

# Does labeling opinions as such influence the perception of the readers?

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October 3, 2018

## Background

Since the rise of channels, such as Fox News and MSNBC, many opinion programs has begin masquerading as “news” programs when in reality, they only offer opinions. For example, many news frequently states how a trading deficit is bad for the economy. Trading deficits, however, are not inherently detrimental to the economy but are simply imbalances between services, imports and exports. While it is possible for trade deficits to be unhealthy for an economy, it is clearly an opinion that is frequently presented as a fact.

Within these programs, they frequently intersperse facts and opinions. These opinions may sometimes be viewed to have the same weight as the facts just noted. In respect publications, editorials and newspapers specifically label opinion pieces in the “Opinion” section while leaving the news unlabeled. With the rise of other channels of information, such as TV programs and the internet, the opinion pieces are frequently unlabeled.

While a simple labeling of the information may not appear as an important detail, it may influence the critical analysis of the article to the readers. Without labeling, the reader may assume it is simply reported as news - especially, when the article flows from news to opinion seamlessly. On the other hand, if the article clearly states an opinion piece at the heading, the readers may view the article with much more skepticism and critical analysis of the argument. It would be helpful to determine whether the labeling of opinion pieces is needed so the readers can parse the information as needed, extract only the facts from the article and form their own views. The reader’s own analysis allows them to avoid making decision that may be harmful to themselves and closely weigh their views and decisions.

The experiment hopes to answer the following question:

**Does the labeling or explicit statements of Opinion articles influence the persuasiveness of the information delivered?**

## The Experiment

The experiment proposed is to randomize subject into control and treatment. Blocking for men and women, educational level and political leaning may be required if we have enough subjects.

Sample size proposed to be at least  $n = 100$  with a two-tailed  $\alpha = 0.05$  for significance. To estimate statistical power,  $ATE = 0.5$  and  $\hat{\sigma}(ATE) = 2$  estimates indicate a statistical power of 0.70. The experimental  $ATE$  and  $\hat{\sigma}(ATE)$  are fully expected to be different but rough guesses preliminarily indicates the experiment has sufficient power.

Initially, each subject will answer a set of questions for baseline of their views on the likert scale. The control group will read an unlabeled opinion article while the treatment group will read a labeled opinion article. Aside from labeling of articles, other methods of "opinion exposure" are proposed below. Finally, each group will answer another set of question to examine if their views has been swayed on the likert scale.

## Treatment Variations

For the treatment, multiple types of exposure can be tested. For example, we can propose 2 types of treatments to expose - 1 ranging from a simple labeling before the article to another with a large, bold font clearly indicating the opinion nature of the article. Another type of treatment can be exposing the article as an opinion piece before the reading - ie. at the top of the article - or at the bottom of the article, or at both places. Note that if the opinion disclaimer is placed at the bottom, it will clearly remind the reader what they have just read is an opinion piece just before they fill out the follow-up questionnaire and may have recency effects. Other variations of such can be made on the method of exposure provided enough subjects. After the article has been read, a separate set of similar questions will be asked to examine the impact of labeling on the opinion pieces.

Another interesting variation could be having both groups read the same unlabeled opinion article. On the final questionnaire, the first and additional question for the treatment group would ask them if they thought the article was a fact or opinion piece. This treatment attempts to force the readers to think critically about what they have read. The simply labeling serves to merely remind them rather than actively forcing them to think critically about the article. Parallel to the variation just mentioned, the opinion article to be read by the treatment group could end with a phrase such as "those are my views, do you agree?" to actively engage the readers in critical thinking. The follow-up questionnaire for the treatment and control group would be the same.

## The Subjects

Subjects for the experiment may be difficult to find. However, the entire survey should take no more than 5-10 minutes. Most likely, some sort of reward will have to be provided. Surveys could be used to find subjects in MIDS program to participate. The difficulty in running the experiment may become the specificity of the subjects. There may be issues in finding subjects in rural parts of the US and non-college educated subjects for a full conclusive survey.

In terms of randomization of the subjects, we do not believe this to be a large issue. There may be blocking of men versus women, educational level and/or political affiliation. By blocking, we may allow ourselves to more closely examine the results and analyze the impact, if any, of the opinion label on articles. Additionally, identification of political parties or associations and leanings may be collected as they may further show differences in perception and influence due to prior opinions. Other covariates such as religious influence may also be an options for varying the differences.

## The Outcome

The experiment hopes to examine whether labeling of opinion pieces as such is important for influencing readers. If it were noted that labeling articles cause critical thinking to engage, it should be encouraged (or discouraged depending on the end goal) to minimize or maximize the influence of articles. Additionally, if variations are performed, experiments will also indicate if placement and methods of opinion labelling affect the outcome.