

New media entrepreneurship: building credibility online

Janet Fulton, University of Newcastle (Australia), janet.fulton@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract

A research project that is examining how alternative media producers work and survive in the online space has found that a key element for success is building credibility, or trust, with an audience. In a similar way to traditional media, credibility with an audience is essential to online publishing ventures to making money and generate success. If an audience trusts the producer, they will return. The researcher has interviewed bloggers, online magazine producers, website developers and broadcasters to investigate four main questions: what skills are required to work in the online environment, what business models are used, what technologies are employed, and what is the degree of success.

This paper is reporting on how the respondents in the research project view credibility and how they build, or have built, that trust with the audience. Analysis of the data gathered via interviews and analysis of online sites has shown that there are three ways to build credibility with an audience: authenticity, engagement and interactivity with the audience, and transparency. The paper will discuss credibility and its relationship with these three themes, how these practitioners understand the need to balance the competing priorities of making money and producing credible content, and how they maintain this credibility by having an intimate understanding of their audience.

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For new media producers, credibility is as vital as it is for producers in the mainstream media: it is tied intimately to revenue making and success. As Mark Briggs notes: “Startup news sites have a difficult challenge establishing trust in a particular community, but trust is essential to growing audience and revenue” (2011: 988). Findings from an ethnographic research project that is examining how new media entrepreneurs work and survive in the online space have discovered that there are several ways an online publishing venture can build credibility: authenticity, engagement and interactivity with the audience, and transparency. This paper is reporting on those findings by discussing how the new media entrepreneurs interviewed for this research project have built credibility with their audience and how they balance their competing priorities such as, for example, sponsorship and advertising with producing a valuable and valued product. In a similar way to traditional communication modes such as newspapers and broadcast media, an intimate understanding of the audience by these producers, and establishing trust and credibility with this audience, is an important part in the success of these online ventures.

The research project is an ethnographic study that is examining new media entrepreneurs in Australia with four main research questions in mind:

- What skills are required to work in the online environment?
- What business models are used?

- What technologies are employed?
- What is the degree of success of these entrepreneurial ventures?

Thirty respondents have been interviewed up to this point including bloggers, online magazine producers, website developers and broadcasters. Analysis of the interviews has shown that an understanding of the audience, and an understanding of how important it is to build credibility with that audience, can lead to success in the online space, both with personal satisfaction and economic success.

This paper firstly examines credibility in the online space, drawing on the literature and examples from the public domain as well as data from the research participants, and then discusses how the participants build and maintain credibility with their audience via a discussion of their everyday practices within the three main themes: authenticity; interactivity and engagement; and, transparency.

Credibility

John Pavlik raises the concern of “credibility, reliability, accuracy and trustworthiness” (2013: 116) in online content producers, such as that of the participants researched in this project, because of a lack of training in editorial and ethical standards by digital producers. It is certainly easy to find examples of online publishing ventures and practitioners that have acted in what is considered unethical behaviour.

For example, in June 2014 blogger Jody Allen, owner of Stay At Home Mum blogsite, was accused of domain squatting, a practice where “Stay At Home Mum had registered a number of domains similar to successful independent blogs in order to redirect web search traffic to itself” (Timson 2014). Social media condemned Allen and bloggers affected by Allen’s domain squatting contacted companies that advertised on the Stay At Home Mum site:

Dear Suncorp, Do you realise you are supporting the unethical business practices of the Stay at Home Mum? You advertise on that home page but Stay at Home Mum has bought up all range of url variations of other successful businesses and now redirects those urls to its website. While not illegal, it is an underhanded way to obtain business and you Suncopr [sic] are supporting that by advertising on the Stay at Home Mum webpage page ... Suncorp I ask that you demonstrate good corporate citizenship and show Stay at Home Mum that you do not support unethical business behaviour by withdrawing your advertising from the Stay at Home Mum website immediately (blogger quoted in Timson 2014).

