

# Credibility in the Global War on Terrorism: Strategic Principles and Research Agenda

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# Source Credibility in the Global War on Terrorism: Strategic Principles and Research Agenda

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The perceived credibility of the United States government on the global stage has never been lower. This impedes its ability to fight, much less to win, the “war of ideas” that is so much a part of the global war on terrorism. Cultivating improved credibility is a long-term effort, but it stands to benefit from a large body of existing research. The concept of source credibility was developed by Aristotle in his classic text on effective communication, *The Rhetoric*. Formal efforts to manage U.S. credibility began in World War I. Modern social scientific research on the subject began during World War II and continues to the present day. More recent work has extended the concept to mass media and internet contexts.

This body of research indicates that there are three key dimensions of credibility: trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill. These three dimensions are not empirical realities but perceptions that can be created, managed, and cultivated. This requires a coordinated approach to message design, delivery, and—most importantly—adaptation to the given audience and current media situation.

Our analysis of the source credibility literature shows that we know the basic dimensions of credibility, how source characteristics impact persuasiveness, and how judgments of credibility can be affected by different media channels. However there is an urgent need to integrate findings of existing research and link those to a contingency model of source credibility. It is especially important that we validate and, if necessary, extend our understanding of credibility in strategic non-Western cultures, and better understand the functions of credibility in new media.

Notwithstanding the need for further research, known principles of credibility point to four recommendations for deployment of messages and communication policy while longer term efforts to improve credibility proceed: (1) Recognize, accept, and adjust for low credibility in the short term, (2) involve sympathetic Muslims, especially those in the United States, in an effort to find more persuasive sources and messages, (3) concentrate on degrading the credibility of opponents, (4) when directly claiming ownership of a message, use lower level officers or trusted third-parties to convey it.

## BACKGROUND

*Well today, in places like the Middle East, there's an information explosion, and no one's hungry for information. What we're competing for there is for attention and for credibility in a time when rumors can spark riots, and information, whether it's true or false, quickly spreads across the world, across the Internet, in literally instants.*

Karen Hughes (2006b), Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the US Department of State.

*I would suggest that there's too many unintended consequences of foreign interventionism, and worst of all, we lose credibility. What we're doing over there now tends to make us look badly with almost every Arab Muslim nation.*

Rep. Ted Pope, R-Texas (2006)

*The first task in countering this challenge is to deprive the Islamists of the ability to discredit the United States and the West. Moreover, this will not be easy. In the wake of the war in Iraq and the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the credibility and moral authority of the United States and its allies in the Muslim world is at an all-time low.*

Zeyno Baran (2006; Director, International Security and Energy Programs The Nixon Center)

Confidence in the United States government is declining both domestically and internationally (Kohut and Stokes, 2006; Taylor, 2004). In a series of nationwide polls taken over the last four years, confidence in the White House is down 40% from 2002 levels. Confidence in Congress is down 25% during the same time frame (Taylor, 2004). Similarly, national polling of influential opinion leaders has noted that the international image of the United States has been tarnished due to the recent involvement and portrayal of the Global War on Terror and policies in Iraq. Pew (2005) notes:

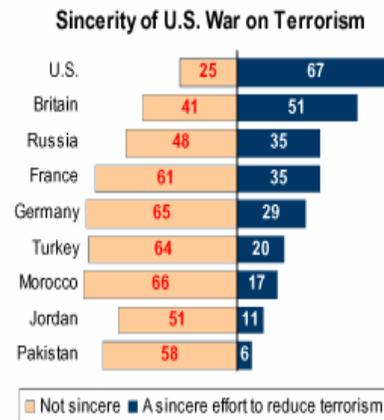


Figure 1 Source: Pew Research Center, 2004

Many influentials also identified America's image in the world and the overall impression that America has lost credibility and respect as the greatest problems facing the nation. As one foreign affairs specialist put it, America has suffered "a loss of international confidence and respect due to the administration ramming a series of ill-considered political, economic and security policies." A media executive described the

problem in similar terms, saying America has “a lack of credibility as a fair and just world leader” (p. 10).

In polling of international attitudes on the image of the United States, Pew (2004) reports that international opinion of US credibility is also declining. Figure 1 represents opinions from a variety of countries on the sincerity of the US led War on Terrorism. Put another way this chart represents the degree to which people around the world trust our judgment concerning the war on terror. Opinion levels about the sincerity of the US led war on terrorism are even lower in Muslim nations. Pew Research Center (2004) reports, “there is even more skepticism of the motives for the war on terrorism in predominantly Muslim countries. By wide margins, the publics of Turkey, Morocco, Jordan and Pakistan question America's sincerity in this effort. In Pakistan, just 6% see the effort as a genuine attempt to reduce international terrorism, while 58% say it is not” (n. p.). These statistics represent a global trend assaulting the credibility of the United States as a policy-making institution.

