal level is the most macro, consisting of the public sphere as the immediate environment of journalism. The structural level (meso) compro-

²It is noteworthy that no model has been developed for second and third world countries as they have also adapted democratic systems and reforms of press freedom within the last decade. Sub-Saharan Africa would offer a new condition for media research: The continent's most important medium is the radio mainly due to the high amount of illiterate citizen. Also, professionalization and autonomy is not as strictly established as in westernized countries.

mises the internal structures of journalism including editorial organizations, routines. The individual level (micro) is sensitive to journalists' background in shaping the contents and form of the news (p. 6). Other attempts to organize the levels of analysis have been presented. Weischenberg for instance, developed the "onion model". He argues that all the four skins of one onion shape the news. The media system, media institutions, media content, and the journalists (Weischenberg, 1995, p. 69). Within a newsroom, there are journalistic and non-journalistic roles. However, at this point, only those journalistic roles are taken into account which have at least some *direct editorial responsibility* for the information and the communication with the source. Technicians, administrators or moderators will not be investigated because the main focus of this study lies in the *professional political journalists'* evaluation of political leaders' credibility and their interpersonal communication behaviour.

Theoretical Approach II: Dimensions of Credibility Research

Few concepts have received more scholarly attention in the U.S. communication science than the issue of credibility. In contrast, this concept remains a neglected research area in Europe. This is particularly because credibility history is seen as a patchy universe. Significant criticism considers past conceptualizations and measurements of credibility. Metzger et al. (2003) stated that "disagreements about the relative importance of the dimensions of source credibility led to the construction of various scales to measure this concept, each reflecting the priority of dimensions identified by particular researchers" (p. 298). A lot of studies do not report details of an analysis such as how the decision for the number of factors or the type of rotation was made. "Source credibility possibly presents the best example of the abuse of factor analysis existent in the communication literature" (J. C. McCroskey & Young, 1979, p. 29). Such problems are explained by the lack of theoretical reflection. Thus, these deficiencies prevent replication or modification of the results (Kohring & Matthes, 2005; J. C. McCroskey & Young, 1979). Nevertheless, credibility is often described as a very strong predictor of news media effects (Kohring & Matthes, 2005, p. 2), as a critical factor in the selection of opinion leaders (Teven, 2008), as "the central variable in all communication" (J. C. McCroskey, 1971) and, according to Aristotle, as the speaker's most potent means of persuasion (Höffe, 2005). It is therefore essential for communication scholars to investigate the theoretical background of this strong persuasive concept.

Interpersonal, Organizational, and Mass Communication Credibility Approaches

To understand the patchy universe, it is important to outline the three different credibility approaches that lead to different conceptualizations: *message credibility*, *source credibility*, and *media credibility*. Historically, *source* and *message credibility* were examined primarily as independent variables in theories of persuasion. Message credibility was explored by focusing on characteristics of messages that could make them more credible. The research on the structure of messages has demonstrated consistent results: unorganized messages are perceived less credible than well-organized mes-

sages. Message organization has further been shown to affect perceptions of the source (Hamilton, 1998; J. C. McCroskey & Mehrley, 1969). Credibility judgements are influenced by message content factors such as information quality, language intensity, and message discrepancy. The tendency today is to turn to the information quality literature to develop scales assessing evaluations of a message's accuracy, comprehensiveness, currency, reliability, and validity (Metzger et al., 2003).

In media research, credibility was used to explain the public's use of various news media outlets. Mass communication scholars looked at *media credibility* in determining the relative believability of forms of communication (newspaper, radio, television). An advantage can be gained from different perspectives of credibility in interpersonal, organizational, or mass communication literature. The locus of this investigation lies in the interpersonal communication process between journalists and political leaders. Therefore, the source credibility concept is at the centre of this study. Knowledge of message and media credibility studies will equally be included into the empirical concept.

