

## **Social Media's Credibility: A Step Towards Literacy?**

A Pew Research study taken in September 2011 says Americans have a very different view of the news sources they rely on--when asked to rate the accuracy of stories from the sources where they get most of their news, the percentage saying these outlets get the facts straight more than doubles; 62 percent say their main news sources get the facts straight, while just 30 percent say stories are often inaccurate (Pew, 2011). So, this research centers on learning about whether or not citizens and journalists think social media has anything to do with differing views of the news. More specifically, whether social media help or hurt news credibility and whether consumers think social media help spread the citizen's voice. My hypotheses are:

1. Using social media gives citizens the voice they want and, in turn, helps television grow by engaging its viewers at home, at work, and elsewhere.
2. Social media has helped news credibility.

The research kept in mind several factors –like the use of comments to engage with viewers and apps that people use to gather their news—but more specifically, looked into the “play theory” and “agenda setting.”

### **Play theory defined**

William Stephenson studied what he called “subjective play.” He observed: “People read newspapers, magazines, and paperbacks in vast numbers, and there are ever increasing audiences for movies, radio, records, and television. All of this, it seems obvious, is enjoyable” (Stephenson, 1987, p. 1). The “play theory” thus explains the interaction between journalists and citizens – specifically, the citizens’ need to be entertained, and the journalists’

need to entertain.

Stephenson stated there are two distinguishing principles of great importance in play theory: (1) social control and (2) convergent selectivity. Social control is the formation of a public opinion; for instance, the object in a democratic system of government is to reach a consensus after due debate of the pros and cons of a public issue (Stephenson, 1987, p. 2). Convergent selectivity, in contrast, lets each person choose something different for himself; primarily characterized by individuality, wishes, and wants (Stephenson, 1987, p. 2).

Stephenson also mentions Ruesch and Bateson, who were among the first to adopt the language of theory to communication problems (Stephenson, 1987, p. 5). The pair says a “social matrix” refers to a larger, scientific system--of which both the psychiatrist and the patient are integral parts (Ruesch and Bateson, 2008, p. 4). They say that larger system is of no immediate concern to the psychiatrist or the patient at the time of interaction. But they say the smaller system is part of the larger system-- and conclusions drawn in this smaller system may become inaccurate or invalid when seen in the framework of the wider overall system (Ruesch and Bateson, 2008, p.4). To put this into perspective, the larger system is larger media corporations, like NBC, and the smaller system is those corporations’ affiliates. But to move forward, Ruesch and Bateson also clarify the role of the “psychiatrists” and “social scientists.” They say:

As psychiatrists and social scientists we are, by definition, interested to inquire into the ways an observer perceives the world rather than how this world really is, because the only method we possess to infer the existence of the real world is to compare one observer’s views with the views of other observers (Ruesch and Bateson, 2008, p. 273).

News followers have the option to observe their news by reading, listening, or watching-- based on their interest. These news outlets all play roles in keeping audiences entertained. Ruesch and Bateson refer to a “communication matrix” with four different levels of systems: intrapersonal (p.199), interpersonal, group, and cultural. They break these into concepts: (1) the

“little black box” concept, (2) interpersonal networks (p. 90), (3) the group network (p. 38), and (4) the cultural network (p. 40). Here’s a grid to explain the differences between the four:

Concept	Explanation
<i>The “Little Black Box”</i>	The self-observer; the individual can observe what goes on in his own mind, but no one can step into the black box to see what’s in it.
<i>Interpersonal Networks</i>	Equivalent parts in closed circuits; X & Y enter a conversation, but have no <i>directional flow</i> . When X is talking, Y has to listen and understand, so there is “information loss” in such networks. X can never fully grasp what Y does, and vice versa.
<i>The Group Network</i>	Specialization of function, and unequal division of receiving and transmission. One television viewer may communicate to vast audiences, to millions of people simultaneously across the world.
<i>The Cultural Network</i>	Innumerable influences communicate to innumerable people. Each person living in a culture is conceived of as bombarded by countless messages, the sources of which he/she is unable to recognize.

Ruesch and Bateson also say human beings are pleasure seekers. They say they are self-corrective and avoid the unpleasantly painful situations (p. 234).

Moreover, Jay Blumler et al. say the study of mass media suffers from the absence of a relevant theory of social and psychological needs. “It is not so much a catalogue of needs that is missing as a clustering of groups of needs,” Blumer et al say. “It’s a sorting out of different levels of need, a specification of hypotheses linking particular needs with particular media gratifications” (513).