The declining state of credibility has been noted across the political spectrum, (see Figure 2). The United States government is not believed as a credible source of information, which is problematic at home as well as abroad in the global war on terrorism. At home, if people fail to take security issues seriously, then people risk their own safety and that of others. It is the responsibility of the United States government to re-establish credibility in order to secure a safe and prosperous future for its citizens. Abroad, the government needs to explore different mechanisms of enhancing its international credibility because, even by current administration accounts, the enemy is winning the war of ideas. U.S. Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld has been quoted as saying: “We have got to get better at this” (Robinson, 2006). Toward that goal, this paper reviews the academic literature on source credibility and assesses the potential and limitations of this line of research for improving U.S. credibility at home and abroad.

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*“By wide margins, the publics of Turkey, Morocco, Jordan and Pakistan question America's sincerity.”*

Pew Research Center

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	Compared to past America is now... (%)			
	Total	REP	DEM	IND
Less Respected	66	50	74	73
Major Problem	43	26	55	50
Minor Problem	18	18	16	18
Not a Problem	4	5	3	4
Don't know	1	1	*	1
More Respected	9	13	7	10
No Change	21	34	17	15
Don't know	4	3	2	2
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

Figure 2 Source: Pew Research Center, 2005

## RESEARCH ON CREDIBILITY

The earliest works concerning source credibility, or *ethos*, date to the 5th century B.C. with Aristotle's treatise, *On Rhetoric*. However, 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship significantly expanded our understanding of the concept. One of the first successful applications of source credibility research was undertaken by the United States Government during World War I. It employed early theoretical models of source credibility in creating the Committee on Public Information (CPI). It was an ambitious attempt to mold public opinion on an unprecedented scale.

CPI established basic principles of effective communication including unity of voice, source credibility, and message simplicity. It also encouraged targeted publics to participate in the war effort through a variety of government programs, making them stakeholders in their government and increasing their sense of community. (Pinkerton, 1994, p. 229). The CPI made extensive use of war veterans in a successful effort to enhance the credibility of public figures speaking about the war. In addition veterans were themselves encouraged to speak out in support of the war. Their credibility was a significant factor in the overwhelming success of the committee's efforts (Pinkerton, 1994).

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For CPI, effective communication meant unity of voice, source credibility, and message simplicity.

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Following World War I the classical concept of *ethos* was reestablished as the concept of *credibility* in the academic fields of communication, public relations, marketing, and political science. By the late 1960s, credibility was a "frequent variable for study or control in experimental research" (McCroskey, 1968, p. 65) across the social sciences. In sum, credibility was first studied in public speaking, but has since developed to encompass modern communication contexts.

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT

Social scientific research on credibility began in earnest during World War II, when persuasion was needed to support the war effort (Metzger *et al.*, 2003). In the 1950's, research into source credibility found that Aristotle was right: The communicator, the message, and the audience were all independent and important factors in perceptions of credibility. For example, studies found that identical messages from two different communicators were rated as having varying degrees of credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Holding the source constant, the message itself will in some cases induce higher perceptions credibility if it appeals to fear and group norms, and draws conclusions adapted to the complexity of the message. Regardless of speaker and message, some

characteristics of the audience, such as group conformity motives and individual differences, have been shown to impact perceived credibility (Hovland, 1953, p. 269 - 277).

In the 1960s and 1970s, a large amount of empirical research studied the factors affecting credibility judgments, including *competence*, *trustworthiness*, and *goodwill* (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Additional studies tested the effect of factors such as safety, qualification, and dynamism (Berlo *et al.*, 1969). Other research focused on the understanding the relationship between the use of evidence and credibility (Luchok & McCroskey, 1978; McCroskey, 1970; Whitehead, 1968) and the positive relationship between caring for an audience and overall credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). As scholarship continues, the need to develop more studies on both communicator and audience variables will substantially increase (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

Traditionally, credibility was studied in contexts of public address. But more recently researchers have sought to apply the principles of source credibility to other media. Source credibility in print is characterized by the traditional factors of expertise and trustworthiness (Pornpitakpan, 2004), but the factors may be somewhat different for television, where researchers have identified attractiveness as a powerful indicator (Ohanian, 1991). While high credibility sources are superior in almost any context (Lirtzman & Shuv-Ami, 1986; Maddux & Rogers, 1980; Ross, 1973; Schulman & Worrall, 1970) it seems that the persuasiveness of high credibility sources can be augmented through the medium of television (Worchel, Andreoli, & Eason, 1975; Andreoli & Worchel, 1978).

