EXPLORING ONLINE NEWS CREDIBILITY THROUGH AESTHETICS AND USER-CONTRIBUTED CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores how interactive features on a news website affect a user's perception of credibility and quality. A between-subjects experiment (n=122) was conducted online using four websites with varying levels of user-contributed content to determine if there was an effect. No significant difference in user judgments was found between the four websites. Further analysis showed sub-dimensions within the credibility measure and specifically found significant differences between groups when making judgments regarding accuracy. The study concludes by offering design recommendations to encourage user-contributed content on news websites and suggestions for future work in the field of design-related credibility research and online news websites in general.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Ke Masters degree and to our five-month-	Katy, for her love and sup old daughter, Elena, who the final stretch.	pport during my journey for my ose smiles kept me going througl	h

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	Vi
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	3
Online News Credibility	3
Aesthetic Credibility	5
User-contributed Content	6
Research Questions	7
3. METHODS	8
Sampling Procedure & Description	
Measures	
Design & Procedures	
4. RESULTS	13
5. DISCUSSION	15
Limitations & Shortcomings	20
Design Recommendations	
Future Work	
APPENDIX	28
LIST OF REFERENCES	42

LIST OF TABLES

1. Dimensions of Credibility	9
2. Summary of Credibility Measure, One-way ANOVA	14
3. Summary of Credibility Measure, Means	14
4. Pairwise Comparison of Means, Tukey HSD	14
5. Summary of Quality Measure, One-way ANOVA	14
6. Summary of Quality Measure Means	15
7. Pairwise Comparison of Means, Tukey HSD	15
8. Participant attitudes towards news article comments	17
9. Summary of Comment Enjoyment/Usefulness Measure, One-way ANOVA	18
10. Summary of Comment Enjoyment/Usefulness Measure, Means	18
11. Summary of Comment Environmental Involvement, One-way ANOVA	19
12. Summary of Comment Environmental Involvement, Means	19
13. Summary of Accuracy Measure, One-way ANOVA	20
14. Summary of Accuracy Measure, Means	21
15. Credibility (TOTAL) One-way ANOVA	33
16. Credibility: Summary of Means and F-values	34
17. Quality Measure (TOTAL), One-way ANOVA	35
18. Quality: Summary of Means and F-values	36

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Respondents primary source for news	8
2. Stimulus Material. Screenshots with manipulated variables.	11
3. Side by side comparison of screenshots.	37
4. Screenshot of website A	38
5. Screenshot of website B	39
6. Screenshot of website C	40
7. Screenshot of website D	41

1. INTRODUCTION

News delivery and consumption changed with the introduction of the commercial Internet in the 1990's. The Internet made publishing easier, cheaper, and faster. As the Internet's popularity grew, the sources of information grew as well. Major media outlets created websites to supplement their print versions and independent bloggers began publishing their own articles and opinions around the web. By the end of 2005, 50 million Americans used the Internet to find news each day (Pew Internet, 2006). As of 2010, the Internet is the third most popular news platform - ahead of radio, local and national newspapers, behind only local and national television news (Pew Internet, 2010).

People no longer look to one or two sources for news, but browse, share, and interact through social networks, blogs, email, RSS, message boards, and text messaging. 37% of Internet users are participating in news through comments on stories, sharing stories on social networks, or tagging content (Pew Internet, 2010). Social network usage has grown exponentially (Pew Internet, 2009) in recent years and has profoundly changed how news is spread. Social networks offer users new ways to quickly share news online and participate in real-time as news happens (Pew Internet, 2010).

One aspect in the changing ecosystem of news has been the introduction of independent niche news websites that focus on specific topics (i.e. technology, entertainment, politics) or concentrate coverage geographically by region, state, city, or neighborhoods (e.g. "hyperlocal"). These new websites range from professional blogs run by one or two people to full-scale newsrooms with reporters covering a wide variety of topics. One of the challenges facing these

new forms of online journalism, whether it be blogs, regional news websites, or niche-topic websites, is building credibility in today's competitive media environment. The challenges facing these new online ventures affect writers, publishers, journalists, web designers, and advertisers alike.

News websites have been slower to adopt new forms of interactivity offered by the Internet.

Chung (2008) found a majority of news website producers had concerns about moderating user interaction on their websites. Interactive features require time and resources, which puts a greater workload on publishers and reporters. In these challenging times for print newspapers, every decision related to a website's design, functionality, or usefulness has to be carefully considered. The goal of this study was to explore how interactive features and website design affect a reader's view of credibility and quality. It aims to build on research related to "surface credibility" - or how much a user believes something based on simple inspection (Fogg, 1999) - and other studies that have found effect between aesthetic treatments and user perception of credibility and quality (Robins & Holmes, 2006).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

People assess credibility online differently and have multiple concepts of credibility depending on the information they're evaluating online (Hilligoss and Rieh, 2007). Therefore the dimensions of credibility vary through different contexts and topics. For example, the factors used to judge the credibility of a website focused on health information are different than the factors someone would use while seeking news online. One proposed framework for credibility assessment (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007), suggests people tend to apply certain aesthetic-based heuristics like the "quality of layout" and "professional design" to judge credibility. Other studies have explored the effect of reader motivations (Johnson, et al. 2007), the influence of message content (Austin & Dong, 1994), the effect of interactive features (Chung, 2008), and how aesthetic variables influence perception (Fogg, et al. 2001; Lindgaard, et al. 2006; Robins, & Holmes, 2006; Cousaris & Watrall, 2008; Tractinksy, et al. 2005). The following is a review of the previous research related to news credibility, aesthetic factors, and user-contributed content.

Online News Credibility

The Internet not only changed the way news is delivered, but changed how news is received. Prior to the widespread use of the Internet, news was primarily a "one-to-many" form of communication and news credibility research focused on credibility of the source (Sundar, 1998). People discussed the news in the public sphere, but not at the speed and scale provided by Internet. With the introduction of the Internet, the delivery of news was reshaped into a "many-to-many" flow of information where readers could comment, share, and participate with the news in new ways. This change also gave scholars new opportunities to explore credibility as it related to the Internet as a medium for news delivery.