Interpersonal Communication and Source Credibility

The path-breaking study by Hovland and his associates (1951) was based on the former psychological studies of "prestige" (e.g. Arnett et al., 1931) in which it was concluded that "the extent of agreement is usually higher when the statements are attributed to "high prestige" sources" (Hovland & Weiss, 1951, p. 635). They adapted this basic idea and argued that the source (by source they meant single persons, groups, organisations or media) is a very important factor in terms of communication effectiveness besides the content and the medium of a message. "Opinions were changed immediately after the communication in the direction advocated by the communicator to a *significantly greater degree* when the material was presented by a trustworthy source than when presented by an untrustworthy source" (Hovland & Weiss, 1951, p. 650). The immediate reaction to the "fairness" of the presentation and the "justifiability" of the conclusion is significantly affected by the subject and his evaluation of the trustworthiness of the source. Through their experiment they designed a theoretical framework for source credibility. Three factors were important for the concept of source credibility: expertness, trustworthiness and intent toward the receiver.

Logically, their concept is too simplistic from today's point of view. Several variables of the message receiver were not taken into account. Cronkhite and Liska (1976) noted that the credibility of sources depends heavily upon the specific function they perform in specific topic situations for specific listeners (p. 105). Moreover, King captures a perspective that posits the varying relevance of source attributes as a function of the receiver's decision needs and message topic. Looking at source credibility one does not only have to emphasize on the perceived attributes, but also on the communication needs of the receiver or the potential function served by sources (King, 1976, p. 225). Since the 1970s, we can observe an increasing precision in measurement from the seminal Yale studies to the factor analytical approach. A movement followed from undimensional to multidimensional measures and from applying items of source credibility to applying specific items of media credibility (Kohring

& Matthes, 2007, p. 237). Research on credibility thus encompasses a rich empirical literature. Metzger (2003) states that “the intense focus on measurement has perhaps come at the cost of developing clear conceptual definitions of media credibility that could be used to form consistent operationalizations of the concept” (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 309). In order to conceptualize a theory, it is important to be aware of its roots. The credibility construct derived from an early age of rhetorical theories, when Aristotle taught people to evoke a persuasive effectiveness. The definite factors of credibility can only be considered as identified after they have been replicated and integrated into a theoretical framework. The problem of the explorative factor analysis was that non-credibility-based dimensions were interpreted as dimensions of the construct (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 235). Dimensions like attraction or objectivity have interdependency with credibility, but are not part of the concept itself. McCroskey & Teven (1999) replicated Aristotle’s conception of ethos and validated their measure scale for a instrument to investigate source credibility. They include exclusively person as sources. They identified three primary dimensions of source credibility: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. *Competence* consists of one possessing knowledge or expertise of a particular subject (Teven, 2008, p. 394). *Trustworthiness* or character refers to the degree to which an audience perceives the assertions made by a communicator to be valid. McCroskey & Teven (1999) criticized that the third dimension of the credibility construct – “intent toward a receiver” or “*goodwill*”- introduced by Aristotle’s “ethos-concept” and taken up by Hovland has been ignored by many researchers and some theorists (p. 90). They argue that goodwill (perceived caring) is indeed a meaningful predictor of believability and likeableness and should take its place in the conceptual and operational future of communication research dealing with ethos and source credibility (J. C. McCroskey & Teven, 1999, p. 101).

For political research the concept of “*source valence*” (e.g. Allen & Post, 2004, p. 174), composed of the communication variable of credibility, perceived homophily (similarity of receiver and his source), and interpersonal attraction has often been applied as a predictor of voting behaviour and perception of political figures. There has been a move toward conceptualizing candidate image as a multidimensional variable that is made up of voters’ independent and composite evaluation of candidates. Studies tested source valence as a multidimensional concept and proved that it is an essential concept to evaluate a communication source. For example, Allen & Post (2004) investigated source valence as a multidimensional concept composed of the communication variables of credibility, attraction, and homophily. These concepts served as operationalization of candidate image and predictor of voting behaviour. Competence and attitude homophily were found to positively affect voters’ selection (p. 174).