The use of the Internet as a mechanism to disseminate information and sell products resulted in the study of source credibility in this context. Generally, information on the web is perceived as more credible than information presented from the same source but through a different medium (Greer, 2003). This shows that to some extent people associate the credibility of a source with the *medium* through which the message is conveyed. One negative mediating factor is advertising: the credibility of sources on the Internet is damaged by the presence of advertising. Even well crafted ads for respected products result in decreased levels of perceived source credibility (Greer, 2003).

Although there are undoubtedly many important cultural differences in the way audiences perceive communicators and messages, there has been only limited research on source credibility in different cultural contexts. Driscoll & Salwen (1995) examined perceptions of media coverage concerning Hurricane Andrew. They concluded that some minority populations,

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Different media may cause unique factors in perceptions of credibility.

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specifically African Americans in Florida, discounted official government messages concerning the impending danger posed by the Hurricane. The result was that large segments of these populations did not evacuate and/or take proper precautions. Many individuals suffered injury and died as a result. The special significance of this study is that cultural differences in perceptions of source credibility impact action even when the content of the message pertains to mortal danger.

International messages and source credibility represents another area of high significance, but low research. Al-Maktay & Boyd (1994) performed one of the few studies of international populations. Their study of medium-related source credibility in Saudi Arabia about the 1991 Gulf War provided some interesting insights. Urban dwellers viewed international (specifically Western) television and radio as very credible sources. Individuals living in more rural areas found the information about the war they received at Friday sermons to be the most credible.

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Research on credibility in non-western cultures is scarce.

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Corporate public relations research has drawn from credibility to study instances where public opinion can be affected by credible public outreach. Corporate image research argues that “recognizability, a reputation of offering a quality product/service, being well managed, treating employees with respect, and a history of prosocial involvement with issues” (Haley, 1996, p. 24) are factors that affect the credibility of American business. Recent research (Callison, 2001) argues that “Public relations spokespersons and the organizations they represent were consistently ranked as less trustworthy, competent, and credible” (p. 231) than non-public relations related spokespersons.

Finally, the subject of gender and source credibility also has received little attention from researchers. Those few studies that have been done tend to focus on the role gender plays in the sending of a message (Pornitakpan, 2004). For example, Kenton (1989) found that male sources had higher levels of source credibility than female sources.

In summary, there is a large body of existing research that can inform the communication doctrine of the United States when presenting information concerning the Global War on Terrorism to various and diverse publics. In particular, several principles are well supported and should be applied:

- In most cases, more credible sources are more persuasive and more effective at delivering information. That is, credibility is skill that must be cultivated.
- Credibility involves at least three dimensions:

- **Trustworthiness** or sincerity: The extent to which the source is seen to truly believe what s/he is saying and to be reliable in only saying things s/he truly believes.
- **Competence** or expertise: The extent to which the source is seen as qualified or knowledgeable to make the arguments being made.
- **Goodwill**: The extent to which the source is seen as having the best interests of the audience at heart.
- Judgments about credibility are affected by characteristics of the source, message, audience, and medium, and efforts that ignore one or more of these are unlikely to be effective.
- Little is known about how culture, context, and gender affect credibility judgments.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **RESEARCH -ORIENTED**

Our review demonstrates that the concept of credibility is a venerable one. Our existing understanding of this concept can inform short term efforts to be more persuasive with strategic audiences, as we explain below. But our modern scientific understanding of credibility is rather dated and narrowly focused on Western culture and Western traditions of argument and persuasion. Updating, integrating, and validating credibility research in non-Western settings is a prerequisite for effectively planning long term strategic efforts to improve U.S. credibility globally.

Despite these limitations, the large body of existing research on credibility is a strategic communication asset because it provides a well-established point of comparison for understanding credibility both domestically in foreign applications. In other words we are not “starting from scratch” with this problem and the research issues are tractable. We suggest four specific goals.

#### **Perform a meta-analysis of existing research.**

Research on credibility literally goes back centuries, with modern social-science approaches research spanning the last 75 years. The result is a plethora of studies subject to historical contexts. For this reason we believe that there should be a meta-analysis performed of existing research. Techniques of meta-analysis, which have matured in recent years, allow statistical

combination of results of published studies to produce higher-power tests based on the body of published research. In short, a comprehensive statistical analysis of existing source credibility research would yield a clearer overall picture of what does and does not influence perceptions of source credibility. This program of research would have a direct impact on the articulation of message strategies relevant to public policy. A more detailed understanding of the components that make up source credibility could enable the crafting of more effective policies.