Previous studies regarding news credibility have focused on message content and source. Austin and Dong (1994) tested the effect of message content versus the reputation of the source by having participants read a fictitious news articles and answer questions related to credibility and reality of the stories. They found that participants relied more on the content of the article than the reputation of the source when making believability judgments. Sundar (1998) had participants read several types of news articles (local news, national news, international news, sports, entertainment, business) and found that people rate stories with quotes significantly higher that stories without quotes. Finally, Kiousis and Dimitrova (2006) had participants rate news articles versus press releases and found that there was no significant difference in credibility judgments between the two.

Recent research has found that the Internet is at a disadvantage in terms of credibility when compared to other media. Hilligoss and Rieh (2007) conducted interviews with undergraduate students and found that the Internet was rated lower in terms of credibility when compared to books and scholarly journals. Similarly, Metzger, et al. (2000) found that college students perceive information found online to be less credible than newspapers. Further complicating the matter was a follow up study by Flanagin and Metzger (2003) that found that college students rate information online as more credible when compared to the general population, but are less likely to verify information they find online. Cassidy (2007) found that online journalists rated news information online as significantly more credible than print newspaper journalists. These studies illustrate the differences between populations when judging credibility online.

Aesthetic Credibility

Research exploring the effects of aesthetics and design on credibility has developed through the years. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) discusses how peripheral cues affect people's attitudes. ELM suggests procedures to manipulate these cues regardless of the arguments being made (similar to later research on the effect of aesthetic factors on credibility). While Petty and Cacioppo admit these procedures may not show why a variable was effective or rule out the possibility of other factors, but the suggested procedures can indicate whether or not a variable has the potential to be a peripheral cue.

Aesthetic factors have shown to have to an influence on user's credibility judgments. In a survey with over 2,500 participants, Stanford's Persuasive Technology Lab found that "design look" was most frequently mentioned for assessing a website's credibility (Fogg, et al. 2003). Website design was mentioned more frequently than information focus, accuracy, name recognition, reputation, tone of the writing, readability, and many more factors.

Robins and Holmes (2006) presented the same content using different levels of aesthetic treatment (high vs. low) and found that the content with a higher aesthetic treatment was judged as having higher credibility. The researchers called this the amelioration effect and suggested that more research was needed to explore exactly what features, elements, or configurations impact credibility.

Further research has explored specific design elements and how they relate to a user's perception of a website. Coursaris, et al. (2008) manipulated the "color temperature" (warm vs. cool) of a

website and found that using a cool primary color reflected positively on the user's perception of the website. Similarly, the existence of greater simplicity and options for reading information easily were shown to positively influence a person's loyalty to online news website (Flavian, et al. 2005). Rain and Karmikel (2009) found that structural elements (name, navigation menu, links to external sites, images, etc) all were positively associated with perceptions of credibility on health websites.

Another form of aesthetic research looks at what Fogg describes as "surface credibility", or how much a user believes something based on simple inspection. In a preliminary study using online experiments, Fogg, et al. (2001), found that banner ads reduced the perceived credibility of a website, while including a formal photo of an author increased the credibility of the website. Related to this concept is research showing that users judge the quality of a website in under a second of viewing it (Lindgaard, et al., 2006). Based on this finding, a study by Alsundani and Casey (2009) asked participants to view 13 pairs of websites side-by-side and judge their credibility after viewing it for 3.42 seconds. "Unity" (balance, contrast, harmony, dominance) in design was found to be an effective factor for making immediate judgments on credibility.

User-contributed Content

News websites have implemented interactive features to allow readers to rate, comment, discuss, and share stories through various channels (email, social networks, mobile devices). Research has explored how these interactive features affect a reader's perception and experience. These findings support the idea that interactive features affect a user's perception of online news.

Chung (2008) surveyed over 500 respondents and found that interactive features are generally used infrequently, but perceived credibility of online news was a positive predictor for use of interactive features like submitting stories, emailing reporters, writing letters to the editor, using message boards, and chats. Flavian, et al. (2005) found that the perceived usability of a website had a significant influenced on a reader's loyalty. Sundar (2000) had participants read three news articles with varying levels of multimedia - images, photos, and video. While multimedia features did affect reader's ability to recall stories, those features had no significant affect on news credibility. Further research by Sundar, et al. (2003) had groups of participants view a political candidate's website with varying levels of interactivity and found that the level of interactivity influenced participants' perception of the candidate.

Research Questions

To further explore exactly what features, elements, or configurations impact credibility, this study specifically focuses on the following questions:

RQ1: Does the ability to comment on an online news story affect a user's perception of credibility?

RQ2: Does the existence of comments on an online news story affect a user's perception of credibility?

RQ3: Does the existence of social media features on an online news story affect a user's perception of credibility?

3. METHODS

Sampling Procedure & Description

Undergraduate students from introductory telecommunications courses at a major Midwestern university in the United States were recruited by email and offered extra credit to complete the online survey. One hundred and twenty-two (n=122) of those who responded were usable for the sample. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 28 years old. 61% were male and 39% were female. 59% ranked the Internet as their primary source for news. 49% had been using the Internet for 6-10 years and 45% had been using the Internet for more than 10 years. 84% of the participants graduated from a high school within the state covered by the environmental website used as stimulus material.

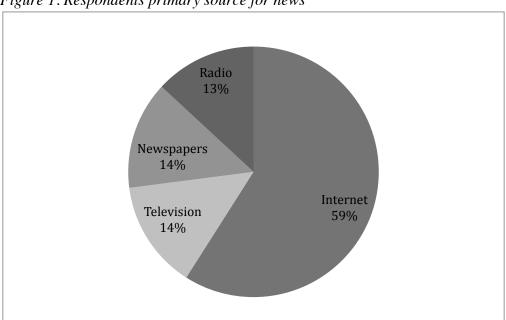


Figure 1. Respondents primary source for news

Measures

Credibility is a difficult concept to measure because individual definitions of credibility can differ. The factors of what influences credibility also vary depending on the user motivations. In order to deal with this fact, several scales and measures have been developed by scholars.

Table 1. Dimensions of Credibility

Sundar (1998)	Accuracy, believability, bias, fairness, objectiveness, sensationalism
Flanagan and	Accuracy, believability, bias, trustworthiness, completeness of
Metzger (2000)	information
Cassidy (2007)	Accuracy, believability, fairness, comprehensiveness

Credibility

An overall credibility score was calculated for each participant by adding scores of 11 survey items. The measure was based on four 5-point Likert scale questions (strongly agree/strongly disagree) using four dimensions of online news credibility - believable, fair, accurate, comprehensive (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Cassidy, 2007) and a 7-item, 5-point semantic differential scale with further measures of credibility - accurate, comprehensive, believable, fair, biased, objective, and factual (Sundar, 2000). The scale was reliable (α = Alpha reliability = 0.8493, Standardized alpha = 0.8589).

