To Label or Not To Label?

Hostile Perceptions of Fact-Checks and Their Sources in the United States

Introduction

Perhaps no facet of political journalism has grown as much in the last decade as fact-checking. National fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact are partnering with local media organizations to bring fact-checking to a variety of media (and political) markets. Websites like PolitiFact and FactCheck.org generate a lot of traffic with audiences. Scholars are devoting considerable attention to interrogating why journalists engage in fact-checking (Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016) and whether fact-checks lead media users to become more likely to believe things that are true (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). Recent work has examined the effectiveness of video and humor in fact-checking (Young, Jamieson, Poulsen, & Goldrin, 2017) and whether truth scales make fact-checks more effective (Amazeen, Thorson, Muddiman, & Graves, 2016).

One factor that makes fact-checks unique in the contemporary world of journalism is that the purpose of fact-checks is to do something that traditional journalism usually avoids: directly commenting upon the veracity of a statement made by a political elite. Since one purpose of fact-checks often ends up asking citizens to believe something that casts their own "side" in a negative light, scholars are skeptical about whether fact-checks can deliver on creating a more informed citizenry.

In other words, fact-checks defy, in some respects, the tenants of objectivity and balance in journalism. However, scholars know very well that partisan individuals often perceive a hostile news media, even when the reporting is done in a traditional, balanced way. The hostile media

perception is well-known in the study of political communication (Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch, 2012). Individuals who care about a topic are likely to perceive bias in balanced stories about that topic.

Fact-checks upend objectivity while simultaneously asking the audience to side with the facts, as presented, even if those facts are counter-attitudinal at best and cognitive dissonance-causing at worst. In hostile media effects research, Gunther et al., (2001) showed that the relative hostile media perception occurs when competing partisans perceive news coverage as biased in the same direction but each group believes the coverage is significantly more unfavorable to their own side relative to the opposing party. The extent, rather than the direction, of the bias is the important concept to understand.

In this paper, we seek to understand how news audiences respond when a story: 1) is labelled as a fact-check, 2) engages in a fact-check that does or does not rate the claim, and 3) is fact-checked by well-known ideological sources of news. We investigate these questions via a survey experiment of a population-based sample of adults in the United States. Our work is conceptually similar to studies where perceived bias is measured after a news story is purposefully altered by researchers to favor one side. For example, audiences accurately recognize bias in stories that genuinely slant toward one side (Kim, 2015; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, Chia, 2001; Brewer, Young, & Jones, 2013), or, similarly, originate from "friendly" or "unfriendly" sources (Arpan & Raney, 2003; Reid, 2012). Fact-checks are a different animal.

That is, we differ from prior research in that, in our survey experiment, the *vessel itself* is slanted even though it is *balanced*. Discovering how Americans react to this new form of accountability journalism will not only help us understand how the public reacts to specific fact-checking content but could also assist news organizations in deciding whether they should label

their fact-checks as a unique type of journalism or simply report them without the "fact-check" moniker.

Relative Hostile Media Perception

Scholars usually explain strong partisans' hostile media perceptions via one of three psychological mechanisms (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart 2004). Selective recall assumes unfavorable content is more salient to partisans. As such, it is more likely to be disproportionately remembered. In a fact-check, evidence that a politician has made a claim that is not accurate might be information that is considered to be more salient than other information in the story.

The second mechanism, selective categorization, is when opposing partisans focus on, process, and recall the same content but interpret the valence of that content as hostile to their own view. Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) describe this explanation as having roots in social judgment theory (Sherif and Hovland 1961), which notes that highly involved partisans are more likely than weaker partisans to believe that media statements tend to be biased. This mechanism also makes sense for highly involved partisans checking PolitiFact every day to see who is the latest leader with their "pants on fire," but have differential beliefs about whether that information is biased against their own partisans.

Of course, scholars have considered whether partisans might be vulnerable to an evaluative bias, rather than the perceptual biases of selective recall and selective categorization. The different standards mechanism proposes that opposing partisans agree on the content and valence of a news story but have different criteria for what constitutes a fair story (Vallone et al. 1985). That is, even-handed treatments of information in a news story would still constitute bias. For example, we could

imagine President Donald Trump supporters reading a story about how Trump erred in a statement of fact but believe that the story is biased because it should have mentioned all of the times he got the facts right or all of the times his adversaries made misstatements of fact. While early studies found evidence for different standards (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Vallone et al. 1985), in more recent work using a more stringent test, selective categorization emerged as the superior explanation (Gunther and Liebhart 2006; Schmitt et al. 2004).