Interpersonal Attraction

Berscheid & Walster (1978) conceptualized interpersonal attractions as “an individual’s tendency or predisposition to evaluate another person or the symbol of the person in a positive or nega-

tive way” (p. 3). Attraction refers to characteristics of an information source that affects listeners’ likeability. It is composed of three dimensions such as social, task, and physical attraction. The more attracted people are to a person, the more influence that person exerts over them and their communication (Berscheid & Walster, 1969). Attraction has been predictive of source evaluation including voters’ choice of candidates (Allen & Post, 2004). Interpersonal attraction has further been shown to affect the amount as well as the quality of the communication that occurs between sender and receiver (J. C. McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Some researchers argue that actual similarity is critical for producing attraction, others claim that only perceived similarity is necessary to cause attraction (Byrne, 1992).

Homophily

The third dimension, *homophily*, has been defined as the amount of perceived closeness or similarity that a receiver perceives as existing between him and an information source. The dimensions of attitude and background homophily have been proven to be stable variables in subsequent research (J. C. McCroskey, Daly, J. A., Richmond, V. P., Cox, B. , 1975; J. C. McCroskey et al., 1975). Nevertheless, Linda L. McCroskey et al. (2006) developed second-generation measures that are more reliable. Allen & Post (2004) point out the fact, that although there is considerable support for the persuasive impact of perceived similarity, only a few studies have explored this phenomenon in a political campaign (p. 176). They conducted a study of voter preferences and employed source credibility, homophily, and attraction. Not all dimensions of source valence were highly correlated with the candidate preference. However, competence and attitude homophily were found to be significant predictors (p. 183). This finding should be included in future research what will be done in this study. Nonetheless, in another study, Anderson and Kibler (1978) examined credibility, homophily, and attraction and found out that social and physical attraction discriminated significantly between favoured and unfavoured candidates.

Ethos and Source Credibility

Since the tendency of human communication research has been to equate ethos with source credibility, a closer investigation of those related concepts is needed. In Aristotle’s art of persuasion, the term ethos (*character* in Greek) designates the image of self built by the orator in his speech in order to exert an influence on his audience. At the core of Aristotle’s rhetorical theory is his analysis of three modes of persuasion. These are commonly called *logos*, referring to discourse and reason, *pathos*, meaning the emotion aroused in the audience, and *ethos* (Yoos, 1979). Rhetorical theory applies the principle of ethos in two basically different forms. The first form is called *subjective ethos*, meaning that the speaker exhibits qualities of a personal nature, intrinsic goodness and honesty, an interest in the well-being of the audience which induce listeners to approve the arguments given in a speech. A second meaning is the *objective ethos*, the portrayal of the character traits of others by

means of description and the portrayal of the character (Sattler, 1947). He is explicit in giving the threefold bases of ethos. These are intellectual virtue, moral virtue, and goodwill (qualities which are in agreement with the customs and traditions of the class) (Sattler, 1947, p. 64). Even though goodwill is closely allied with moral virtues, a second aspect of goodwill has to do with characteristics which are basically non-moral qualities: a speaker who resembles the audience, one who is clean and neat in dress, one who praises good qualities, one able and inclined to benefit the audience in a pecuniary way, one who takes the audience seriously (Sattler, 1947, p. 59). These qualities nevertheless win approval from observers and are therefore important to be included into a concept of ethos. Aristotle asserts that the speaker who possesses the three personal qualities will be worthy of belief (Sattler, 1947, p. 58). In order to persuade an audience, intelligence, character, and goodwill are manifested by the choices the speaker makes. This voluntary choice is made with respect to matters involved in invention, arrangement, style, and delivery.