Quality

Next, a measure of quality was constructed using scores from an 8-item, 5-point semantic differential scale. Participants were asked to rate the website using the following items: well written, organized, clear, coherent, user-friendly, interactive, and enjoyable. An overall quality score was calculated by adding these scales. The scale was reliable (α = Alpha reliability = 0.7952, Standardized alpha = 0.8133).

Design & Procedures

A between-subjects experiment (randomized, post-test only) was conducted. Undergraduate students in introductory telecommunications courses were recruited through email and offered extra credit to complete the online survey. A link to the survey was included in the recruitment email. Students who did not choose to take the survey were offered an alternate option for extra credit. Participant's answers were anonymous.

Stimulus Material

A regional environmental news website was used as stimulus. The website was chosen for two reasons. First, the author of this study had previously served as lead web designer on the site and had familiarity with the design, content, and features. Second, the website serves as a good representation of a niche news website focusing on a specific geographic region. Similar websites covering different topics (i.e. technology, entertainment, politics), regions, and cities are attempting to fill the void that traditional news organizations have left as the economics of news has changed. An article from the website was selected based on the following criteria: 1) non-controversial topic, 2) related to national environmental news, and 3) had more than one comment.

The selected article was titled "Researchers study how climate change chases fish from streams".

A screenshot of the article was then taken and manipulated using Photoshop to create four versions of the same article. Using a screenshot controlled for variables such as layout, fonts, colors, and photos that can render inconsistently on different browsers and computer platforms.

The manipulated variables for each screenshot were as follows:

Figure 2. Stimulus Material. Screenshots with manipulated variables. For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this thesis.



Procedures

A link to access the online survey was included in the recruitment email. After agreeing to a consent form and answering basic questions about their Internet use and primary news sources, participants were presented the following statement:

On the next page, you will view an image of a website. Please take a few minutes to review it and get an overall sense of the page (you are not required to read everything on the page). Please answer the questions beneath the image to the best of your knowledge.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four screenshots. After viewing the screenshot, participants were first asked if they had previously visited the actual website being used as stimulus material (participants who had visited the stimulus website before were not included in the sample). Participants were then asked to rate the website using the previously detailed scales related to credibility and quality. A manipulation check was included in the scale to verify if participants recognized the level of user-contributed content of the screenshot. After rating the website, participants were asked about their attitudes towards news, comments, and Internet self-efficacy. Finally, participants were asked several demographic questions.

Participants who had previously visited the stimulus website were excluded from the final data set. Incomplete surveys were also excluded from final analysis. This accounted for some of the variance between group sizes. Participants were randomly assigned to a group by the survey tool, so there was little control over the final group sizes. Prior to data cleansing, group sizes ranged from 30 to 50 participants.

4. RESULTS

Data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel and R. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for credibility differences among four websites. Perception of credibility did not differ significantly across the four groups, F(3, 118) = 0.995, p = 0.3978.

Table 2. Summary of Credibility Measure, One-way ANOVA

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Pr(>F)
Group	3	87.4	29.147	0.995	0.3978
Residuals	118	3456.7	29.294		

Table 3. Summary of Credibility Measure, Means

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	24.28947	5.177435	38
Website B (story + comment box)	25.25000	4.865945	32
Website C (story + comment box +	26.76190	5.448897	21
comments)			
Website D (story + comment box +	25.64516	6.156560	31
comments + social media icons)			

Table 4. Pairwise Comparison of Means, Tukey HSD. Credibility Measure (95% family-wise confidence level)

	Estimate	lower	upper
Group B - Group A	0.9605	-2.4195	4.3405
Group C - Group A	2.4724	-1.3581	6.3029
Group D - Group A	1.3557	-2.0538	4.7651
Group C - Group B	1.5119	-2.4444	5.4682
Group D - Group B	0.3952	-3.1550	3.9453
Group D - Group C	-1.1167	-5.0982	2.8647

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for quality differences among four websites. Perception of quality did not differ significantly across the four groups, F(3, 118) = 0.4483, p = 0.719. Thus, these findings support the conclusion that interactive features have no significant effect on a user's perception of credibility or quality of a news website.

Table 5. Summary of Quality Measure, One-way ANOVA

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Group	3	24.74	8.2454	0.4483	0.719
Residuals	118	2170.08	18.3905		

Table 6. Summary of Quality Measure Means

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	18.84211	3.709202	38
Website B (story + comment box)	19.71875	4.531142	32
Website C (story + comment box + comments)	18.42857	5.343888	21
Website D (story + comment box + comments +	19.22581	3.887670	31
social media icons)			

Table 7. Pairwise Comparison of Means, Tukey HSD. Quality Measure (95% family-wise confidence level)

	Estimate	lower	upper
Group B - Group A	0.8766	-1.8029	3.5562
Group C - Group A	-0.4135	-3.4502	2.6232
Group D - Group A	0.3837	-2.3192	3.0866
Group C - Group B	-1.2902	-4.4266	1.8462
Group D - Group B	-0.4929	-3.3074	2.3215
Group D - Group C	0.7972	-2.3591	3.9536

Based on the results of both one-way ANOVAs in this study, the answer to all three research questions is that there is no significant difference between credibility or quality judgments based on the level of user-contributed content offered by a news website.

5. DISCUSSION

While the results of the experiment are somewhat disappointing, there is still knowledge to be drawn from the data. It is most likely true, as the study suggests, there is no significant relationship between the selected variables and perception of credibility or quality. Even as previous studies have shown significant relationships between credibility and aesthetic quality, design features as minor as a comment box or social networking icons are not significant credibility signals to users of news websites. These features most likely complement other factors such as overall aesthetic quality, brand awareness, author name, author photo, as well as message characteristics like grammar, spelling, and tone.