Fact-Checking and the Hostile Media Perception

The effectiveness of fact-checking has been examined empirically for over a decade (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994; Amazeen, Thorson, Muddiman, & Graves, 2016; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Graves & Glaisyer, 2012). While some scholars showed corrective effects on audience beliefs (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994), others presented evidence that fact-checking does *not* reduce citizens' misperceptions when existing beliefs are challenged (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). In the main, selective exposure and perception drive the primacy of pre-existing beliefs, even when those beliefs have been shown to be factually inaccurate (Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Tang, 2010; Greitemeyer, 2014). When confronted with counter-attitudinal evidence many partisan citizens counterargue, actually strengthening their misperception (Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Hart & Nisbet, 2011; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Nyhan and Reifler (2015) found that Democrats are more favorable to fact-checks than Republicans. They conclude their examination of the effectiveness of fact-checks in the 2014 elections by noting,

> Finally, our study does not directly compare the effects of fact-checking to other forms
> of news reporting. We therefore cannot definitively conclude that conventional
> approaches to journalism would not prove as popular as fact-checking and/or would not

provide knowledge gains that are at least as large as those we document here. Our expectation, though, is that the clarity of the fact-checking format, which frequently uses (relatively) unambiguous ratings and seeks to reach defined conclusions, can help people make sense of complex factual debates more effectively than traditional reporting presented in an inverted pyramid style — at least when it comes to fact-checks that do not concern highly controversial issues and figures (p. 15).

We argue that fact-checking, when labeled as such, will raise the skepticism with which partisans approach the stories. That is, our major hypothesis is that supporters of a target of a fact-check should be more likely to perceive a hostile media when a news organization writes the same story but does not label is as a fact-check.

We also approach our analysis with several research questions. While we expect individuals to perceive a hostile media when a co-partisan is the target of a story labeled as a fact-check, people may still be more likely to accept the information in a fact-check as accurate. Therefore, we ask RQ 1: when partisans read a fact-check targeting a co-partisan, will they be more likely to accept the result of the fact-check?

Additionally, we are curious about source effects of fact-checks. Turner (2007) showed that simply labeling a story as coming from FOX or CNN affected whether liberals and conservatives thought the story was biased. On the other hand, fact-checks are not designed to promote ideological perspectives. Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network has certified the non-ideological nature of a variety of fact-checking organizations from mainstream organizations like the Washington Post's Fact Checker to Check Your Fact, a part of the conservative website the Daily Caller's platform. Since fact-checking organizations can do credible work, even when being funded by ideological sources, we ask RQ 2: does the source of a fact-check affect whether individuals accept it?

Method

To test our hypothesis and examine our research questions, we conducted a survey experiment of 510 individuals recruited by Qualtrics. The experiment varied whether the story was labeled a fact-check (both in the headline and lede), whether the story offered a rating of the fact-check (half-true or not rated with a definitive label) and the source of the fact-check (FOX News, MSNBC, or the Associated Press).

In the rating/no-rating condition, the story – about a claim then candidate Trump made about gun laws in Chicago – concluded, "Trump had a point about the high crime rate in Chicago, but his claim that Chicago has the nation's toughest gun laws is years out of date" in the no-rating version whereas the rating version added the sentence, "We rate the claim as half-true."

Participants were asked questions about their media attitudes, partisanship, voting behavior in the 2016 presidential election, and demographic information, including their political partisanship. Participants were also asked whether they thought the story was 1=biased in favor of Trump to 7=biased against Trump and whether the journalist was 1=biased against Trump to 7=biased in favor of him. Participants were also asked to rate the veracity of the claim as 1=definitely false, 2= probably false, 3=neither true nor false, 4=probably true and 5=definitely true. We also measured the amount of attention participants paid to the story.

Sample

The survey was administered online to a nationally representative sample (N = 510) sampled by Qualtrics. There were slightly more female respondents (50.78%) than self-identified male respondents (U.S. Census 50.8% female), half belonged to the 18-44 age group (50.98%, U.S. Census 44.6%), and a large majority identified themselves as "White/Causasian" (75.88%, U.S. Census 78.2%). In terms of educational attainment, three-fourths are almost evenly distributed

among those with only high school diploma (25.49%), some college (24.12%) and bachelor's degree (23.92%), while the rest either have associate's or graduate degree or do not have a high school diploma (slight skew above U.S. Census estimates in 2016). Half of the respondents have average annual income ranging between $25,000 and below $75,000 (U.S. Census 39.3%), while 20.39% reported earning below $25,000 (20.8%, U.S. Census). As for party identification, respondents were almost evenly split between the Democratic (50.20%) and Republican Parties (48.04%), with the remaining 1.76% maintaining their independence or not wanting to be categorized despite being probed on their leaning. This is a lower percentage of pure independents than is typically found in national surveys (Pew 2017 estimates 8% of respondents were pure independents) Of those who fully identified with either parties (n = 327), majority said they strongly identified with their chosen party (61.85% for Democrats, 57.14% for Republicans).