### **Develop a contingency model of credibility.**

Existing research suggests that the credibility of a source delivering a particular message may depend on a number of situational factors. For example research shows that in some cases, high-credibility sources are not significantly more persuasive than low-credibility ones. Thus we see potential for a model to predict source credibility factors for a particular message being delivered to a particular audience via a particular medium. Such a model would have a great deal of practical value. For instance, if research shows that source credibility has low impact on the persuasiveness of a particular type of message (perhaps Web sites), then this could become an attractive alternative for the United States at a time when its credibility is low.

### **Study cultural differences with respect to credibility, especially in strategically important cultures.**

This research goal should receive high priority. It could be that the three dimensions of trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill are more or less culturally universal, but of course this may also *not* be the case. Even if the dimensions are universal, the causes of the associated perceptions could be different. For instance, religious identity might be an added dimension of credibility in the Muslim world. Or it might influence judgments of trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill in a way that is unlike the West. We need new research validating and, where necessary, extending credibility research into non-Western cultures. This new research would examine the links between culture, ethnicity, religion, and credibility, using both sources and receivers from different cultures. Intersectional research examining source credibility and other variables like gender, medium, and audience characteristics in a particular region would also be useful.

## **Develop a new media strategy and an understanding of its audience in strategically important cultures.**

New research should be undertaken on the effectiveness of messages delivered through the Internet from government and non-government sources. The new media are of special interest in the Global War on Terrorism. Jihadis have invested heavily in new media technology as an ideological and recruitment tool (Brachman, in press; Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006). Assessing source credibility in relation to the Internet could provide special insight into what jihadi sites are the most persuasive and what groups are the most dangerous. This information would be critical to any long-term planning to counter the jihadi new media efforts. In addition knowledge about how to construct and present a credible Web site would be invaluable in an effort to compete with jihadis in virtual environments. Currently we are ceding cyberspace to terrorists. Accurate, culturally specific information about virtual credibility could change the balance of power on-line.

### **POLICY -ORIENTED**

Even though its supporting research needs updating and extending, credibility provides a good heuristic lens for vetting possible statements and actions in the GWOT. Put another way, the United States could hardly go wrong by asking of a particular policy option: *Will this make us seem more trustworthy and competent? Will this demonstrate goodwill?* Existing research also points to possible ways to work within and overcome those limitations. Here we offer four recommendations.

### **Recognize, accept, and adjust for low credibility in the short term.**

There are two strategic implications of this statement. First, those persons involved in U.S. foreign policy, public diplomacy, strategic communication, and related activities must recognize privately that in the short term their statements and actions are interpreted with suspicion and doubt in the Muslim world. Whether this is deserved or not, it places severe constraints on their ability to drive public discourse about terrorism. Continued attempts to drive the discourse only cultivate increased cynicism in the target audience.

Second, while low credibility is a constraint, it is possible to benefit from constraints by accepting and working with them. For example the U.S. should recognize *publicly* that it has low credibility in the Muslim world, that this is for *good reasons*, and

that it understands its need to rebuild trust. We base this recommendation on a strategy of *counter-attitudinal advocacy* (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003), where doubts about the source are acknowledged and used as a resource to help establish common ground with the hostile audience.

**Involve sympathetic Muslims, especially those in the United States, in an effort to find more persuasive sources and messages.**

In recognition of their diminished credibility, U.S. public communicators should seek alternative sources for delivery of messages concerning the war on terrorism. Returning to the theoretical discussion above, Muslim communicators probably retain a higher perception of goodwill and perhaps even expertise when discussing U.S. policies. Explanations of the war on terrorism should seem more credible to a Muslim audience if they come from credible Muslim spokespersons.

Opinion leaders are known to play a key role in credible dissemination of information in Arab cultures (Al-Maktay & Boyd, 1994). Messages concerning terrorism must be adapted to, and filtered through, opinion leaders in international areas where public support for the United States is low. For instance, the earlier mentioned study by Al-Maktay & Boyd (1994) identified local clerics as a key source of credible information for non-urban dwellers in Saudi Arabia. These local leaders should be critical nodes in the dissemination of information about terrorism.

Cultivating intermediate communicators in the Muslim community will be a complicated task that involves at least two different components: one, securing the support of Islamic sympathizers and, two, crafting messages that both reflect policy goals and respect the interests of the messengers. However, doing so is clearly worthwhile as it attempts to recover some of the benefits of credibility (if not credibility itself) through the use of trusted third parties.

