

To Label or Not To Label?

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

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Abstract

In this paper, we seek to understand how news audiences respond when a story: 1) is labeled as a fact-check, 2) engages in a fact-check that does or does not rate the claim, and 3) is fact-checked by ideological news sources.

We investigate these questions via a survey experiment of a population-based sample of adults in the United States. The findings suggest 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.

Discovering how Americans react to this new form of accountability journalism will help us understand how the public reacts to specific fact-checking content, and 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.

Hypothesis & Research Question

- **Our major hypothesis is that:**
H1: 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 label is as a fact-check.
- **Additionally, we also 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?
RQ 2: does the source of a fact-check affect whether individuals accept it?

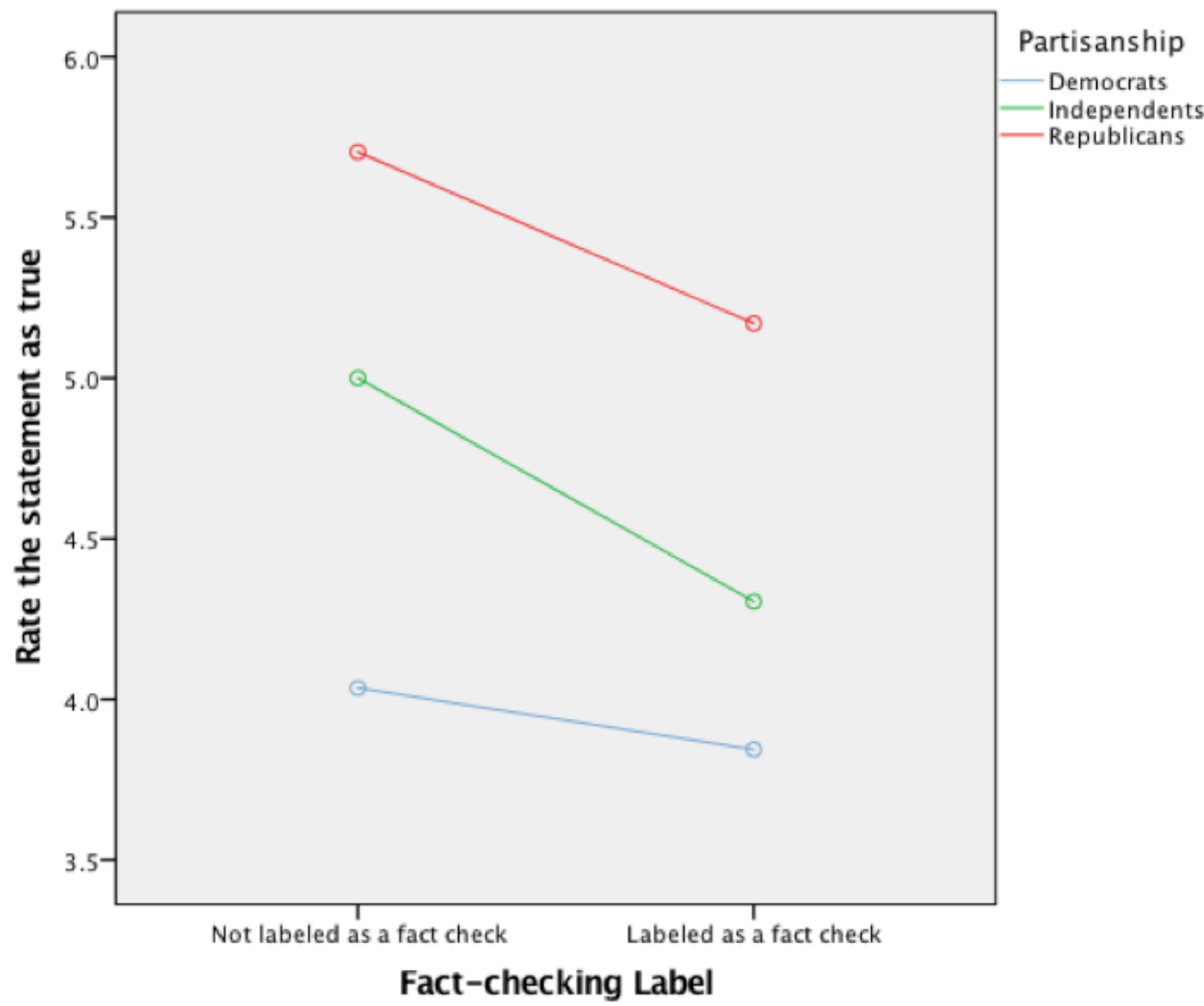
Method

- **Online survey experiment: 2×2×3**
We varied whether the story was labeled a fact-check, 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).
- **Nationally representative sample:**
50.78% female, 50.98% belonged to the 18-44 age group, 78.2% “White/Caucasian”;
Three-fourths almost evenly distributed among those with only high school diploma (25.49%), some college (24.12%) and bachelor’s degree (23.92%);
Half have average annual income ranging between \$25,000 and below \$75,000;
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

Results: Main Effects

- **The fact-checking label had the largest explanatory power in explaining HMP towards the 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.