Results

Hierarchical linear models were used to estimate the effect of the media source, the fact-checking label, and the fact-checking rating on people's hostile media perceptions and beliefs in the false statement. Table 1 shows the main effects. Among the three independent variables of our interest, the fact-checking label had the largest explanatory power. Whether the news story was labeled as a "fact check" in the title significantly contributed to people's hostile perception towards the news story. People who saw the story labeled as a "fact check" were more likely to say that the story was biased against Trump, controlling for their partisanship, attention to the story, and demographics (b=0.40, p<0.05). This is consistent with our guiding hypothesis.

Moreover, the fact-checking label also influenced how people rated Trump's statement after reading the story. People who saw the story labeled as "fact check" were less likely to rate the statement as true, suggesting that the fact-checking label made the story more persuasive (b=-0.46,

p<0.05). This effect was over and above the effect of partisanship, attention to the story, and demographics. Additional investigations into the interaction between partisanship and the fact-checking label suggested that the persuasive effect of the fact-checking label was equally strong for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans (Figure 1). On the other hand, the ideology of the media sources and the presence of a truthfulness rating did not have unique contributions to people's perception of the story/journalist being hostile towards Donald Trump, and their beliefs in Trump's statement.

We also estimated models of interaction effects among the media source, the fact-checking label, and the fact-checking rating. Table 2 showed a significant interaction effect between the media source and the fact-checking label on people's hostile perception towards the story. A post-hoc analysis suggested that the effect of the fact-checking label was different for Fox, MSNBC, and AP (F=7.30, df=2, p=0.001). For Fox and MSNBC, labeling a story as a "fact check" made people perceive the story as more biased against Trump; while for AP, the fact-checking label actually made people perceive the story as less biased against Trump (Figure 2).

Discussion

Qualtrics only finished gathering its sample on March 26th, so we have more work to do in investigating the effects of personality, general media trust, and attitudes toward the president on perceptions of a hostile media and the participants' own rating of Trump's claim.

However, with what we have learned so far, it is clear that labeling a story as a fact-check simultaneously made people more likely to perceive a hostile media *and* be more likely to be skeptical of Trump's claim about Chicago's gun laws. Additionally, ideological sources were perceived to be biased about Trump while the Associated Press was not. Interestingly, Fox and MSNBC were both perceived to be biased against Trump. If our study had been conducted early

in the 2016 presidential primaries, this would have made sense to us. On the one hand, Fox News shows hosts have largely served as cheerleaders for the president since he took office, making the perception of bias against Trump puzzling. On the other hand, the fact-check label on Fox also signals that the information is not coming from a show host, but from the reporting side of the media company, perhaps raising the skepticism of regular Fox viewers, something we will explore and report before the AEJMC conference should we be accepted.

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Table 1 OLS models on hostile media perceptions and belief in the false statement

	Dependent variable:			
	Hostile perception towards the story	Hostile perception towards the journalist	Evaluation of the statement	Rating of the statement
Age	0.134**	0.149***	-0.086**	-0.089*
	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.041)	(0.052)
Sex	-0.433**	-0.428**	0.240*	0.340**
	(0.184)	(0.172)	(0.130)	(0.167)
Education	0.063	0.060	-0.045	-0.174***
	(0.062)	(0.058)	(0.044)	(0.056)
Income	0.027	0.022	-0.010	0.024
	(0.062)	(0.058)	(0.044)	(0.057)
Race	0.271	-0.069	0.151	0.237
	(0.208)	(0.194)	(0.147)	(0.189)
Partisanship	-0.027	0.026	0.160***	0.376***
	(0.046)	(0.043)	(0.033)	(0.042)
Partisanship Strength	-0.084	-0.092	-0.020	0.126
	(0.099)	(0.093)	(0.070)	(0.090)
Attention to the story	-0.097	-0.079	-0.042	0.164**
	(0.074)	(0.070)	(0.053)	(0.067)
Fox	-0.119	-0.056	0.034	0.310*
	(0.201)	(0.188)	(0.142)	(0.183)
MSNBC	0.151	-0.101	-0.089	0.215

