TRUST AND BIAS IN NEWS EVALUATION

A CONNECTED EXPERIENCES LAB RESEARCH REPORT
TRUST AND BIAS IN NEWS EVALUATION

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Recent research had shown that Americans believe that over half of news reporting is biased or inaccurate. Further, studies had shown that people’s evaluation of news articles as untrustworthy, biased, or inaccurate often depends on the political affiliation of the source and its alignment with the reader. This bias can result in differing evaluations from right- and left-leaning readers of the same article or claim.

Past research, however, did not distinguish between individuals’ trust in a news source, and their belief in the claims of the articles it publishes. Researchers also did not account for politically motivated responding, which may significantly affect such survey-based evaluations.

We address these issues in a randomized controlled experiment, using novel methods to separate the different factors that impact responses to news. The work will be presented at the 2019 Computation + Journalism Symposium and can be downloaded from SSRN.

Do readers trust reporting when they trust the media source, or do they trust claims that align with their political views? How can we measure and reduce politically biased responding?

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Key Findings

Our research results in several key findings, with implications for the design of online news aggregators and of platforms where news is shared.

1. It doesn’t matter where it appears, as long as I agree with it: Participants overwhelmingly report believing headlines that align with their political views, regardless of the source of the report.

2. There is strong evidence that survey participants report their news evaluations in a manner that is not truthful, but that affirms their political views. For example, right-leaning readers would often say a left-leaning headline is false, even when they believe it is true.

3. Financial incentives can reduce participants’ tendency to respond in ways that align with their political preferences. Right-leaning participants in particular rated more left-leaning headlines as true when given incentives to respond truthfully.
Research Background

The Gallup and Knight Foundation’s 2018 Survey on Perceived Accuracy and Bias in the News Media\(^1\) found Americans believe 62% of the news they see is biased and 44% is inaccurate. The study further showed that readers are more likely to trust news sources that align with their political leanings: for example, liberals tend to trust news from The New York Times, while conservatives rely more on claims from Fox News. However, in addition to the source factor, a reader’s evaluation of news depends on the message itself: a liberal reader may believe the claim that “Trump Speculates About ‘Rogue Killers’” solely because the claim aligns with her political views.

Indeed, this cognitive bias, known as motivated reasoning, is a well-documented phenomenon, in which people draw conclusions from information that aligns with their own political leanings. People with different political leanings may draw very different conclusions from the same information.

A related phenomenon is known as expressive responding. Expressive responding occurs when people can correctly evaluate information and draw the right conclusions, but choose to misreport their true beliefs in a way that better expresses their political preferences and affirms their identity.

In this research we ask: do readers evaluate news reports based on how much they trust the media source? Or do they trust claims that align with their political views, in a form of motivated reasoning, regardless of where these claims are published? Further, our study investigates the extent of expressive responding in news evaluation. How much of the bias is simply due to politically biased (expressive) responding? How can we reduce this bias?

We designed a novel experiment to answer this question. Going beyond previous studies, we randomly assign news sources to headlines to measure their respective effects on reader evaluation. In our study, participants rated claims that aligned with and opposed their political views, experimentally associated to publishers with

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different politics, as shown below. This setup allows us to understand the effect of the individual’s political alignment with media source, and with the claims made in the headline, on their evaluation of the reporting.

An example of randomized sources and headlines.

In addition, we measure and reduce expressive responding by providing some of our participants with monetary incentives to answer truthfully. This allows us to understand how truthful evaluation of headlines might be different than reported evaluations by the other participants.
The Experiment

We designed our study to gain a robust understanding of how much participants’ evaluations of news reports depend on their political alignment with the claims in news headlines versus their alignment with the news source.

Procedure
Each participant saw two political headlines associated with the New York Times, one of them left- and one of them right-leaning; similarly, two political headlines were shown associated to Fox News. In reality, these headlines, all of which were true, came from various other media sources. The remaining headlines were decoys, meant to hide the real purpose of this experiment.