Looking at intelligence, character, and goodwill it is clear that the two concepts, source credibility and objective ethos, overlap. The two concepts differ in how they define ethos or source credibility and where they locate it, however. Hovland's revolution shifted the location of ethos from the source to the receiver. Ethos or source credibility was defined as the receivers' image of a source. Aristotle on the other hand, defined ethos as referring primarily to real or pretended qualities in the speaker, which must be seen from the speaker's view as well as from that of the audience (Sattler, 1947, p. 55). The persuasiveness of ethos depends on the audience perceptions but ethos itself belongs essentially to the speaker. Aristotle was rather concerned to instruct speakers how to persuade an audience. He was referring to the human virtues, the qualities of mind or soul that depend on volition, evoke moral esteem, and the excellence of a human being (Logue & Miller, 1995, p. 24). The *objective ethos* concept is concerned with the characteristics of a speaker and his voluntary choice in applying the three personal qualities. On the other hand, source credibility is investigating the audience response, its acceptance to such an invention or speech and can only be found in the eyes of the receptor. The inclusive table which follows may be considered as summary of the two concepts. It clearly shows the differences of the two approaches.

Table 1

Ethos and Source Credibility: Two depended Concepts

| | Ethos | Source Credibility | Interference and Difference |
|---|--|---|---|
| Origin | Aristotle | Hovland et al., McCroskey | |
| Definition <i>Ethos</i> / <i>Source Credibility</i> | <p>“Totality of characteristic traits” (Sattler, 1947, p. 55).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective ethos (character and personality of a speaker) • Objective ethos (portrayal of the character traits) • Contents of Intelligence / Character / Goodwill | <p>“Attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a <i>receiver</i>” (Allen & Post, 2004; McCroskey & Young, 1979).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contents of Competence / Trustworthiness / Goodwill | <p>Character traits (Aristotle) versus attitude toward a source (McCroskey)</p> <p>Both concept content of three dimensions</p> |
| Intelligence / Competence | <p><u>Nine virtues (Tugende):</u></p> <p>Two of them (wisdom and prudence) are intellectual virtues. The intellectual factor is associated with moral virtues as regulator of the reasoning which is designed to achieve the moral virtues with respect to a given case (Sattler, 1947).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prudence (Klugheit) • Wisdom (Weisheit) | <p><u>Competence</u></p> <p>“Perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions” (McCroskey & Young, 1979).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligent vs. unintelligent • Untrained vs. trained (in that specific message field) • Inexpert vs. expert • Informed vs. uninformed • Incompetent vs. competent • Bright vs. stupid | <p>Operationalization is similar but the intellectual virtues belong to the individual while “competence” here is operationalized as perceived ability.</p> |
| Character / Trustworthiness | <p><u>Moral Virtues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gentleness • Liberality • Justice • Courage • Temperance • Magnanimity • Magnificence | <p><u>Trustworthiness</u></p> <p>“Perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions” (McCroskey & Young, 1979).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honest vs. dishonest • Untrustworthy vs. trustworthy • Honourable vs. dishonourable • Moral vs. immoral | <p><u>Difference:</u></p> <p>Perception of a moral or unmoral, honest or dishonest source versus moral virtues of a character</p> |
| Goodwill | <p>“Wishing for a person those things which you consider to be good (Sattler, 1947, p. 59) .</p> | <p>“The degree to which an audience perceives the source caring for them and having their best interest at heart”</p> | <p><u>Different stand-points:</u></p> <p>Wishing for a person versus perceiving a source caring.</p> |
| Main Differences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intention • Quality of a speaker that can cause persuasion • (Ethos) belongs to the speaker | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception • Audience response to such a speech • Source Credibility can only be defined by a receptor | <p><u>Ethos:</u> creates a potential persuasive speech</p> <p><u>Source Credibility:</u> Decides whether the speech is perceived as effective and persuasive.</p> |

The examination shows that ethos should not be equalized with source credibility. Source credibility is rather the *perceived objective ethos* of a person in a specific situation. For this study, the focus lies in exactly this perceived objective ethos. Nevertheless, moral characteristics originally designated by the term ethos designated will be included. It would be interesting to investigate how the

two concepts interact. They are interdependent because ethos is important to create a *potential persuasive speech*. Whether the speech is perceived as persuasive and effective, however, will only be decided on the receptor side - *the source credibility end*. How can political leaders assess an objective ethos and what do they assume to be important for persuading a journalist? Qualities of character are crucially important to the way they position themselves relative to others for communication. The rhetorical status therefore helps to see the continuing relevance of *ethos*.