	(0.201)	(0.188)	(0.142)	(0.183)
Fact-checking label	0.404**	0.072*	-0.209	-0.462**
	(0.201)	(0.188)	(0.142)	(0.182)
Fact-checking rating	-0.146	-0.113	-0.001	0.149
	(0.202)	(0.189)	(0.143)	(0.184)
Constant	4.095***	3.988***	2.814***	3.108***
	(0.426)	(0.397)	(0.300)	(0.388)
Observations	466	466	435	466
R2	0.044	0.047	0.080	0.205
Adjusted R2	0.018	0.022	0.053	0.184
F Statistic	1.726*	1.880***	3.044***	9.716***

Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2 Interaction effects on the hostile perception towards the story

Variables	B	SE	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	4.436	.487		9.103	.000
Age	.122	.057	.113	2.129	.034
Sex	-.416	.184	-.117	-2.261	.024
Education	.066	.062	.055	1.070	.285
Income	.016	.062	.013	.262	.793
Race	.232	.210	.054	1.105	.270
Partisanship	-.027	.046	-.027	-.579	.563
Partisan strength	-.070	.099	-.033	-.712	.477
Attention to the story	-.086	.074	-.055	-1.169	.243
Fox	-.993	.349	-.262	-2.844	.005
MSNBC	-.584	.341	-.155	-1.711	.088
Fact-checking label	-.323	.348	-.086	-.929	.353
Fact-checking rating	-.300	.345	-.079	-.869	.386
Fox * Fact-checking label	1.080	.498	.251	2.170	.030
MSNBC * Fact-checking label	1.101	.490	.253	2.246	.025
Fox * Fact-checking rating	.446	.493	.078	.904	.366
MSNBC * Fact-checking rating	.012	.495	.002	.024	.981

Notes: 1. R^2=0.069, F=2.071, df=16, p=0.009

Figure 1 Effect of fact-checking label for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans
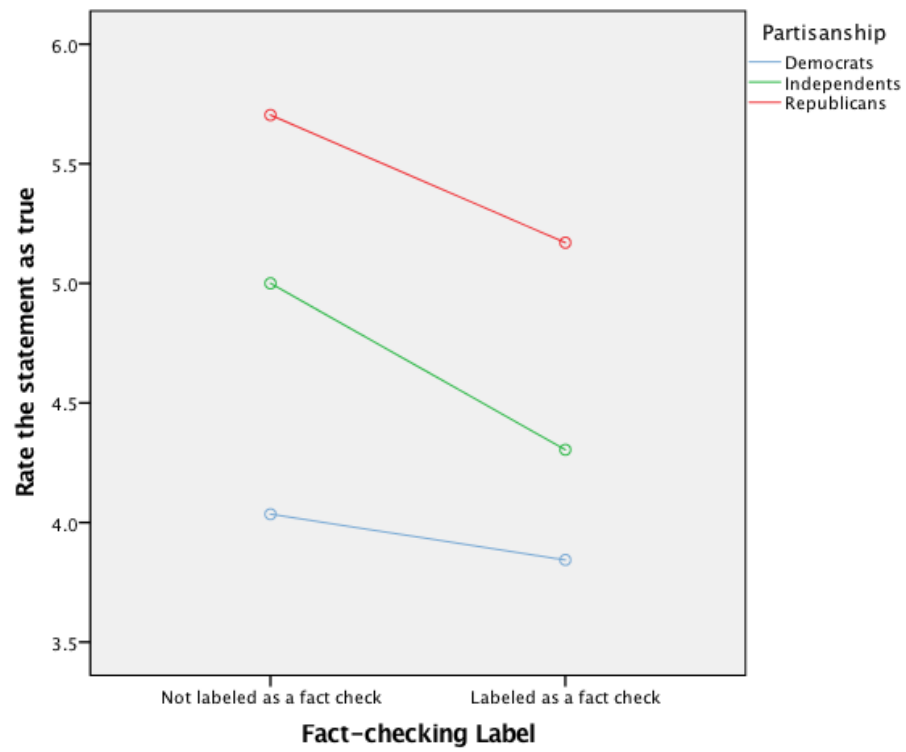
Figure 2 Interaction effects of the media source and the fact-checking label on the hostile

perception towards the story