It may also be that college students are more likely to accept what they read online as true and are less likely than the general population to consider credibility when reading news online. Flanagin and Metzger's (2003) research indicated that college students verify the information they find online significantly less than the general population. 98% of the participants in this study said they were confident in their ability to use the Internet (82% strongly agree, 16% somewhat agree). It is possible their high level of Internet self-efficacy combined with their decreased likelihood to verify information online impedes their ability to make well-informed judgments regarding credibility. This survey, by design, used an article with a topic that was not controversial or meant to trigger an extreme response, as it could have overly impacted participant's judgments regarding aesthetics. But this could have also weakened the results if this topic was of insufficient interest to prompt participants to make thorough judgments regarding credibility. In future work, it would be beneficial to explore how article topics affect user perceptions of credibility.

The data shows mixed results regarding attitudes towards interactive features related to commenting or recommending. While Chung (2008) found credibility as a strong predictor for using interactive features, this study suggests that interactive features don't predict credibility. The results of this study suggest that college students don't rely heavily on comments or interactive features when judging the credibility of news websites. The data supports this as 75% of respondents said they think, in general, comments make news articles more interesting, but only 57% said comments were useful to them. This supports the findings of this study. If participants don't find comments on news articles useful to them, then it is likely that they aren't using them to judge the credibility or quality of a website.

Sundar found that interactivity had a positive effect on a user's perception of credibility of a political candidate's website, but this does not seem to be the case for news. Overall there is a mostly positive view of reading comments and sharing news online, yet posting comments directly on news websites is much less popular. 62% of participants said they were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to read comments on a news website, but only 20% said they were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to post a comment on a news website. 42% of participants said they were either "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to read comments on the stimulus website, whereas only 10% said they were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to post a comment on the stimulus website.

Table 8. Participant attitudes towards news article comments.

	In general	Stimulus website
"Very likely" or "somewhat likely" to read comments	62%	42%
"Very likely" or "somewhat likely" to post a comment	20%	10%
Enjoy reading comments on a news website (strongly agree or somewhat agree)	71%	N/A

Table 8. (cont'd)

Comments make news websites more interesting (strongly agree or somewhat agree)	75%	N/A
Comments on news websites were useful to them (strongly agree or somewhat agree)	57%	N/A

Data was also analyzed to learn how level of enjoyment for reading comments varied by treatment. Six survey questions related to involvement were totaled for each participant. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for the level of enjoyment of reading comments among four websites. Level of enjoyment did not differ significantly across the four groups, F(3, 118) = 0.8764, p = 0.4555.

Table 9. Summary of Comment Enjoyment/Usefulness Measure, One-way ANOVA

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Pr(>F)
Group	3	76.5	25.515	0.8764	0.4555
Residuals	118	3435.6	29.115		

Table 10. Summary of Comment Enjoyment/Usefulness Measure, Means

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	14.50000	4.421997	38
Website B (story + comment box)	16.59375	6.262327	32
Website C (story + comment box +	15.52381	6.177532	21
comments)			
Website D (story + comment box +	15.35484	4.943335	31
comments + social media icons)			

Although level of enjoyment did not vary by treatment condition, further analysis was done to check for correlations between level of involvement and credibility judgments. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between participant's enjoyment of reading comments and their total credibility score. A weak correlation that was not significant was found (r (120) = .087, p > .05). Enjoyment of reading comments is not related to credibility.

Participant's level of interest in environmental issues as it relates to credibility was also explored. Three survey questions related to participant's interest and involvement in environmental issues were totaled into one score. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for the level of involvement in environmental issues among four groups. Level of involvement did not differ significantly across the four groups, F(3, 118) = 0.909, p = 0.439.

Table 11. Summary of Environmental Involvement Measure, One-way ANOVA

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Pr(>F)
Group	3	115.2	38.39	0.909	0.439
Residuals	118	4983.7	42.235		

Table 12. Summary of Environmental Involvement Measure, Means

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	23.94737	6.120181	38
Website B (story + comment box)	25.90625	6.869096	32
Website C (story + comment box +	26.19048	7.263739	21
comments)			
Website D (story + comment box +	26.06452	5.999642	31
comments + social media icons)			

A Pearson correlation coefficient was also calculated for the relationship between participant's interest in environmental issues and their total credibility score. A weak correlation that was not significant was found (r (120) = .072, p > .05). Enjoyment of reading comments is not related to credibility.

As noted in the literature review section, the Elaboration Likelihood Model describes how peripheral cues affect people's attitudes. In this experiment, the manipulated variables appear to not have been effective cues for participants to make credibility judgments. Nor did the groups vary based on their level of enjoyment of comments or their involvement in environmental issues.

Type II Error

These results demonstrate Type II error. Accepting the null hypothesis based on each participant's total credibility score resulted in a claim of no difference between groups when in fact, there were significant differences regarding sub-dimensions of credibility. To further explore the Type II error, power analysis was done using R. A power of 0.4405 was calculated using 21 as the common number of participants in each group, at a significance level of .05 and a "medium" effect size of 0.25. This low value of power shows that the sample size was not large enough. Further analysis showed that 45 participant's per group would yield a power of 0.803, a minimum desirable level of power when using .05 level of significance.

Sub-dimensions of Credibility

Some data suggest that there was in fact a difference between the four groups. Upon further inspection, two factors were extracted from the overall credibility scale for insights into the sub-dimensions of credibility, specifically the concept of accuracy. The two survey questions regarding accuracy were then totaled to create a score for each participant. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for the accuracy sub-dimension among four groups. Accuracy score differed significantly across the four groups, F(3, 118) = 2.7564, p = 0.04548*. Tukey's HSD revealed that users who saw the website with less user-contributed content (m = 3.94, sd = 1.16) gave the website a higher accuracy rating than users who saw a website with more user-contributed content (m = 4.64, sd = 1.40).

Table 13. Summary of Accuracy Measure, One-way ANOVA

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Pr(>F)
Group	3	12.355	4.1182	2.7564	0.04548 *
Residuals	118	176.301	1.4941		

Table 14. Summary of Accuracy Measure, Means

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	3.947368	1.1612521	38
Website B (story + comment box)	4.375000	0.9755065	32
Website C (story + comment box +	4.761905	1.3749459	21
comments)			
Website D (story + comment box +	4.645161	1.4035286	31
comments + social media icons)			

These results suggest that user-contributed content influenced participant's judgment of accuracy in a negative way. While it is difficult just what factor caused participants to judge the website as less accurate, it could have been simply a result of having to process more peripheral information on the page, or possibly something specifically mentioned in the user-submitted comments on the article.