Blumler et al. also say people may lean toward broadcast news as opposed to other media because each medium offers a unique combination of three things: (1) characteristic contents, (2) typical attributes, and (3) typical exposure situations (Blumler, p. 514). Broadcast news is more desirable because it has several uses and gratifications, including the social and psychological origins of needs, those needs, expectations, which are generated from needs, the mass media, differential patterns of media exposure generated by the mass media, need gratifications, and other consequences (p. 510).

Blumler also says the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction, and that the needs served by mass communication constitute but a segment of the wider range of human needs--to the degree to which they can be adequately met through mass media consumption certainly varies (Blumler, p. 511). He says methodologically speaking; many of the goals of mass media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members themselves (Blumler, p. 511).

There are many news outlets to which people can go--print, digital, magazine and more. But Blumler said they go to radio and television broadcasts for one major thing: to be entertained. Broadcast television and radio networks know this--which is why they tease. Those teases can occur via Twitter, Facebook, and during newscasts. And there is also such thing as mobile news.

Sylvia Chan-Olmsted et al say the development of mobile news has significant implications for consumers' news consumption patterns, especially those who are still forming their adulthood news habit (Chan-Olmdsted et al, p. 126). This applies to the "play theory" because people **want** news all the time; as fast as possible. Journalists can fulfill viewer wants by engaging with their viewers on a daily, or hourly, basis and thus participate in the "play theory."

Viewers can also have a say in what goes or does not go into the newscast via these mobile news apps. Chan-Olmsted et al also says mobile news consumers are more likely to:

- follows news frequently (Chan-Olmsted et al, p. 127)
- use multiple news platforms/sources (Chan-Olmsted et al, p. 127)
- seek practical utilities from news information (Chan-Olmsted et al, p. 127)
- value portal news sites (Chan-Olmsted et al, p. 127)
- share content with others (Chan-Olmsted et al, p. 127)
- be receptive to advertising campaigns, especially those via social media (Chan-Olmsted et al, p. 127)

### Agenda setting defined

Along with viewers needing to be entertained, the newscast has this inherent need to set the agenda of the stories. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw refer to Lang and Lang's definition of agenda setting in their analysis of the topic. Lang and Lang define agenda setting as such: *the mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, having feelings about* (p. 468).

Moreover, McCombs and Shaw say the "mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (p. 177). Lei Guo says *television and retrieval* has many aspects-- there are two aspects to be considered: (1) consider later retrieval, or memory, for that memory content. If the content of a television message has been selected from sensory store, encoded into working memory, and thoroughly

stored, then it should be retrievable for use at a later date (Guo, p. 54), and (2) in the television-viewing situation, the viewer must keep up with the message. If you don't encode some aspect of a scene and the scene changes, that's it, you didn't encode it (Guo, p. 54).

To clarify this process of "encoding," Guo discusses television messages and storage--describing the viewer "storage" essentially as the content they read. That storage is affected by two things: individual differences and resource limitations (Guo, p. 53). This means however frequent the viewer responses, however frequent the calls will be.

### Play theory and agenda setting: then and now

The play theory has been around for a while, from the traditional days of newspapers and books to the modern days of television and social media. To put it into context, let's look at how some celebrities have evolved from both traditional methods and modern evolvements.

To start, there is such a phenomenon as the "Oprah Effect." Oprah Winfrey's fame outside her television show grew from her book club. She launched her campaign "get the country reading again" on September 17th, 1996--which has generated **38 consecutive** best-selling novels (Peck, p. 2). Oprah's rise to fame as a reading agenda setter can also be attributed to literacy's importance-- which Janice Peck divides into four matters of importance:

1. The reading is an inherently beneficial, liberating activity
2. It liberates by unleashing the free play of subjective imagination
3. The reading combined with "literature" takes on the liberatory qualities of both
4. By enriching the individual and nourishing her autonomy, reading has inevitable benefits for society.

Peck also illustrates two key literacies: (1) literacy as enabling and (2) literacy as dangerous. While both attribute great power to reading and the written word, there are distinct differences. In “literacy as enabling,” literacy, reading, and literature are assumed to naturally produce enlightenment; but in “literacy as dangerous,” these are potential outcomes that can be minimized and redirected (p. 5).