Marketing and entertainment online publication Mumbrella, writing on the same story, quoted a spokesperson for blogging advertising company Nuffnang who called for bloggers to develop a Code of Ethics for blogging (2014, n.p.). However, it would seem that, rather than a formal Code, Pavlik’s concern of “credibility, reliability, accuracy and trustworthiness” (2013: 116) is policed by the audience. Social media educator and consultant Laurel Papworth, speaking at the 2009 Media 140 conference in Sydney, made a comment about bloggers and what happens when they lose their credibility with their audience: “bloggers who get a story wrong are greeted with a howling barrage of criticism, with repeat offenders receiving the worst punishment of all, a deafening silence” (2009: n.p.).

On a similar note, Macnamara states that mechanisms for self-regulation are already happening in this space because of the nature of online publishing: “One of the inherent benefits of online publishing is that corrections can be made quickly” (2014: 272). Kelly Riorden’s (2014) research project into traditional and new media outlets and how they approach standards in the digital age found that if outlets handle corrections quickly and honestly, this practice builds trust and, therefore, credibility. Paula Matthewson, who blogs and works under the pseudonym Dragonista, agrees: “Learn how to fess up when you get things wrong, and address them quickly” (Paula Matthewson, i/v 17.9.14).

Furthermore, what Pavlik fails to recognise is that online publishing ventures do include practitioners who are trained in the editorial and ethical standards Pavlik is discussing – there are journalists that work in these online ventures that bring these journalistic standards with them as part of their habitus (Johnson 1993: 5), which Webb, Schirato and Danaher describe as, “the set of values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that stay with us across contexts ... it can be understood as a ‘feel for the game’” (2002: 38). A participant in this research, Mumbrella content director Tim Burrowes, said that he and other staff that work at Mumbrella draw on their journalistic background when they write for the site:

[M]ost of what we do, we would apply the rules of journalism as we see it to them ... certainly what tends to happen I think the culture here, where most of the journalists have come from a print background is you still feel that you’re, you’re applying the principles that you learnt in your print background. You know, and it happens to be in a new medium (Tim Burrowes, i/v 7.8.14).

Mumbrella also includes a statement on its website: “Mumbrella is bound by the standards of practice of the Australian Press Council” (<http://mumbrella.com.au/about>). It should also be pointed out that in traditional media, these standards are not always maintained, with the Finkelstein Report in 2012 recognising lower standards in journalism and a low level of credibility (2012: 123) with the latest Trust in Media report showing a low level of trust in certain parts of the media (Essential Research 2014).

Donsbach (2013) also notes the decline in trust and credibility in professional journalism around the world. On the other hand, there are bloggers who are considered by their audience to be trusted and professional. An example in this research is Greg Jericho, whose blog, *Grog’s Gamut*, is considered to be a credible political blog (Bruns 2012; Simons 2012). Jericho is an example of a blogger who built up a reputation over several years in line with Lasica’s comment that compares bloggers to news publications:

Over time, bloggers build up a publishing track record, much as any news publication does when it starts out. Reputation filters—where bloggers gain the respect and confidence of readers based on their reputation for accuracy and relevance—and circles of trust in the blogosphere help weed out the charlatans and the credibility-impaired. If the blogs are trustworthy and have something valuable to contribute, people will return (2003: 73).

Jim Macnamara talks about the loss of gatekeepers (2014: 206), or the bypassing of gatekeepers, as one of the major differences between online ventures and traditional media and this lack of oversight may lead to a lack of credibility in online producers because of the perceived higher chance of errors. This generalisation, though, fails to recognise that, in a similar way to journalism, online producers have a vast range of business models as well as a wide range of interests, writing styles, topics, and audiences.

Sites from this research, such as sports site The Roar and entertainment site Novastream use contributors with each article edited prior to publication. A lack of formal editors, though, has not affected the credibility of PollBludger's William Bowe, who is a highly respected electoral analyst or Greg Jericho, whose blogging about politics and the 2010 election provided an alternative view to that of the mainstream media, which was accused at the time of partisan reporting (Hobbs & McKnight 2014).