These results also suggest that accuracy itself is regarded differently than other dimensions of credibility like fairness, bias, and trustworthiness. When making credibility judgments, readers may judge a source to be accurate, but neither fair nor unbiased. Or the inverse, readers may believe a news sources as being fair and unbiased, but not necessarily accurate.

Limitations & Shortcomings

It could be argued that by only surveying college students, the results of this survey are not applicable to the general population. This study is still relevant to the general population because college students are the first generation to have grown up using the Internet and have relied on it as a source of news. At a time when the news and media landscape is going through a period of major upheaval, understanding college student's attitudes and behaviors towards news is important because they represent the market for news consumption in the future.

A possible threat to internal validity was the timing of the survey. The survey was administered during the 2010 mid-term elections, resulting in an increase of campaign advertisements challenging the credibility of political opponents. It is possible that some participants had a heightened sense of credibility and were more likely to question the believability, accuracy, or fairness of news in general. Another threat to internal validity may have been the national and local oil spills that occurred during the months prior to the survey. Both of which could have raised participant's awareness to environmental issues and affected their response to an environmental news story.

Lack of user motivation most likely also played a role in this study. Giving participants stronger motivations to investigate the website thoroughly through a scenario such as researching a paper for school or looking for health news may have resulted in stronger scores. In this study, participants were simply asked to review the website. It would have been beneficial to present them with a scenario that provided more motivation to trust the website they were rating. A possible scenario statement could have read, "Imagine you're working on a paper for a class assignment and need to find a recent environmental story. You search the Internet for "environmental news" and the third result is the following website."

While previous research regarding "surface credibility" (Fogg, 1999) has established that users make judgments about a website's credibility by simply looking at the page, it is difficult to isolate specific design elements that significantly influence their decisions. It should also be noted that the placement of most of the aesthetic variables in this study were "below the fold",

meaning that participants likely did not see the variables in the first few seconds of viewing the page. This was confirmed by the manipulation check question in the survey. Participants failed to notice the manipulated variables when reviewing the screenshots. This design flaw could have resulted in participants using other non-aesthetic factors to make credibility judgments about the website.

Aesthetics establish an initial reaction or emotion, but credibility is most likely established over longer periods of time - days, weeks, or years. The concepts related to credibility such as believability, fairness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness require an established relationship between reader and publisher. Factors such as who is recommending the website or if they have visited the website before also play a role in user's perceptions of credibility.

In design research there are limitations to an online survey. Design research cannot rely solely on numbers. Based on this study, interactive design features are not significant factors in a user's perception of a news website's credibility or quality. The features used in this study offered negligible differences between the four websites, and therefore were unable to significantly influence participant's scores. These results are consistent with research by Sundar (2000) and Collins (2006) that showed no significant difference in credibility scores using independent variables such as multimedia features, website creator, or brand.

Design Recommendations

Exploring credibility through design features has challenges. People's tastes, perceptions, attitudes, and preferences towards design differ and change over time. Technology tends to stay

one-step-ahead of design by introducing new platforms, formats, and devices. Developers and designers have learned to quickly adapt and create usable, meaningful, and aesthetically pleasing interfaces to help users enjoy technology.

The results of the study are meaningful for news website designers in several ways. First, it provides quantitative data suggesting that certain features on a news website have no significant effect on a user's perception credibility or quality. This lack of influence on user perceptions suggests that news website designers need to explore new ways to encourage interaction with the hope of engaging users and building credibility. Second, the results shows that users are much less likely to post comments on news websites than they are to simply read them. Again, this shows how designers have failed to create an experience that takes advantage of the user-contributed content offered by the Internet. Finally, the findings show that users find comments on articles interesting, but not useful. Designers should find ways to improve the experience of commenting and comments on news websites.

Most news websites today offer the ability to interact with news articles by commenting, sharing, or recommending, and while it is unlikely these features will be left out of news website in the future, the findings do provoke questions about their effect. Today's news websites follow established layout and design principles. The focus is on the content of the article, usually justified on the left side of the page. A comment box and comments are found at the bottom of the article and treated as supplementary content. Features related to sharing and recommending are then embedded in various places on the page - before the first paragraph of the article, in

dedicated boxes for user tools, or at the bottom of the article. The right margin of the article is usually reserved for recent comments, links to other articles, and advertisements.

This study suggest that interactive features for commenting and sharing should be given more prominence to more effectively influence user perceptions of the website. The challenge for designers is to make better use of these features by integrating them more into online news articles without interfering with overall experience. Offering users a more interactive experience will keep readers engaged and could increase return visits, indirectly improving the credibility of a news website.

Interactive features should not be an afterthought to the overall design of a news website. News website designers should explore new ways to embed these features into the user experience. The following are several recommendations to news website designers.

- Explore more effective ways to support conversation on news websites. Offering users an
 experience that mimics the real-life ways that people discuss news rather than a list of the
 most recent comments. For example, integrating comments or the ability to comment
 within an article.
- 2. Provide better tools for sharing and recommending articles on a news website. While encouraging users to share on other networks (i.e. email, Facebook, Twitter) is important to build an audience, designers and developers could create features on their own websites provide context around articles. For example, designers could incorporate a

"shared score" to aggregate how many times a story has been shared on various networks and prominently place it on the article.

3. Experiment with alternative page layouts to encourage user-contributed content. For example, remove the primary menu on an article page or move the comment box to a more prominent position next to the article to reduce clutter and promote interaction.

Future Work

Going forward, it would it would be beneficial to supplement this study with qualitative data to further explore credibility and quality. Future work should focus on qualitative research such as one-on-one interviews or field studies to gain a deeper understanding of how users judge the credibility of news websites within a given set of circumstances. One-on-one interviews using the same stimulus material would offer an opportunity to ask follow up questions related to credibility and gain a better understanding of how these features affect perception. Participants could be asked to rank the most important features on the page, and then a follow-up study would be designed using those variables to explore significant differences.

Future work should also include a follow up study based on the design recommendations mentioned above. Comparing a screenshot from this study with a substantially different version using features that encourage interaction could be done to explore if the differences affect user perceptions of credibility and quality. As noted previously, aesthetic features should be placed "above the fold", so participants are more likely to immediately see the variables with their initial viewing of the page.

Finally, future work should also explore different news topics (i.e. business, sports, entertainment) with regards to aesthetics to see if there are differences in perception of credibility. For example, based on prior research, it's possible that users would have a heightened sense of awareness if the news website was related to health issues. This could affect their overall scores related to credibility. This type of research would be useful to news website designers when considering design features for news websites that primarily cover one topic.