These two concepts structure this project--looking at how the content of news stories can either be enlightened through the literacy of web stories, or how they could potentially be minimized and redirected through web stories.

Moving forward, another example of this “play theory” developing with social media is Taylor Swift. One of the main reasons she rose to fame was because of her use of the early social network Myspace. She shot videos, edited, posted, and blogged on her Myspace account. She personalized herself and engaged with her fans. The same effect may work in newscasts-- as Susan Jacobson indicates in her article, “Does Audience Participation on Facebook Influence the News Agenda?” Jacobson analyzes the show, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, and considers agenda-setting as giving the public greater influence over which stories are covered in the news.

From Rachel Maddow’s Facebook page, Jacobson discovers there is a positive correlation between stories discussed on Facebook and the subsequent airing of similar stories on TV. She also says the evidence suggests social media may enable many factors that influence both.

Jacobsen references Bernard Cohen, who defines agenda-setting as: “the notion that the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 20).

## Facebook as agenda setting

Jacobsen also says Facebook and the news agenda play a key role in democratic societies--primarily with citizen participation and the potential for social change. She says, "The agenda building perspective serves to broaden the range of recognized influences on the public policy-making process." If Facebook does play a key role in democratic societies--what are its roles in other societies?

In Thamaraiselvan Natarajan's article, social media advertising has increased focus in newscasts--and Natarajan compares the US to Asia. Natarajan claims "Advertising through social media has overtaken the traditional channel of advertising in various dimensions," Natarajan said. "Social media as an integral part of Internet has elicited significant interest both among academicians and industrial professionals."

In a 2012 Nielsen report, Asian consumers are influenced by social media advertisements to a greater degree than their Asian counterparts (Natarajan, p. 697). And according to a recent report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India, India currently has **106 million** internet users out of which **62 million** users actively engage in social media websites (Natarajan, IMAI, 2013, p. 697). This not only illustrates human dependency on social media, but the need for engaging with viewers. This study is strictly geared toward strategic communication, but can easily be applied to broadcast networks.

Alfred Hermida et al. look at social networking as a "global phenomenon." According to a 2010 Pew result, almost half of adults say they use social networking sites in countries like the United States, Poland, the United Kingdom, and South Korea (Hermida, p. 815). That Pew research focuses on two Pew Internet Project surveys--between teens and adults. The surveys

reveal a ***decline*** in blogging among teens and young adults and a modest rise among adults 30 and older; it also says 28 percent of teens, ages 12-17, and young adults, 18-29, were bloggers (Lenhart, et al.). It also says during that same period, the percentage of online adults over thirty who were bloggers rose from 7 percent blogging in 2006 to 11 percent in 2009 (Lenhart, et al.).

## Methods

### *Focus Groups*

To find out if social media has helped or hurt news credibility and if it does or does not give citizens' voice, I turned to University of Maryland journalism students. I conducted two focus groups, one with two people, and the other with a group of four. The group of four had one student who was not a journalist.

Moreover, to start the focus groups, I came up with the following list of questions:

1. Where do you get your news?
2. What kinds of apps do you have?
3. What are your thoughts on Twitter?
4. What about Facebook?
5. So do you essentially like the fact that Twitter allows you to follow all these different news organizations and journalists individually?
6. Should we keep these comments open on stories that we post and that people are posting? People consistently complain on those sites and have some kind of potentially offensive comments that they make. Do you think we should do away with them?
7. Do you think that in a sense the social media platforms should start letting us pick and choose which parts we want to enable and which ones we want to disable (in regard to comments on stories)?
8. Do you think that it's essential to allow people to give their voice and express their opinions? Do you think that's essential for journalism?
9. Do you think it's good for journalists to use their Facebook pages? Let's put aside the fact that you're budding journalists. Just as citizens and viewers and readers just trying to engage with your favorite journalists. Do you think that's really exciting that you can now engage with them?
10. Do you think that using social media is essential – for both national and local stations – to get the agenda out?

11. Flipboard? Have you heard of it?
12. Do you think it's a good thing or a bad thing to have this app that can let people be more selective with their news?