Variety of Credibility: Related Terms, their Definition and Classification

Different concepts are closely related to the credibility construct. Their classifications are important for a better understanding of the inherent dimensions of credibility. Bentele (2008, p. 52) asked to better differentiate the evaluated object on the judgment. For example, credibility can ascribe to the content of a message - on the what -, it can ascribe to the source (communicator) – on the who –, and it can ascribe to the mode of presentation (how the message was submitted, visual, auditiv, or audiovisual). Media categories can further be differenced into intramedia differences or intermedia differences: Bentele (2008) points out that credibility can be more different between media types (quality versus tabloid press - an intramedia credibility gap), than between different media categories like TV and press (p. 54). Media categories are critical to evaluate in terms of media credibility. The heterogeneity is strong within media types. For example a TV station broadcasts entertainment programs as well as hard news.

Related concepts like image, trust, objectivity, and quality differ in their definition whether investigating a person (communicator, source), a product or institution (TV-show, a particular newspaper, etc.), or a media category (like TV, radio, Internet or press). Because this dissertation focuses on the evaluation of political leaders, the definition of the related concepts will be in favour of that. Nevertheless, other perspectives will be taken into account as well.

Credibility and Image

The two concepts are discussed in thematically closeness. The missing accuracy of discrimination has often been criticized (Nawratil, 1997; Bentele, 2008, p. 38). Images can be defined as impression of an object, a person, or a situation which occurs through a situation. They are based on stereotyped compression, on generalization, on over-interpretation of experiences (Bentele, 2008, p. 38). Research in marketing communication focuses on the impact of advertising, logos, and labels. Image is a “quasi judgment”. It can be defined as “a holistic and vivid impression held by an individual or a particular group towards an organization and is a result of sense making by the group and communication by the organization of a fabricated and projected picture of itself” (Hatch, Schultz, 1997). An image can therefore develop without any personal experience with that particular organization. It can change faster than reputation. Reputation develops through experiences and goes deeper.

Surely this definition is not truly valid for this investigation. An image of a person, held by another person, differs in the amount of personal experience, the frequency of personal contact, and the abstraction level. Credibility must be defined as an aspect of an image because it highlights the fact that the image is – like credibility – a perception criterion. Credibility is a partial quality of an image. The image itself is an attribution; credibility is a special attribution that is defined by its positive quality of an image.

Credibility and Trust

The concept of trust has been explored with growing interest since the 1990s because it is considered an important basis for social order and a function for social cohesion (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Trust and credibility are often used as synonyms. Bentele points out that credibility is indeed an aspect of trust, but not the same construct. He classified typical actors in trust conception process. A trusted object can be a person, an institution, or a system. Through their experience they develop trust in that specific person, institutions, or system and expect trustworthy behaviour. Trust submitters can further be PR agencies or the media. Trust relates to interpersonal trust; trust in an institution, or in the system. It is voluntary and depends on confirmation. Trust produces a potentially action space, where people rely on uncertain assumptions and has a cognitive and an affective part. An emotional bond serves as a basis for trust. The cognitive aspect points to the rational decision to trust someone or something without empirical evidence. It is perhaps one of the most important mechanisms in helping people deal with the risk of an open future (Luhmann, 1973). Further, trust can be considered a crucial variable for media effects and it informs us how individuals perceive and evaluate news media for example. Kohring & Matthes (2007) defined trust in news media as hierarchical factor of second order. It serves to explain the factors of first order such as: “trust in the selectivity of topics, trust in the selectivity of facts, trust in the accuracy of depictions, trust in journalistic assessment” (p. 240). Trust is the most important dimension of a relationship between the public and political or economical people and institutions (Bentele, 2008, p. 40). This definition refers to the process character of trust in comparison to credibility. Trust is a motivational process phenomenon and has a stronger bond than credibility which usually occurs as a situational judgment. Trust can only be achieved through different steps and not within one situation like credibility.