Conclusion

The objective of this study, at its basic level, was to explore the relationship between website design and a user's judgment of information. By exploring how users interact with websites, this research improves understanding for web designers, journalists, and independent news organizations, so they can make informed design decisions. The findings of this study reject the conclusion that reader comments, the ability to comment, or interactive icons have a significant effect on a user's perception of credibility or quality of news websites. Even though these factors did not reveal significant differences, the results are still relevant because they suggest that design features that publishers have shown reluctance to implement, in fact, do not have as much an effect on their credibility as they imagined. The findings also provides insights for news website designers and suggest that design improvements could be made to encourage interaction on news websites.

Credibility is something that is built over time. While some interactive features may not have an immediate effect on credibility judgments, they do promote reader engagement and build

communities around news websites, which entices readers to return to the site. These return visits to a website will help drive participation and establish credibility in the long run.

APPENDIX

Survey Instrument

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.
This website is a believable source for environmental news.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
This website is an accurate source for environmental news.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
This website is a fair source for environmental news.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
This website is a comprehensive source for environmental news.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
Please rate the website using the following scales.
Accurate / Inaccurate
Believable / Unbelievable
Biased / Unbiased
Clear / Unclear
Comprehensive / Incomprehensive
Factual / Not factual
Fair / Unfair
Informative / Uninformative
Important / Unimportant
Objective / Subjective
Persuasive / Not persuasive
Sensationalistic / Not sensationalistic

Well-written / Poorly written
Organized / Unorganized
Interactive / Not interactive
Useful / Not useful
Coherent / Incoherent
Confusing / Clear
Enjoyable / Not enjoyable
Sophisticated / Unsophisticated
User-friendly / Not user-friendly
How likely are you to read the comments on an article on this website?
Very likely
Very likely Somewhat likely
Neutral
Somewhat unlikely
Not likely at all
How likely are you to post a comment on an article on this website?
Very likely
Somewhat likely
Neutral
Somewhat unlikely
Not likely at all
I would recommend this website to my friends.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
I would recommend this website to my family.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
I would share a story I found interesting on this website with my friends on a social network (i.
Facebook, Twitter, Delicious)?
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neutral
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.
"I am confident in my ability to use the Internet."
"I enjoy reading comments on news articles online."
"Comments on articles on news websites are useful to me."
"Comments on articles make news websites better."
"Comments on articles make news websites more interesting."
"I am interested in environmental news."
"I am well informed about environmental issues."
"Environmental issues are important to me."
How likely are you to post a comment on an article on a news website? Very likely Somewhat likely Neutral Somewhat unlikely Not likely at all
How likely are you to read the comments on an article on news websites'
Very likely
Somewhat likely
Neutral
Somewhat unlikely
Not likely at all

Credibility Measure

Scale Reliability Alpha reliability = 0.8493, Standardized alpha = 0.8589 Reliability deleting each item in turn:

Table 15. Credibility (TOTAL) One-way ANOVA

	Alpha	Std.Alpha	r(item, total)
accurate/inaccurate	0.8295	0.8384	0.6455
believable.unbelievable	0.8401	0.8492	0.5007
unbiased/biased	0.8623	0.8666	0.2833
comprehensive.incomprehensive	0.8358	0.8477	0.5442
factual.notfactual	0.8320	0.8423	0.5925
fair.unfair	0.8323	0.8436	0.5998
objective.subjective	0.8563	0.8666	0.2812
This.website.is.a.believable.source.	0.8329	0.8416	0.6061
for.environmental.news.			
This.website.is.a.comprehensive.so urce.for.environmental.news	0.8272	0.8405	0.6423
This.website.is.a.fair.source.for.en vironmental.news.	0.8262	0.8393	0.6525
This.website.is.an.accurate.source. for.environmental.news.	0.8623	0.8666	0.2833

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Pr(>F)
Group	3	87.4	29.147	0.995	0.3978
Residuals	118	3456.7	29.294		

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	24.28947	5.177435	38
Website B (story + comment box)	25.25000	4.865945	32
Website C (story + comment box + comments)	26.76190	5.448897	21
Group D (story + comment box + comments + social media icons)	25.64516	6.156560	31

Table 16. Credibility: Summary of Means and F-values

Table 10. Creaibill	Website A	Website B	Website C	Website D	F	Pr
	(story)	(story +	(story +	(story +	1	11
	(Story)	comment	comment	comment		
		box)	box +	box +		
		JOX)	comments)	comments +		
			comments)	social		
				sharing		
				icons)		
Credibility	24.28947	25.25000	26.76190	25.64516	0.995	0.3978
(TOTAL)	21.20317	25.25000	20.70190	25.0.510	0.555	0.5570
Accurate	2.078947	2.250000	2.380952	2.290323	1.1106	0.3477
Believable	1.921053	1.875000	2.095238	1.870968	0.7378	0.5315
Comprehensive	2.105263	2.281250	2.619048	2.387097	2.1295	0.1002
Fair	2.157895	2.406250	2.619048	2.516129	2.6845	0.04981
						*
Unbiased	3.263158	3.250000	3.095238	2.774194	1.7844	0.1539
Objective	2.684211	2.500000	2.619048	2.548387	0.351	0.7885
Factual	2.026316	2.187500	2.333333	2.258065	0.8832	0.452
This website is a	1.868421	1.781250	2.047619	1.838710	0.7915	0.501
believable source						
for environmental						
news.						
This website is a	2.078947	2.187500	2.190476	2.419355	0.8658	0.461
fair source for						
environmental						
news.						
This website is an	1.868421	2.125000	2.380952	2.354839	3.5812	0.01599
accurate source						*
for environmental						
news.						
This website is a	2.236842	2.406250	2.380952	2.387097	0.2336	0.8728
comprehensive						
source for						
environmental						
news						

Quality Measure

Scale Reliability
Alpha reliability = 0.7952, Standardized alpha = 0.8133
Reliability deleting each item in turn:

Table 17. Quality Measure (TOTAL), One-way ANOVA

	Alpha	Std.Alpha	r(item, total)
clear.confusing	0.7763	0.7953	0.4838
clear.unclear	0.7810	0.8012	0.4460
coherent.incoherent	0.7578	0.7786	0.6210
organized.unorganized	0.7590	0.7808	0.6099
well.written.poorly.written	0.7621	0.7834	0.5758
user-friendly/not user-friendly	0.7518	0.7732	0.6533
interactive/not interactive	0.8144	0.8193	0.3287
enjoyable/not enjoyable	0.7783	0.8014	0.4663

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Group	3	24.74	8.2454	0.4483	0.719
Residuals	118	2170.08	18.3905		

	Mean	sd	n
Website A (story)	18.84211	3.709202	38
Website B (story + comment box)	19.71875	4.531142	32
Website C (story + comment box + comments)	18.42857	5.343888	21
Group D (story + comment box + comments + social media icons)	19.22581	3.887670	31

Table 18. Quality: Summary of Means and F-values

	Website A	Website B	Website C	Website D	F	Pr
	(story)	(story +	(story +	(story +		
		comment	comment	comment		
		box)	box +	box +		
			comments)	comments +		
				social		
				sharing		
				icons)		
Quality (TOTAL)	18.84211	19.71875	18.42857	19.22581	0.4483	
Clear/confusing	2.421053	2.343750	2.333333	2.387097	0.0596	0.9808
Well written	2.157895	2.187500	2.380952	2.451613	1.0966	0.3535
Organized	1.921053	2.093750	1.952381	2.161290	0.8051	0.4934
Coherent	2.131579	2.187500	2.190476	2.354839	0.5991	0.6168
User friendly	2.105263	2.343750	2.047619	2.322581	1.1794	0.3206
Interactive	2.921053	2.937500	2.142857	2.354839	3.8501	0.01138
						*
Enjoyable	3.105263	3.500000	3.095238	3.096774	1.8105	0.149
Clear/unclear	2.078947	2.125000	2.285714	2.096774	0.3761	0.7704

Table 19. Other Factors: Summary of Means and F-values

	Website A	Website B	Website C	Website D	F	Pr
	(story)	(story +	(story +	(story +		
		comment	comment box	comment		
		box)	+ comments)	box +		
		,	,	comments +		
				social		
				sharing		
				icons)		
How likely are	3.315789	3.187500	3.095238	2.741935	1.2091	0.3096
you to read the						
comments on an						
article on this						
website?						
How likely are	4.157895	4.093750	4.285714	4.096774	0.1685	0.9174
you to post a						
comment on an						
article on this						
website?						
I would	2.736842	2.937500	2.714286	2.838710	0.3437	0.7938
recommend this						
website to my						
friends.						
I would	2.736842	2.937500	2.714286	2.838710	0.3437	0.7938
recommend this						
website to my						
family.						
I would share a	2.763158	2.562500	2.142857	2.580645	1.5735	0.1995
story I found						
interesting on						
this website						
with my friends						
on a social						
network (i.e.						
Facebook,						
Twitter,						
Delicious).						_