Laurel Papworth also discussed a lack of editors in the online space:

No, we have an army of them... nitpicking, pedantic readers who won't just read but insist on correcting. And I wouldn't have it any other way. FFS the long tail of content means that over time we gain respect. Social media is not a democracy but a meritocracy. Screw up too often and the readers stop correcting – they go elsewhere to a more switched on, valued source (2009: n.p.).

Papworth's "gatekeepers" are her readers and, as Macnamara notes: "It could be argued that there is not a loss of gatekeepers, but rather gatekeepers are external to the medium instead of internal" (2014: 272), in this instance, the audience. Sholto McPherson recognises the importance of building trust with an audience and how to recognise what the audience wants, giving the ability to monetise the audience, in a similar way to traditional media:

... once you have an audience that, you can convert that into customers. And the challenge publishers have is working out which products they can sell that don't damage their credibility, and I think that that's much easier in a niche site, like you can, because you can define your niche very clearly and say, 'This is where we're not going to be commercially involved' (Sholto McPherson, i/v 2.7.14).

Anne Summers is a digital magazine producer as well as a journalist, author, editor and publisher but she also uses events as a revenue making exercise, which she finds successful. She is able to do this because of the credibility she has generated with the audience over many years. As Briggs notes, new media entrepreneurs can "use their credibility to attract speakers who can draw a crowd, then sell sponsorships" (Briggs 2011: 3297). Summers did this when interviews in 2013 with former Prime Minister Julia Gillard at the Melbourne and Sydney Town Halls sold out quickly.

Credibility leads to an increase in social capital (Johnson 1993), which can be leveraged into other forms of capital, including symbolic (Paula Matthewson won Commentary blog of the year in 2013 for Ausvotes2013), economic (the ability to capitalise financially on reputation via an increase in advertising and sponsors) and political. For example, in 2012, highly influential female bloggers, including Mia Freedman, Wendy Harmer and participants in this research Nicole Avery and Kayte Murphy, were invited for drinks with then Prime Minister Julia Gillard, thus demonstrating that a high social capital can also lead to political capital.

The next sections will discuss the three key themes that emerged from the data that are crucial to online publishers if they want to build credibility with an audience: authenticity; interactivity and engagement; and, transparency.

Authenticity

As Macnamara notes, false content can quickly be reported in the Web 2.0 collaborative environment: “The practice of distributing promotional content in allegedly independent blogs is called ‘flogging’ on the internet and blogging networks are proving to be quite effective in detecting falsity and deploying codes and conventions of conduct that promote honesty and transparency” (2014: 271). Dan Gillmor calls this a “BS meter” (2010: 34) where human beings have “an understanding of when we’re seeing or hearing nonsense and when we’re hearing the truth, or something that we have reason to credit as credible” (ibid.). Blogger Kayte Murphy specifically highlights authenticity as a factor in her success and has enough capital in the field (30,000 blog readers per month, 14,000 Twitter followers, 11,000 Facebook followers) to be able to choose who she works with commercially, while keeping her integrity with the readers:

[I]t comes back down to that authenticity. I mean I have worked with a major supermarket chain who wanted to make too many tweaks to my post. They wanted me to put this in, take that out, put this in. And I said, ‘Look I can’t. Like it’s actually, no.’ You get a really good feeling and a good radar when you first initially start the discussion with brands. You sort of, you know if you’re not going to let me do it my way I’m not going to do it. Because I’ve got a responsibility to my readers too, that they’re coming to my site and that they’ve got to be rewarded with something good (Kayte Murphy, i/v 21.7.14).

Murphy stated that she carefully chooses sponsors, while keeping the demographic of her audience in mind. In other words, she has a high understanding of her audience, and recognises what her audience would find believable and genuine:

I mean you know working commercially, obviously I have to be very careful with who I work with. For example Mercedes Benz had a, had a campaign, and I couldn’t take part in that because my readers don’t drive Mercedes Benz. They drive Toyotas. And so, my latest client is now Toyota, which is a good fit for me because I drive a Toyota. I talk about my Toyota, and I know that it’s a good car and it’s a family car and that’s who’s reading my blog (Kayte Murphy, i/v 21.7.14).