The war on terrorism has involved numerous attempts at engaging domestic/international Islamic sympathizers. The United States in particular has pursued military alliances with several Islamic governments and attempted to foster support within the domestic Muslim community. We propose that these efforts be redoubled in light of the low credibility associated with messages originating from the United States. This may be a more attractive mechanism of engagement for those involved in the Muslim community for it does not involve military action or compromising the identities of persons known to them—the only task asked of them is the delivery of a message. A more moderate approach

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*“Muslim Americans have far more credibility to debate issues of their faith than I do as a Christian.”*

Karen Hughes

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would allow policy makers in the United States to engage Muslim community members in a different and more productive way.

While engaging sympathetic Muslim communities, it is important to avoid attempts to control their messages. Local, knowledgeable consumers are the best judge of what messages may be appropriate or inappropriate for the audiences they are intended to influence. Attempts to co-opt these groups or make them “mouthpieces” would only serve to further damage the credibility of the United States.

### **Concentrate on degrading the credibility of opponents.**

While the United States must take steps to improve its own credibility, it can also take steps to undermine the credibility of its opponents in the war of ideas. As the experience in Northern Ireland demonstrated, terrorists sustain community support only so long as there is belief in their inherent goodwill (Garfield, 2005). Furthermore, in order to die for a cause a recruit must have faith in the leadership. While military victories attain short-term successes, undermining the credibility of the enemy, and hence their ability to recruit and gain community acceptance, opens up possibilities for long-term success and stability.

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Undermining the credibility of the terrorists, and hence their ability to recruit, opens up possibilities for long-term success.

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Corman and Schiefelbein (2006) have recently noted that for jihadis, “social legitimation means having the communities in which they operate know their story, share their goals, and accept and support their efforts” (p. 6). This reliance on social support should be viewed as a weakness in the jihadi network. Attacking the consistency of their view of jihad should be a priority for U.S. media strategy. Questioning the “goodwill” of jihadis should be a primary focus as “violent methods inevitably harm innocent people, so there is a built-in drag on the organization’s legitimacy” (Corman and Schiefelbein, 2006, p. 6).

In addition to attacking the goodwill of jihadis, their competence as leaders should be questioned. Recently, U.S. Central Command released a “blooper” video showing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi having trouble operating an automatic weapon and wearing Western running shoes. While this particular release apparently did not get much traction in the Arab world because it was closely associated with a Western source, it is a good example of what could be done to undermine a terrorist’s competence and trustworthiness. Further efforts using Muslim sources and a more strategically ambiguous strategy can be made in this regard.

**When directly claiming ownership of a message, use lower level officers or trusted third-parties to convey it.**

Finally, our research indicates that people have a general distrust of public relations professionals. If the military must directly engage the public (domestic or international) it should *not* be through public relations professionals. Individuals “from the field” are perceived as having a higher degree of competence and are viewed as less likely to deceive. For this reason, lower level Foreign Service officers and military field commanders (or others with direct experience of what is happening on-the-ground) should perform public relations and public diplomacy interactions. Highlighting the field experience of individuals can increase their perceived credibility in the event that the government needs to communicate directly with domestic and/or international audiences. To as great an extent as possible, these spokespersons should deal in verifiable facts and avoid strong attempts to frame or “spin” them.

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The U.S. should use lower level officers and cultural icons to deliver important messages.

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Use of familiar cultural icons (such as celebrities) has been shown to increase the credibility of a message or brand (Goldsmith *et al*, 2000). Osama bin Laden’s “celebrity” status in the jihadi world is an example of celebrity that works against the interests of the United States. Who qualifies as a celebrity is a culturally sensitive question. For instance, a given celebrity in the United States may be unknown or viewed negatively in Asia or the Middle East.

Nonetheless, the use of popular and recognized sources to present information concerning the terrorism can increase the public awareness and confidence in our overseas activities. Celebrity appeals are a proven way to sell product (Goldsmith *et al*, 2000; Ohanian, 1991). While the idea of celebrities endorsing the Global War on Terrorism may seem strange, similar principles of sales apply in the public and private sector: A product is nothing more than an embodiment “of objects/ideas to be sold to the audience” (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

The United States should recognize its low credibility abroad and undertake the long term effort that will be necessary to improve it. That will require updating our scientific understanding of the subject, by integrating existing research and extending it to other strategic cultural contexts. Nonetheless existing knowledge about credibility offers some sound advice on how to proceed under present constraints. Following those principles while closing the intercultural research gaps will help construct a future perception

of the United States which is competent, trustworthy, and displays goodwill to strategic audiences worldwide.

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