I modeled these questions from a variety of scholars and studies. I focused mostly on Gabi Schaap's 2009 study, "Measuring the Complexity of Viewers' Television News Interpretation: Integration." Schaap states that in order to study how television news affects its viewers, it is relevant to study how viewers interpret the news (p. 61). And there are thus two dimensions of credibility: viewer interpretation and journalist intent. Schaap deems these as "interpretive complexity." Schaap says:

The viewer brings to the meeting his or her individual and social characteristics: a personal life history, experiences, interests, goals, attitudes, and membership of various social groups, all stored in knowledge. The news also brings to the meeting its characteristics; not only the topics on which it reports--its 'content'--but also formal features such as sounds and images, the structure of an item, or its length (Schaap, p. 63).

From that segment, I posed the following question to both my focus groups and my phone interviews: "do you think we [journalists] should enable or disable comments?" I asked that question because, to me, enabling/disabling comments is something that demonstrates journalist intent, but that viewers interpret differently, as Schaap explained.

My first phone interviewee (who was supposed to be part of my focus group, but could not make it), 23-year-old Sung-Min Kim –originally from Korea—said there are a lot of petty things that people take out of context when they comment on a social media page. "In terms of news, Facebook people post too many radical opinions," Kim said. "For example, with gay marriage, those comments are homophobic – I'm not homosexual but I feel offended by what I read. On Twitter, I can easily ignore them. But it's a different game on Facebook because of the access to comments." Kim also added enabling or disabling comments depends on the degree of

the offensiveness, but he said that offensive comments hurt news credibility and damaged citizen voice.

Since Kim was my first interview, I decided to add the example of “homosexual” as a potentially offensive topic. In my first focus group, 23-year-old journalist Nicole (who did not disclose her last name) of Virginia said she thought those kinds of negative comments could hurt credibility. “In that sense maybe if you know you’re going to post a story about a controversial topic, maybe you shouldn’t have the comments,” Nicole said. “But for a regular story I think you should [disable comments]. Like I know for one of my stories I posted for my capstone course, people left comments and said ‘you know this is a great story. I’m so glad that you touched on this subject.’ And that kind of reassured me. I felt like I was doing a good job as a journalist.”

So from Nicole’s perspective as a journalist, she saw social media as something that could enhance voice, but also hurt credibility at the same time. And it was interesting to me that she thought it was okay to disable comments when they were offensive because she thought doing so could save the face of the news organization and protect others’ voices.

In my second focus group, 19 -year-old non-journalist, Charlie Bulman, of Maryland said he saw negative social media comments directed toward journalists, and thus saw it as a potential way to hurt credibility because it attacked the character of the journalists. “I think it’s really problematic with female writers,” Bulman said. “People write, especially with females; they’ll write if they don’t agree with someone. It’s some kind of issue about gender.” When I asked him for specific examples, he said: “I mean, I’ve read a couple of articles that addressed comments and also emails that female journalists get.”

In the same focus group and directly after Bulman's response, 21-year-old journalist Kelsey Nelson of Maryland said she agreed with Charlie, but thought a lot of journalists received a lot of comments from citizens, and that some could be dangerous to the story. "When you write a story, you get people to think a certain way, but at the same time I think they should monitor them because people write some really outrageous – and I mean outrageous – things that are offensive to people," Nelson said. "So you don't want them to feel like you're embracing that. But it could be dangerous."

The question of whether or not news is credible thus turned into a question of whether or not journalists should enable or disable comments. 22-year-old journalist, Emily (who did not disclose her last name) said as long as comments are not endangering the individual or group of individuals and are not threatening in any way, journalists should not delete them. "Commenting is a platform for informing people, whether or not you agree with them," Emily said. "And I'm friends with some speakers, [who said] a huge controversy came out about a woman who resigned on air – and people were saying some pretty horrible things not just about her journalism but about her appearance and the way they speak. But it's just a part of life."

A part of life that 19-year-old journalist, Josh Needelman, said is essential. He said before the Internet, there was no real platform for readers to get back to the journalists, except for letter to the editors. "So now you have this whole new platform for people to communicate," Needelman said. "I mean, what's the point of journalism? It's the point to stimulate conversation so if they can add to that conversation then that's what they should do." Needelman also said that revoking the comments could be advantageous and thus hurt both news credibility and citizen voice.

Moreover, I wanted to look deeper into the play theory with my focus groups, and see how enthusiastic or unenthusiastic people were about journalists engaging with them via social media. To reiterate the play theory, it is the theory that citizens like to be entertained by journalists or celebrities through different mediums. I thus asked the journalists to put aside the fact that they were journalists and instead just go into this question with a citizen perspective.