Phillip McIntyre, discussing the perception of authenticity in popular music, provides the following understanding of the term: “when we describe something as authentic we usually mean that it is reliable and trustworthy or is genuine and of undisputed origin” (2012: 162), an understanding that is evident in Murphy’s comments. McIntyre further states that one way to establish authenticity is “through a commitment to a close and intimate relationship with an audience” (ibid: 170) and engagement and interactivity with the audience is another key theme recognised within the data.

Interactivity and engagement

Siapera (2012) lists interactivity, where an audience can participate in a site, as one of the characteristics of publishing in the online environment. Engagement with the audience builds trust and respondents noted how interacting with an audience increases the audience and can build trust. Paula Matthewson

succinctly summed up her strategy of audience interaction: “Inhabit the places where your readers are, and truly engage with them” (Paula Matthewson, i/v 19.9.14).

Greg Jericho also found that an ongoing interaction assisted his reputation in the online space. Jericho described his technique for engaging with the audience that was appropriate to establishing credibility in his particular area of engagement. He talked about how he built the audience for Grog's Gamut over a year and when he wrote a blog post that criticised the mainstream media coverage of the 2010 Australian election, his interaction with an audience over time had built his reputation so that he was considered a credible source of political information:

When I wrote the post slamming the coverage [of the 2010 Australian election], and that kind of went off a bit, then it [the blogsite] got up to around 2,000 hits a day for the rest of the election. And again, that was all due to Twitter ... people write Blog posts slamming the news media all the time, and even back then certainly that was happening. But because I'd been on Twitter for a year, and in that year I had been chatting regularly with journalists from the press gallery, they, even though I was a pseudonym they knew who I was, and that more importantly, they knew I wasn't a crank; they knew I wasn't someone who was just on Murdoch Press, it's all a conspiracy and everything, they knew that I wasn't just someone who was always critical, that I would actually praise if I thought there was something good. And also if they had issue with something that I wrote, that I would be someone who they could debate it with, and I wouldn't start swearing at them and telling them to get stuffed or things like that (Greg Jericho, i/v 18.7.14).

Jericho's reputation led to opportunities that would not have arisen without the initial engagement and ongoing interaction with his audience: he has worked as a researcher for ABC program The Hamster Wheel, writes for The Drum, has a column in The Guardian Australia edition, lectures at the University of Canberra, and writes a weekly piece for SBS. He is also a judge for the annual Best Australian Blogs competition. In other words, the increase in Jericho's social capital led to an increase in other forms of capital to the point where he is a trusted, credible member of the online space.

Transparency

Transparency is another theme that arose in the interviews when participants were asked about how they generated trust and credibility. One concern about bloggers and other online producers is that content can be monetised by doing such things as sponsored posts or having advertising on the site. Jenkins, et al. pose the question: “What types of tie-ins or relationships must be made public?” (2013: 1503) and go on to ask, “what of bloggers who are reviewing a product provided to them by a company or fans being rewarded for their commentaries or promotional work with access to creators?” (ibid.). This issue of transparency was raised several times during the interviews. Several of the respondents use strategies that clearly point out their policy when it comes to sponsored posts and advertising: the audience is aware of any advertising and conflicts of interest. These participants are mindful that in any of their dealings with their audience, it is imperative that there is a high level of trust and that the audience understands when a post, for example, is sponsored. Nicole Avery carefully chooses which companies she accepts sponsorship from by assessing how her audience will react.