Credibility and Objectivity

Objectivity is seen as an important journalistic quality criterion. Different definitions are used for objectivity. From a constructivist perspective, objectivity can be defined as fair if the news presented are true and accurate (Bentele, 2008, p. 44). Objective reporting simplifies reality, but does not fake it. Perceived absence of objectivity can influence credibility. Bentele argues that the perception of the compliance with journalistic objectivity standard influences the credibility evaluation. Karl Popper defined objectivity as “intersubjective verifiability”. Objectivity is important as regulative idea al-

though it can never really be verified and we can never be sure to reach it. Invariance verifies the assumption that a fact is objective. Intersubjective criteria such as intersubjective comprehensibility, independency from the system, verification, independency from the method and from convention – measure invariance and may serve as objectivity check and may lead to a perceived credible statement.

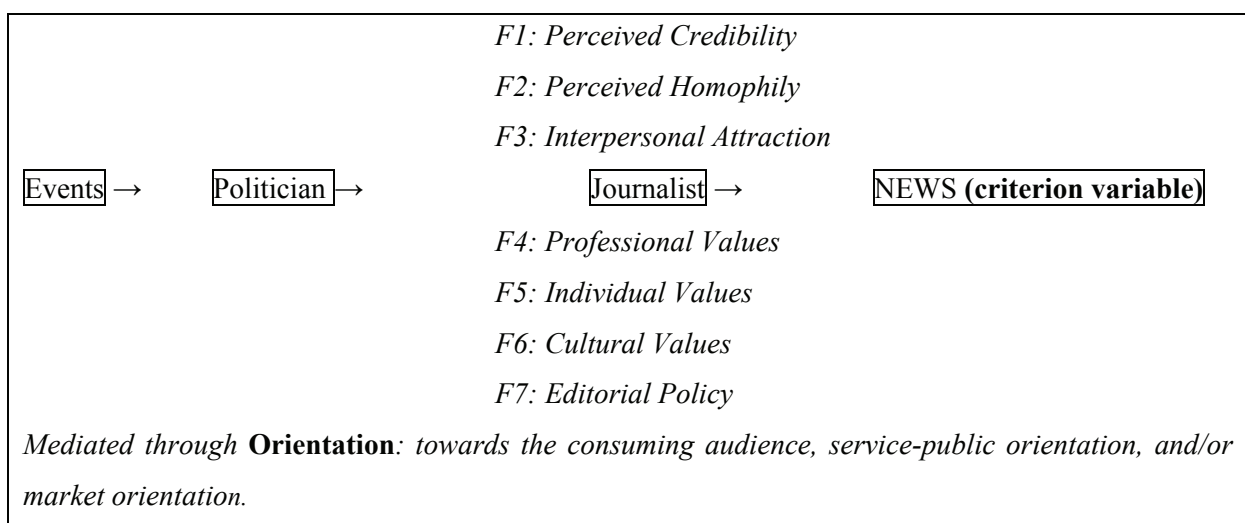
Credibility and Quality

Quality is a social construct. Credibility is understood as a super ordinate criterion of media quality, as outcome of a quality reporting (Neuberger, 2003). It is also assumable, however, that credible sources can be a precondition for a perceived quality reporting. Therefore, the two concepts influence each other in an assumable positive correlation. The perspective of judgment is important for an ideologically definition of quality. It is a very dynamic concept that changes from one society to another and within time. The errors in journalism are increasing and the debate on quality implementations as well. Analyzing the concept of credibility is therefore also important for journalistic quality. We must know more about their work routines to define specific quality criteria. One problem today is that professionals still believe that journalistic independence would be threatened with the implementation of quality criteria.