19-year-old Brittany Cheng of Maryland said she thinks it is an interesting change from what we had in the past, when we would just have fan mail. “They [journalists and celebrities] would probably never ever read it,” Cheng said. “But now they – people, especially celebrities, like to hear what their fans have to say when they see something that’s worth responding to.” Cheng also said this engagement helps journalists with their stories. “Kevin from the *Baltimore Sun* spoke to us one day and was basically talking about how there was like a train crash or some kind of accident and he had to report on it but he didn’t have any sources,” Cheng said. “So he took to Twitter and was like ‘was anybody on this site?’ and the response was overwhelming. People responded with photos and stuff from the accident. Twitter is useful for providing sources.””

23-year-old Nicole (who did not disclose her last name) said she agreed with Brittany, and thought social media is a way to respond to the community, especially if the journalists are not in local news. “In local news, they always say we work for the community,” Nicole said. “We want to know what’s going on, and I think it works. And also they’ve got – I mean, in my capstone course, we get a lot of story ideas from Twitter so I’m sure they get a lot of story ideas from their pages.”

To look deeper into my other theoretical framework, agenda setting, I asked my focus group this question: do you think we, as journalists, need to set political agendas for the week? I

also followed up this question by asking if they thought using social media is essential for both national and local stations to get the agenda out. I underscored the Sunday shows (*Face the Nation, Meet the Press, This Week*) because in my Washington program, we discussed the Sunday shows' impact on news organizations and how they structure the news for the week. This angle came from Lang and Lang, whom I mentioned earlier. They iterate that the mass media force attention to certain issues and thus build up public images of political figures.

23-year-old Nicole said it is a hard question because she said things change so often throughout the week. "To start an agenda on a Sunday," Nicole said, "how would you keep that agenda? I don't know." Brittany Cheng agreed and said she thinks it could be useful. "It has its place. But I think, like she [Nicole] said, it is constricting."

I then followed up and asked what kinds of things they would like to see tweeted out from news organizations who wish to put out an agenda for the week. I modeled this question after Lang and Lang again because they also said the mass media are constantly presenting objects, suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about" (p. 468).

Nicole said the Associated Press sets the agenda at the end of the day, not at the start of the week, which she thinks makes a difference. "They don't do it on Sundays, but every day. Some things you need to know for today," Nicole said. "And I like that. Sometimes I don't know all the things so it's good to know, oh I got this going on for today. So I can see it more so for daily agendas."

Brittany Cheng, on the other hand, said she is unsure if she has an opinion on the matter. "I personally like a separation – like an organization from its political agenda," Cheng said. "But that's just kind of the way things have been trending towards. I would say it's good to have the

daily kind of round up, but they can cause – it can be dangerous if there's too much attention on just these ideas.” Cheng also said journalists could miss out on a lot of other stories by having too much focus on one agenda. She cited the missing Malaysia flight as an example, saying that although she did understand the importance of that story, there are other stories that news organizations could cover. So she perceived ambiguity as something that could help credibility and a narrow focus as something that could hurt it.

Nicole then added that the Associated Press tries to do the biggest stories, but also brings undiscovered stories to the tables, which are the stories people need to know about. “I understand what you were saying, too,” Nicole said. “They might put too much focus. But they only do that in the story. And of course they don't just report on those 10 things throughout the day.”

Brittany and Nicole then agreed that people would ultimately lose interest and thus lose sight of the value of the story. Brittany then said political agenda caters to a different crowd. “For example, if there's this convergence theory about how people nowadays, they seek to find news sources that kind of confirm their pre-existing beliefs rather than seek out sources that don't,” Cheng said.

### *Interviews*

My in-person interviews ran much shorter than my focus groups because the questions were general. This was because I conducted these as man on the street interviews, and I was also looking to go into these interviews with a narrow focus—specifically, if different age demographics and non-journalists thought social media hurt credibility, and whether or not it helped organizations set the agenda. I also wanted to find out if older adults age 30 and up think social media gives voice. These are the questions I asked:

1. Where do you get your news?

2. Do you read that in print or online?
3. Do you use Facebook to get your news?
4. Do you think using social media hurts credibility?
5. Do you think that news organizations set the agenda?

These are standard questions, but I knew that if I could get a response off one question, I could add the questions from both the play theory models and agenda setting models after. I also went into these interviews thinking people aged 30 and up would not use social media as much as those age 18 to 25. So I hoped to either prove myself right or prove myself wrong.