Measures

Participants rated the headlines they saw on whether they believed them to be true or false. They also answered questions about their own demographics and political beliefs, and whether they recognized and trusted the news sources.
Experimental Manipulation
To investigate the impact of politically motivated responding, half of participants were assigned to an experimental condition where they received a financial bonus for correctly answering 12 or more questions. The other half were just asked to state whether they thought each article was true or false. The rating interface is shown at right.

Participants
We recruited 400 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing platform. We adjusted participation requirements to achieve an equal representation of conservative and liberal ideologies. All participants were paid $1 USD as compensation. The experimental condition bonus was an additional $1.60 USD.

Study Results
The results of the study suggest that the source of news has less impact on perceptions of truth or falsehood than was previously thought: Participants were more likely to rate articles as true when the headline claim aligned with their political beliefs. Compared to the political differences observed based on headline content, left- and right-leaning participants gave similar ratings to headlines regardless of whether the headlines were associated with The New York Times or with Fox News. In other words, the effect of a politically agreeable claim on evaluations of news was much greater than the effect of people’s political alignment with the media source. The figure on the next page shows the strong effect of headline alignment (left column) and the weaker effect of source (right column) on the “true” ratings.
Remarkably, when right-leaning participants receive monetary incentives to respond truthfully, they were significantly more likely to rate left-leaning headlines (lower left of the figure below) and sources (lower right) as true. In other words, it is likely that participants without incentives to respond truthfully often report opposite-side claims as false, even if they know the claims are true.

Effects of headline and source politics on news evaluation
Discussion

The results of our study shows that the reputation and perceived politics of a media source is less important to evaluations of reporting than previously thought. In contrast to findings from previous studies, participants’ evaluations of headlines in this study were most influenced by the politics of the claim presented, and to a lesser degree by the politics and reputation of the media source. Our experimental results suggest that the salience of publisher demonstrated in past studies was possibly caused by conflation of article and publisher politics. These findings are consistent with the idea of motivated reasoning, where a reader’s people’s worldview affects their evaluation of information.

**Headlines are more important than sources in news evaluation, and monetary incentives reduce bias in evaluation.**

When people receive incentives for responding with what they truthfully believe rather than responding in a manner that corresponds to their political beliefs, they are more likely to report agreeing with news claims that do not align with their politics. For instance, right-leaning individuals believe left-leaning news to be more true when they receive an incentive to report their beliefs truthfully.
Key Implications

This research has important implications for news, for researchers who study trust in news, and for platforms where news is shared.

Many previous studies of trust in news were conducted via surveys. Our results indicate that these surveys may have suffered from expressive responding, where participants answer in a way that affirms their political identity rather than truthfully reporting their beliefs. Future studies should also consider the use of source-headline randomization if they are seeking unbiased estimates of the influence of brand.

These results can suggest the need for future research to determine how news sharing platforms can curb the sharing of misinformation and questionable content. Past research indicates that people share news reports because they correspond with their political identities, often without regard to whether they believe the news to be true. Further work must be done to understand how these motivations can translate into actionable suggestions for reducing sharing of questionable information.

Limitations

While we are confident in our setup and results, this research has not been heavily peer reviewed, and should be considered preliminary. We are currently working on extending and replicating our findings.

Our experimental setup has a number of key limitations. First, the experiment was conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk, which means that our sample may not representative of the overall US population. Second, the participants that received the incentive to report their “truthful evaluations” of the headlines may instead have provided their best guess of what the researchers might label as ‘true’ or ‘false.’ It is not unreasonable for participants to assume a left-leaning bias of the researchers and respond accordingly, resulting in the observed trend.
However, our post-experiment questionnaire and open-ended responses by participants did not provide any indication that such activity had taken place.

Finally, our experiment used only two sources (New York Times and Fox News) and six headlines. It is possible that our results are specific to these settings. A future study should extend the number of sources and headlines used in the experiment.

Additional Information

This work was presented at the Computation and Journalism Symposium in Miami, Florida, on January 31, 2019.


For more information, including press inquiries, contact cxlab@cornell.edu.