Summary of Research Interest

The main interest of this research lies in the question of how credibility of political leaders is evaluated by the gatekeepers (e.g. journalists) and what influence it has in combination with correlates of credibility on the news reporting. The following model represents this research idea. The seven factors F1-F7) are the predictor variables of source preference of journalist, believability of source, and influence on the media content.

Figure 1: Research Concept



Because credibility should be analyzed in consideration of its specific situation, intervene variables have to be taken into account such as communication channel, relationship with source and topic involvement of journalists.

Research Question and Rationale for Study

The aim of this study is to determine how Swiss and U.S. political journalists assess credibility. The overall research question is as follows:

Overall Research Question I

How do Swiss and U.S. political journalists assess credibility of political leaders?

According to Hickson et al. (1979) only a very short exposure to a source is sufficient to allow impression formation about a message source. Does this count for journalists as well? Brettschneider (2002) mentioned that past experience in terms of kept promises is very important to evaluate a political candidate (i.e. congruence).

RQ1: *Are journalists more likely to believe a political leader when they have past experience in terms of kept promises with that politician?*

RQ2: *How is a good professional relationship with the sources a predictor of source preference?*

To evaluate these questions, a meta-analysis of important credibility studies (source credibility, media credibility, and message credibility) is needed as a methodological instrument. Credibility is highly situational and depends on the reviewer's relationship to the medium, the source of the message, and the message itself (Cronkhite & Liska, 1976; Edelman & Tefft, 1974; Metzger et al., 2003). Certain journalist factors, such as demographics, issue involvement - which assumes that people have greater trust for consonant messages and greater suspicion of dissonant messages when issue involvement is high - have been found to influence perceptions of credibility.

The core concept for this research is the perceived source credibility which means a physical person, a political leader who wants the media to deliver his statement in order to get re-elected. The table below demonstrates source credibility factors which have been found to be relevant in former studies (Hickson et al., 1979; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; J. C. McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

Table 3
Factors of Source Credibility

| Factor | Measures |
|--|--|
| <i>Competence</i> (perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions) | <i>Intelligent vs. unintelligent</i> <i>Untrained in politics vs. trained in politics</i> <i>Inexpert in politics vs. political expert</i> <i>Informed vs. uninformed</i> <i>Incompetent vs. competent</i> <i>Stupid vs. bright</i> |
| <i>Trustworthiness</i> (perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions) | <i>Honest vs. dishonest</i> <i>Untrustworthy vs. trustworthy</i> <i>Honourable vs. dishonourable</i> <i>Moral vs. immoral</i> <i>Unethical vs. ethical</i> <i>Phony vs. genuine</i> |
| <i>Goodwill / Caring</i> (the degree to which an audience perceives the source caring for them and having their best interest at heart) | <i>Cares about others vs. does not care</i> <i>Has others interest at heart vs. does not have others interests at heart</i> <i>Self-centered vs. not self-centered</i> <i>Not concerned vs. concerned with others</i> <i>Insensitive vs. sensitive</i> <i>Not understanding vs. understanding</i> |

The three dimensions of source credibility were each measured with six bipolar adjective (see Table 3, measures). Approximately half of the eighteen scales on the instrument were reversed to reduce item-response bias. Respondents were asked to indicate their feeling about a politician. They could rank them between 1 and 7 whereas number 4 indicated that they were undecided. The alpha reliabilities of these measures usually range between .80 and 0.94 (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Teven (2008) has analyzed the perceived credibility of leading candidates for the presidency in 2008. Surprisingly, goodwill was the strongest predictor of candidate believability. Trustworthiness was less predictive and competence much less predictive which is a departure from an earlier study, where trustworthiness was found to be the strongest predictor of believability (p. 400). Goodwill is indeed a very important personal quality. A politician who relates well with voters is more likely to be perceived as credible source (Teven, 2008, p. 394). Existent research within a wide variety of contexts indicates that each dimension (competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill) contributes to important communication outcomes and effects (J. C. McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Teven, 2008). For the journalism context, the same question must be asked to determine the predictability. The pairs of adjectives used in the factor analytical approach are mostly not specific to journalist and political leaders and must be adapted to this specific situation. Teven (2008) also suggests that perceived homophily with individual candidates may impact judgements of credibility (p. 402).