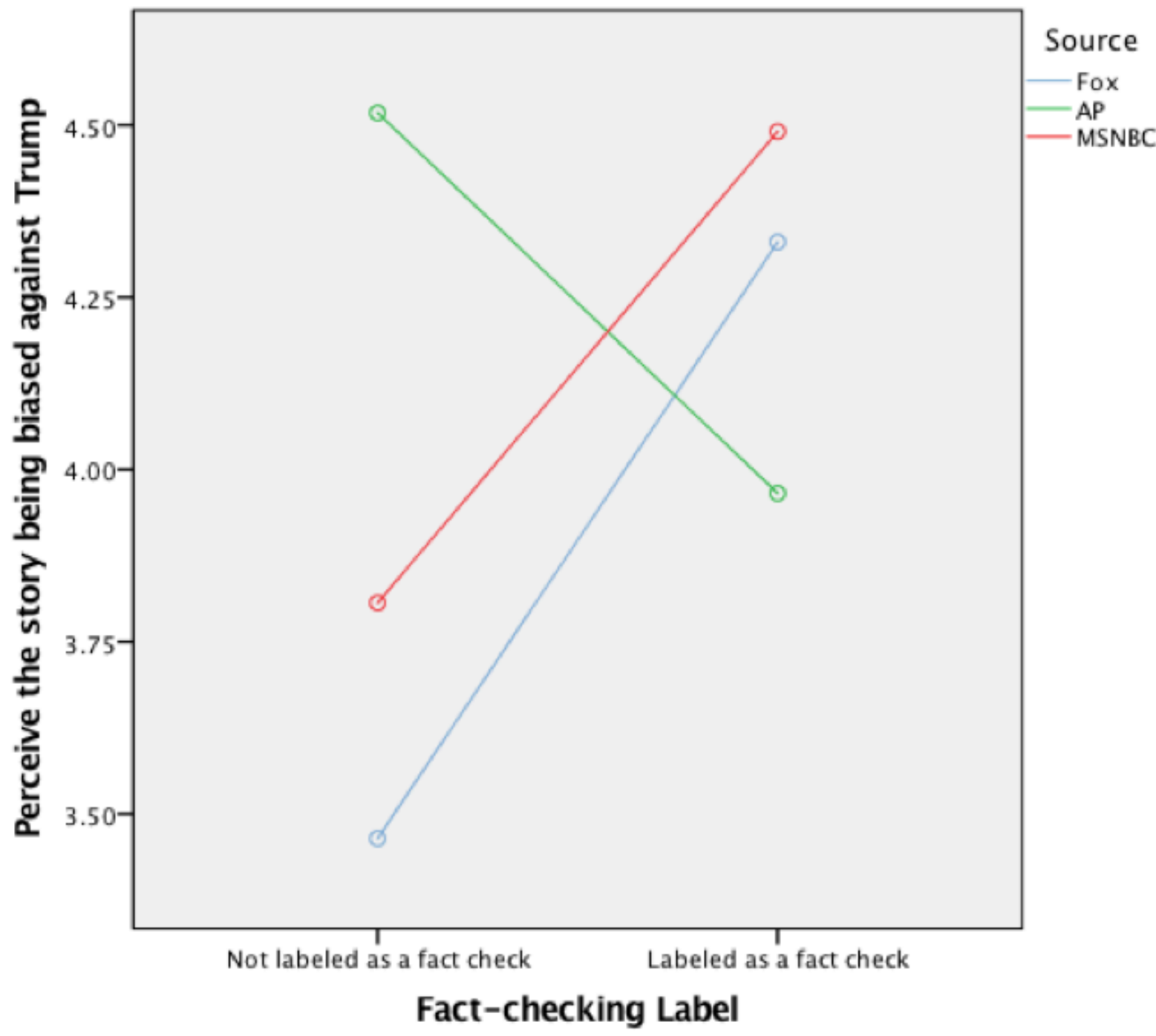
- **Moreover, the fact-checking label also influenced how people rated Trump’s statement after reading the story.**
People who saw the story labeled as “fact check” were less likely to rate the statement as true, suggesting that the fact-checking label made the story more persuasive, controlling for their partisanship, attention to the story, and demographics ($b=-0.46$, $p<0.05$).
The persuasive effect of the fact-checking label was equally strong for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans:



- **Effect of the ideology of the media sources and the presence of a truthfulness rating**
Both factors 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.

Results: Interaction Effects

- **There is also a significant interaction effect between the media source and the fact-checking label on people’s HMP towards the story.**
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:



Conclusion

- 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. It is likely that 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, raising the skepticism of regular Fox viewers.

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