Treatment Screenshots

Figure 3. Side by side comparison of screenshots

Website A	Website B	Website C	Website D
story	story + the ability to	story + the ability to	story + the ability to
	comment (comment	comment (comment	comment (comment
	box)	box) + comments on	box) + comments on
	JOK)	story	story + social media
		Sto1 y	features (social media
			icons, RSS feed icons,
			recent comments)
GREAT LAKES ECHO	GREAT LAKES ECHO	GREAT LAKES ECHO	
Researchers study how climate change chases fish from streams	Researchers study how climate change	Researchers study how climate change chases fish from streams	GREAT LAKES ECHO Researchers study how climate change chases fish from streams
Fig. 201 - Addressmoothing Model, No. Fig. 21 in Thought is Model, No. Fig. 22 in Thought is Model, No. F	chases fish from streams 193.201 August and the stream of	Chases fish from streams Total and approximate action does a contraction of the proof of the pr	Chases fish from streams TO ADD TO A
"Stemar of the dock has it assessed systems of the secretarial and the second transfer of	according professor of fundamy and should resource. "Some of the first the in a paper specific professor of the specific specimen for an experiment of the specific specimen for an experiment of the specific specimen for an experiment of the speciment specimen for an experiment specimen for a specimen of the specimen specimen for a spec	Execution professor of flowerly and which of measures. "Uses of the find his in a paper of the	Secretary professor of flowardy and secretary control of the basis of
Oracy and Colleges from 64 and a contract many many from these here in the contract many from these here in the contract was a factor of the contract was a contract per and and a contract a contract per and and a contract per and and a contract per and a contr	Mode on the policy of the poli	Af Yea lays. The flary continues. Motive store long plated drives and the second seco	of "An age," the frequent more." White You have placed in more. White You have placed in more than the second of
move fether seth. They have to grower of provise many have its shortest and All-Disput plans for dismand. The following with they assessed recompany blocks have been they should have growers and hadases. The propert, further they for the following dismany fethers of themsoft Company and Meeting Machine Continue coulders consequent Survey's Australe Continues Company and Meeting Machine Continues consecution has the land pump, Machine Continues of the Meeting Machine Continues according to the land pump, Machine Continues Continues.	stems. Including identifying the normalise baseries in companie. The countries have be predict, for national, here the cost water-bursing stock and indict to a severer fromt case. They work to be two leves warring unknown all properly larger and from it was sometiment worth. They have the two leves warring unknown and properly larger and from the contribution of the contribution of broad that any larger of broad that and provides the properly larger and the contribution of the larger of the contribution of the larger of the lar	sortions from local relations with their insection by parties for the first on finite in cool streams, including ordering fine insection to proprior. The scientist house by sortion fit in returns, how the contractive from great will adopt to a senter Creat Casso. They went to know how secting waters will provid largerount these to be noted. First morth. They have the desiration final new to develop the contractive of the new first morth. They have the desiration final new to develop the contractive of the new first morth. They have the desiration final new to develop the new first morth.	controling that brasil colonis with new assembly partied for a final in boal and a state of the
White the country or things to present the control tension in the control tension of tensi	They present with failure. They present charles by the United Briefes Geological fourways National Climates Charges and Wildle Science Center, reclaims researchers from that agence, Mongrad Briefe Scienced, Perror State Culturally, The United High Research Could, Text Mannaco Department of Malcont Resources and Microgen Department of National Resources. **Description** **Text Country C	hear for cools reals." The missings are long inscription imaginate cools not set or private larg species and healths. The pripant, United by the historial billion december part for any Yestorian Chinage and Wildle Stories Contine, Indiana researchers that of party, Vindyan Brist University, Parts Sterio University, the University of Harmando-Auth, the Microsotia Gugatheset of Marcial Resource and Historian Continent of Hossian Resource of Supplement of Marcial Resource and Historian Continent of Hossian Resource of Hossian Resource of Marcial Resource and Historian Continent of Hossian Resource of Hossian Resour	New Ser Stocker and Michigan Service and Service Annual Service Servic
Notice that Control was a first that the cont	the Borroom are of the control of th	The scientists will lives distract change modes and produced body-see changes to understand how the hashed and distributions will change over 26. See and 100 years. Excellent products produced by the province of the change of	The scientish will the otherwise models and produced both-see changes to understand from the hands and distributions will distribute and offerth distributions will distribute and offerth distributions will distribute and the Section of Sectio
Amounts has your later to be a second or the	Unway set the project's lead transapping. **Y you've as individual date manager they are to the set within the page, and describing you've to the set of the segue, to all describing you and set one of the segue, to all describing you.	The second of th	professor of followers of Annual State University and the projects and University and the projects and Proceedings of the projects and Proceedings of the projects and Proceedings of the Proceedings of th
"The cashs of the work operation in the see immage the insic." Represent, who distinct here involved exempted with order or the in see in this is being in several parties of printing to desting these procure reasonable." Planning which parties are the second of the	Newworks have a particular to be dear pass and described to the found mobile and foundation that the foundation of the control of the contro	Amount in the property of the	Associate has provided by the service of the servic
The state of the property of the control of the con	"The quality of the select deposition to the see manage for indic." Processes, who such colors have been considerable and select and select find. "We select to it is gift, with go all going to deeming these precision resources." Pyrecoses used just from prices offered by demand for indicate test in a supprison amount of follows excluded. Select guards in produce service.	The goal is to help recours messages profest solvented withorhold and importer species. "The goal's of the seator deposition in these we recourse for sold," improved, with displace have been seator to entire the seator deposition in the we recompare for sold," improved, with displace have been seen to see that the sold, and the process of the seator deposition in the	The goal is the lay resource investigate profest individual extended and imported reported. "We goally of the water deposition on those we remay the insent? Pipconess; while studies labor. Incl. and includes of the water and form. The studies is a poly of printing the destroy. Body protocol resources." Processed as the form or printing form the form of the studies and the studies are studied to studies and the studies are studied.
the spring work in the MV. In the Mark 2012 In the beam buyers to determine the answer most unknowning to helded changes. Extern any product from detailuber changes to 2013. Placemosts capture the text has been as assess of opposity to companie the propert. When the Mill of the form one purchased was for the 1 finding point or page. The specific	What in the samp when is a print transformation in including, bear it in more interess uses of the least of the one of booling surprises, or way. These subseques study with himseased when reprint and charging register predicting, care contribute invessed nutrients and scalements will be writer. You desting a bit of these retrinic insocrates that pressure want to go to and recording, within You desting a bit of these retrinic insocrates that pressure want to go to and recording, within	Indiana woodlands being used by problem core. "ther if in seeing have as a party transformational schoolings, book into more interested uses of the less of the food and lookiness implementation, he says. These changes, along with inverseed under spread and changing implient productions, one problem invasional nutrients and advantumes to the seasor.	Indexe wordends being used to produce core. With I'm seeing here is a privile transformation all includings, both I'st involved sizes of the less of the date of biodeless production, he wight, These shapes, extry and increased what sopraid and charging produce produces, one profibed increased nutrients and advances in the season. On the season of the season.
temper ser wast, profesio, film somb par out. The property fromps worth parties between temperature. Proproveder sopin filming on the professional and an all confidence of continues an extreme in extreme parties and parties and parties are all confidence of continues and extreme parties and an all confidence of continues are serviced as a service of continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a serviced and an all continues are serviced as a service	and instituting our cost automations, reproduced agin, or some causes are trace formation institutions and less and value and the information is used to be the fact that the in- the spring and in the fail. By the fail of 2012, the face has based in determined in an extended to habited change. It plans to predict their detribution changes by 2010.	"Y was deating a kif of these natural resources that people want to go to and rections, we're also destroying our load enumers." Processes says, "It is not asset we been send communities to these next all communities to these next all communities to the next and communities to the next and the state of the next and the state of the next and the state of the next and	"If we deathly a bit of frees natural resources that people went to girl and reproses, we're see deathly girl to the deathly and to the processes seen," is some cases as been seend communities in these creat areas that depend on financies to come free the best following the surring and in the facility. As a facility of this fees areas to excess the common of a co
"They make up who as par." 8.1914, Oracla Janes Erde, Montgar Data University Ringer Center for Environment Journal of the Continuence of the Continue	Pyrocents use on the season has a serious or opposity to complete the project. "When have the different two quality forms are have the time pass or place," he says. "The larger was self, printedly, the costs part of. The properly includes a printed printed recovery a manager placement says faithing on the grantiques that are a child happerform become a manager printedly. The properly limited as a child happerform become a manager or possible.	Change, It gives to predict from destination changes by 2013. Placement was the face from these assessed or upgroup to complete the project. Figure only set of the face through the count on the face for the pulsars in places, "The broad or part of the place for the place of t	Change It plans to protect has destination changes by \$2110. Pigrovens says the team than a series of upproxy to complete the project. "We have to get it does now quickly because we have to have given in place," he says. "The tops or west, protecting, the cases gain or." The series are state protecting, the cases gain or."
October 1 Octo	"All of years have from confidence reprincess," he says, "He wort our size to have those, the wort our provides to from them. "Have from units on the says,"	The priparity findings worth just benefit resource managers, Perposent says felling us his grand/quently lates as a shift legised into misses a latest or according. "As all of segues have those elibricous deporterious," he says. "He said our late in his legister place. No worth our grandwise in harear them. "The said our property of the said of the said of the said."	The projects follogies worth just learned resource managers, Projected says follogie on the grandqueenfoil likes are shift included from thorous a server in extractly. "As of of projects have those elibricate opportunes," he says, "We san't our Kids to New Book, tills wort our grand-tilbs these them." "The second of the said." "The second our field on the second."
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Figure 4. Screenshot of website A



Figure 5. Screenshot of website B



Figure 6. Screenshot of website C





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