Transparency is absolute key and one of the things that I think is really, really important that I need to remember all the time is that it's pretty much, you know it took me, it would have taken me sort of four to five years to build up this really, really quite loyal audience. There's really not a price that's worthwhile throwing it away for one sponsored post at all and because without the integrity of my voice and my opinion, people won't come back and you get called out very, very quickly online. Before I take on any sponsored work there's like I guess a three-way equation that has to work. It has to work for me personally in the blog, it has to work for my readers and it has to work for the brand (Nicole Avery, i/v 18.9.14).

Kayte Murphy also noted how being upfront with your reader builds online trust:

I've got a sponsored post going out tomorrow for Care Free light bladder leakage. You know and straight up, and it's a great post and I love writing sponsor content because it really pushes you to be creative, because it has to be so good that readers come away with a laugh or that, you know they, they, the first line is 'this is a sponsored post. So if you don't feel like reading...'
(Kayte Murphy, i/v 21.7.14).

Murphy also has a page on her site that clearly discusses her rules and expectations for marketing, sponsored posts and advertising as do other bloggers interviewed for the research. As Mark Briggs points out, "some news startups are making transparency a virtue. As important as having ethics is letting people know that you do" (2011: 1280). It is also important to keep in mind that audiences can understand the differences in different genres of information dissemination: "Readers go to blogs and other user-generated content usually fully aware of the non-professional status of the author. In addition to a genre distinction, branding further ensures that there is little likelihood of readers being misled" (Macnamara 2014: 273).

However, as Dan Gillmor notes,

Not all bloggers are adequately transparent. Some, to be sure, do reveal their biases, offering readers a way to consider the writers' world views when evaluating their credibility. But a distinctly disturbing trend in some blog circles is the undisclosed or poorly disclosed conflict of interest. Pay-per-post schemes are high on the list of activities that deserve readers' condemnation; they also deserve a smaller audience (2010: 71).

In an interesting summation of the news business and its relationship with public relations, Macnamara (2014) notes the influence of public relations on traditional media content and concludes that journalism needs to improve transparency by ensuring all published articles/stories include the source of the information, the author, the author's affiliation, and which journalistic standards were applied before publication. Several authors in Fowler Watt and Allen's (2013) book on challenges in journalism have written about how transparency can and should be incorporated into the work practices of journalism to increase trust and credibility, each of which can be seen in the participants in this research project: declaring personal views (Wallace 2013); linking to original sources (Moloney, Jackson & McQueen 2013; Thompson 2013); openness about how news is gathered (Gerodimos 2013; Lilleker & Temple 2013); engagement with audiences via social media (Rohumaa 2013); and, correcting errors openly (Rohumaa 2013). Macnamara also states that journalism/PR practices still continue to be "conducted largely 'under

the radar” (2012: 44). In other words, some forms of journalism in the traditional media, for example lifestyle journalism such as travel, fashion, beauty, entertainment, are less likely to disclose economic affiliations. Franklin notes that this form of journalism has been criticised because of its “alleged too proximate connections with the market and public relations” (2012) and Hanusch (2012) has argued that lifestyle journalism is often regarded as inferior to other forms, such as political journalism, because of its closeness to the economic field. Several of the respondents in this research project are producing work that is very similar to lifestyle journalism (for example, fashion and beauty, TV reviews, film and game reviews, restaurant and food) and, as noted throughout the paper, are aware of the importance of transparency to maintain the trust of the audience.

Conclusion

It has been noted that in credible news organisations there has traditionally been a wall between advertising and news (Briggs 2011; DeMasi 2013), although it can be argued that the wall in some forms of journalism is particularly fragile or non-existent. In online publishing ventures, such as the ones included in this research project, having that wall may not be a feasible option. Now, as Briggs notes, “the balance now rests on trust: News entrepreneurs must make the decisions to create and sustain trust with their audience” (2011: 964). In this research project, the participants discussed how they build and maintain this trust, or credibility, with their audience when priorities such as economic considerations compete with valued content that the audience wants. Recognising the importance of the audience, and understanding what that audience wants, leads to an increase in credibility, which can mean a successful online venture and they maintain this balance and create this credibility in primarily three ways: authenticity, interactivity and engagement, and transparency.

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