With my first interviewee, 37-year-old Emily (who did not disclose her last name) of Washington, District of Columbia, I found my original hypothesis to be neither right nor wrong. She said she does not think social media hurts credibility, but added that she hates Facebook. “I prefer Twitter because it is easier,” Emily said. So at that point, I could not disclose whether social media, as a whole, was something those 30 and up avoided. And, at that point, I could not say it did not give voice to those aged 30 and up.

51-year-old Jane (who did not disclose her last name) said she did not think social media is a credible source to get the news. She said she gets her news from newspapers and websites because she likes to have more details in the story – thus changing my belief that those 30 and up did not to those age 50 and up did not use social media and thus found it insignificant to both their voice and news credibility.

49-year-old Grazilla of France said although she lives in France, she still gets her news from CNN’s website, but said she does not always believe what she reads. “I like reading the news, but I also think some of its news is biased,” Grazilla said. I then asked her if she thought CNN set an agenda because she thought it was biased. “Yes, I feel like I just read it, but it’s open for interpretation,” Grazilla said. “It always has a bias.” Since Grazilla’s response was directed toward CNN’s website only, I deemed her statement as invalid to conclude or not conclude that

those age 50 and up find social media as credible or not credible and whether it gives voice (I still used her statement in my results, however, because I found that she underlined a significant factor for news credibility, and that was news bias).

After weeding through these in-person interviews, I wondered: will age and title be enough to support my hypotheses? I also thought about how to define social media. So I decided to take to social media, and post on Facebook. After doing so, I received three responses: two from those aged 24, and one from a man age 41.

41-year-old Hugo Sanchez said he does not like to look at the news too often, but when he does, he watches television and uses social media. “If I watch any, CBS is the source of news (TV) and Facebook & Twitter; because of my career I usually stay in contact via Facebook and Twitter.” And my project did look deep into Facebook and Twitter, but, like I said earlier, I preferred to look at social media as a whole because I wanted to know if there was a difference between mediums.

One social media element I did not look into was popular apps. However, from my social media responses, I found they do have an impact on social media credibility and on citizen voice. 24-year-old Nick Perrella said he gets his news from Huffington Post, but also from an app called Flipboard. Flipboard is an app that allows its users to pick and choose which news they want to follow. It is essentially a magazine app that allows them to flip through their Facebook and Twitter feed, as well as news sites, like the Huffington Post and Washington Post. “It is easier for me to pick and choose what I want to read,” Perrella said. After he mentioned where he got his news from, I downloaded the app. I played around with it (prior to my focus groups) and decided to implement it in my list of questions for my focus groups. I wanted to know: do these apps help give citizens’ more voice and do they help credibility?

Charlie Bulman, the government and history student, said he uses them because a lot of politics aggregate toward them. “I happen to say I like them,” Bulman said. “And that’s, that’s nice because they pick the best stories.” So from this statement, Flipboard could, in fact, help citizen voice by allowing a more narrowed selection for the citizen.

Journalist Josh Needelman said he also likes the selectiveness of the app, Flipboard, but could see it hurting other news’ organizations. “It’s cool that you can pick and choose your outlets, but it could also—say this Flipboard thing becomes huge – will newer publications get noticed? How’s that going to allow for anything else to grow and expand?” Needelman said. So as it helps citizen voice, it also hurts journalist expansion.

For Emily, she does not think journalist expansion should be a concern from the app just yet. Flipboard is something she sees as good for busy people, which she said is the majority of America, but she thinks people who want to stay informed will continue to go to their resources. “People are bugged in and connected all the time,” Emily said. “So they’re going to see headlines from other sources.” So while I cannot disclose whether apps, like Flipboard, hurt credibility, I could say they help citizen voice by allowing them to select the news they want.

24-year-old Matt Soave of Washington wrote to me in an email, and said both he and his girlfriend use the website, Reddit, because the stories do not update too often. “But it usually has every ‘big’ story for the day,” Soave said. “However, it’s definitely got a bias, so I don’t rely on it alone or look into the stories too deeply. It’s mostly just to see if anything big has happened and maybe [I] look at some reactions (via the comments).” From his comment, I can underscore that although Reddit – like Flipboard – does allow citizens’ voice; it still has a limited amount of credibility. And when I looked into Reddit, it allows citizens to write their own stories, thus

making it a citizen journalism website. I therefore decided to not attribute my Reddit find into my results section, but still think it is significant enough for citizen voice.