The Credibility Construct

Research shows that the source is more important if the receiver shows low involvement. If he is an expert in the topic area, the content of the message is getting more important than the source (Nawratil, 2006). Today, the tendency to assess message credibility is to turn to the information quality literature to evaluate a message’s accuracy, comprehensiveness, currency, reliability, and validity.

Table 4
Message Credibility

| | | | |
|-----------------------|--|--|--|
| Receiver-based | <i>Orientation</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source vs. message orientation | (Stone & Hoyt, 1974)/ (Cronkhite & Liska, 1976) / (King, 1976) |
| | <i>Involvement</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High vs. low involvement | (Gunther, 1992) |
| Content | <i>Accuracy, Comprehensiveness, Currency, Reliability & Validity</i> | | |

RQ3: *What criteria of the content are essential for journalists? How do they define the information quality of their sources and how is it influencing their consideration for an argument in their text?*

RQ4: *How is message credibility correlated to source credibility?*

RQ5: *Channel-Credibility: What communication channels do reporters prefer and in what specific situation?*

RQ6: *How credible are blogs of political leaders compared to Press Releases?*

U.S. Political Journalist vs. Swiss Political Journalists

Overall Research Question II

What differences exist between the U.S. political journalists’ evaluation and the Swiss evaluation of political executive leaders?

RQ7: *Do U.S. journalists significantly define sources to be credible if they are attractive?*

RQ8: *To what extent does task attraction predict believability of a political leader?*

RQ9: *To what extent does perceived homophily predict journalists’ perception of source credibility of a political leader?*

Credibility and its Influence on Source Usage

Overall Research Question III

What influence do the selective criterion of credibility and its counterpart (lack of credibility) have on the media content and how are they linked to other correlates of credibility?

RQ10: *To what extent does reporters' perceived source credibility predict source preference?*

H1: *Congruence with journalists' value system has a significant impact on source preference.*

Methods & Procedures

Follow-up: A qualitative analysis of influences on the journalistic content will be conducted after the survey. Results from the survey will be included into the content analysis. A qualitative content analysis will analyze how the journalists frame the politician and how this correlates with their perception. It will be highly important that the survey as well as the content analysis will be analyzing the same time period because otherwise, their perception might have changed over time or has been influenced by other contextual factors.

Predictor Variables: Perceived credibility, perceived homophily, interpersonal attraction, professional values, individual values, cultural values, editorial policy / **Criterion Variable:** Source *preference* of journalist, believability of sources, influence on the media content

Pretest

Evaluate the concept and measure for political leaders in terms of the predictor and criterion variables and in terms of an international comparison.

Political figures

Executive political leaders will be selected as stimulus objective, because it is assumed that they have the biggest impact on the media. They should belong to different political parties and should differ in age, gender and education.

Journalists

According to the complex theoretical approach by Scholl (1997) journalists will be selected after his criteria to identify journalists. For the purpose of this study, political journalists will be chosen. The criteria for this selection are that they have to report full time from a government building or a similar place. Their political reporting must be perceived as their *main work*. Up to now, it seems most relevant to focus on TV journalist as their influence on political knowledge on citizens has been proven to be the highest. This idea needs to be discussed with other scholars.

Measurement

Conducting research for all articles published that have used scales relevant for this dissertation (including source credibility, message credibility, self-report measures of interpersonal attraction, homophily, believability). (Wilke, 2008)

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