## Results

While conducting this project, I had two hypotheses: (1) using social media gives citizens the voice they want and, in turn, helps television grow by engaging its viewers at home, at work, and elsewhere, and (2) social media has helped news credibility. I did not focus on one social media over the other (i.e. no Facebook versus Twitter comparison) because I wanted to see how journalists and non-journalists perceived social media as a whole. I also wanted to know which factors contributed to the notion of ‘credibility,’ and thus look into how we, as journalists, could use those factors to help our own credibility.

With that said, the two major factors that hurt news credibility – based on my project – were (1) offensive comments posted to both websites and Facebook, and (2) news organizations’ focusing too much on one agenda with their social media. When citizens posted offensive comments about either the journalist or topic, the news organizations’ credibility suffered and the voice, in turn, suffered. Journalists thus have to make the tough decision to either enable or disable comments – something that journalists said could help credibility, but hurt voice at the same time (by eliminating comments, we end up offending those who posted them and ultimately sending the message ‘your voice does not matter’). And when there was a sense of news bias, my interviewees and focus groups both said they shifted to other news outlets and other social media. So social media still is a credible source of news, but only when the citizens

and journalists perceive the organizations' posts as credible – either from the comments they read or from the topics the news organization chooses to cover.

I had two subjects – journalist Brittany Cheng and non-journalist Grazilla— who both pointed fingers at national news coverage. They both said when there is too much coverage on one topic, it makes them lose interest. For Brittany, that was the missing Malaysia plane coverage (even though she understood the importance of the coverage). They said they lose interest and thus do not see the news organization as something that gives constant updates. Grazilla told me: “I read it, but I don’t always believe what I read because there is bias.” So while they did think it was essential to put the agenda out via social media, they did not think it is essential to send out only one agenda, but multiple agendas.

Moreover, Flipboard is something that could enhance citizen voice and help credibility. My focus groups agreed that the app does make things more accessible for busy people and thus helps new organizations get their agenda out. But does it help credibility and does it give voice? The journalists I interviewed did not think it ultimately helped credibility, but it also did not hurt it. So it can be ruled out as null because the app allows citizens to pick and choose where they want to get their news from – so they could be picking and choosing the organizations they already deem as credible or not. But Flipboard is something that gives citizens’ voice because now, more than ever, they could select which news organizations they like based on their Facebook likes and Twitter feed.

Before I move to the discussion, I would like to revisit and summarize my two hypotheses and synthesize my interviews.

*Hypothesis one: social media gives citizens’ voice and, in turn, helps television grow by engaging its viewers at home, at work, and elsewhere*

To reiterate, this hypothesis focused on whether or not social media gives citizens the voice they want, and, from my interviews and focus groups, I found that answer is not so simple. In fact, my responses showed conflict – especially when it came to the idea of enabling or disabling comments to help credibility. While 23-year-old Sung-Min Kim said disabling comments is something that journalists should consider because there are too many radical opinions, 19-year-old journalist Brittany Cheng said she was anti-regulation when it comes to commenting because—she said—journalism is more interactive. She also underscored that the commenting section is an integral part of journalism and is thus a checkup on what we, as citizens, are reading.

21-year-old journalist Kelsey (who did not disclose her last name) said comments can be good because they allow citizens to voice their opinions, but she also said we need to monitor them because they can become extremely outrageous and – as a news organization – you do not want people to think you’re embracing those comments because it could hurt your credibility.

22-year-old journalist Emily (who did not disclose her last name) saw comments as a platform for informing people. She said she did not think disabling comments was absolutely necessary because they help citizen voice, but she said it was necessary to remove the comments if they endanger others. However, 19-year-old journalist, Josh Needelman, said revoking comments could be advantageous because the point of journalism is to stimulate conversation – so if we can, we should do it. 19-year-old non-journalist, Charlie Bulman, said it is hypocritical to take away commenting altogether on a post because news organizations need consistent policies. He said they can take away certain offensive comments, but taking away the ability to comment will ultimately take away citizen voice.

### *Hypothesis two: social media has helped news credibility*

Again, this hypothesis tested whether or not social media has actually helped news organizations maintain their credibility – by interacting with viewers and taking responsibility for their mistakes through that medium. From my interviews, those aged 18- 40 found social media to be both credible and non-credible, while those age 50 and up did not think it was credible.

19-year-old Brittany Cheng said journalists could miss out on a lot of other stories by having too much focus on one agenda, citing the missing Malaysia flight as an example -- saying that although she did understand the importance of that story, there are other stories that news organizations could cover.

23-year-old journalist Nicole (who did not disclose her last name) said journalists may put too much focus on one agenda and thus hurt their credibility. And both Nicole and Brittany agreed, during their focus group, that people would ultimately lose interest and thus lose sight of the value of the story if there is too much emphasis on one story.

37-year-old Emily (who did not disclose her last name) of Washington, District of Columbia, said she does not think social media hurts credibility, but, at the same time, said she hates Facebook.

51-year-old Jane (who did not disclose her last name), on the other hand, said she did not think social media is a credible source to get the news and gets her news from newspapers and websites. And 41-year-old Hugo Sanchez said he does not like to look at the news too often, but when he does, he watches television and uses social media because he thinks they are credible.

65-year-old Greg Gibson of Los Angeles said he did not look on Facebook, did not read or wrote Facebook comments on news posts, and saw television as something that was a more credible way of getting news – despite news bias and reporter mistakes.

## Discussion

The results of my interviews show a certain consensus when it comes to the factors that both help and hurt news organization's credibility: setting the agenda, playing with the viewers, bias, and social media. But what is interesting is that none of my interviewees perceived social media as being the sole factor that hurts news credibility. There were other factors – offensive comments and a narrowed focus—that my interviewees and focus groups centered their attention on. But they also said that social media is a gateway to giving citizens the voice they want, and also giving journalists more ideas and topics to discuss.

Furthermore, this study also indicates that if journalists pick and choose which stories should or should not have comments, they will cut off citizen voices through those actions.

As discussed in my original proposal, William Stephenson says there are two distinguishing principles of great importance (when it comes to the play theory): (1) social control and (2) convergent selectivity. To clarify again, social control is the formation of a public opinion; the object in a democratic system of government is to reach a consensus after due debate of the pros and cons of a public issue (Stephenson, 1987, p. 2.), and convergent selectivity let's each person choose something different for themselves; primarily characterized by individuality, wishes, and wants (Stephenson, 1987, p. 2). I am reiterating this because my focus groups and interviewees liked to partake in convergent selectivity – they liked to choose

something different for themselves and therefore liked having their individuality, wishes, and wants. Very few, if any, liked to be told what was happening.

A Pew Research study in 2011 also suggested that according to most Americans, mistakes are okay – as long as the news organization points it out (Pew, 2011). Another relative statistic is that the press's perceived lack of fairness, its unwillingness to admit mistakes, inaccurate reporting, and political bias matched highs reached in 2009 (Pew, 2011). Here's a look at those Pew Research statistics from 2011:

<b>Perceived Lack of Fairness</b>	77%
<b>Unwillingness to Admit Mistakes</b>	72%
<b>Inaccurate Reporting</b>	66%
<b>Political Bias</b>	63%

Like my project results, this Pew Research study indicates that perceived lack of fairness is at the highest percentage of viewer complaints, while political bias is at the lowest. So, should the press be more willing to integrate citizen voice in its stories? Should journalists admit their mistakes? Should they apologize for inaccurate reports? And should journalists have a political agenda?

According to this study, and to my focus groups, citizens hold journalists to a higher standard of excellence, and would like them to fess up to their mistakes and listen to them more than anything else. A possible solution could be to Tweet out the mistake, post on Facebook, put in an editor's note on a website, or simply air it on a newscast.

## Conclusion

This project and research was meant to look qualitatively at the ways in which journalists and non-journalists perceive social media use in the news. Based off my findings, one could assume that the option to enable comments on a news organization's Facebook page does give voice and does help television grow. But one can also assume, based off my interviews, that certain comments could also hurt news credibility if they are offensive.

So what could someone looking into social media and news credibility do in the future?

Here are some suggestions I have for them, based off of what I found in my study:

- Look into how news organizations' apologize for their mistakes via social media, and how often they do.
- Look into how networks and local television affiliates set the agenda via social media.
- Find a news organization that disables comments on its website or Facebook page, and see why they do, and what kind of feedback they get from doing so. Then compare them with another organization that does enable comments.
- Interview a reporter who tweets out or interacts actively on Facebook or Twitter. See what problems they run into, and then seek feedback from the people who comment on their posts.

These are just some of the future research options, but obviously those who read my study will be able to pull out more ideas. My study implicates those four bullet points, and thus could lead to further research.