Essay 2: Attempting to Measure American Trust in News Media

By Adam Yang

"Fake News". Ever since Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States, this term has been eagerly used by Americans all across the political spectrum to shut down ideas that contradict their own. What started off as a description of weaponized misinformation posted on social media during the 2016 election cycle, soon became a catchphrase used by politicians and media personalities to describe any form of inaccurate information (Wendling). Eventually, it evolved into a colloquial term used by many common folks to act as a proverbial shield against information that contradicts their beliefs. The popularization of this term is symbolic of the U.S. population's growing distrust towards media news outlets.

According to survey data collected by Gallup, the trust in news media has been steadily dropping over the years to the point where in September 2016, only 32% of the participants claimed to trust the news media at least a "fair amount" (Gallup). The Gallup survey also reported that in July 2017, 63% of the participants believed that the news media favor one political party or the other (Gallup). It is possible that the growing partisanship of both the news media and the general public is driving this distrust. Whatever the reason is, these findings lead to a very interesting question: Will the average American be more likely to distrust an article when they know which news outlet published the article?

If we can design an experiment to explore whether knowing an article is published by a mainstream news outlet would cause the average American to distrust the information in the article, we may be able to gain some insight about the current state of trust that the American public has in our established sources of information. The experiment will likely also be able to separately gauge the difference between Republican and Democrat attitudes towards different news outlets, if we implement blocking by political affiliation.

The Ideal Experiment

The ideal setup of this experiment would involve randomly selecting a large group of participants from the entire population of the United States to get the best representation of the average American. This is easier said than done because there are all sorts of factors that may cause one type of American to be more willing to participate in the experiment than others. Furthermore, there are certain Americans who are unable to take part in the experiment, such as the 14% who are illiterate (NCES). Once the subjects are selected, they will be labeled by important descriptions such as their political affiliations, their age, their ethnicity, and their gender. Then blocking will be implemented where the participants are separated into subgroups determined by the mentioned descriptions. The participants within each block would be randomly allotted into the control and treatment groups. This way, the control and treatment groups would have an equal number of participants with each description. For example, there should be a similar number of Democratic millennial Asian men in the control

and treatment groups. This will reduce the difference between the two groups caused by chance. For example, if Republicans are more likely to distrust the news media, and the treatment group gets randomly assigned many more republicans than the control group, then our results will be biased.

After the treatment and control groups are assigned, each member of the groups would be given a collection of articles from various news sources to read. Each of these articles will be printed on plain Word/PDF format with zero branding. In terms of what articles to feature in the experiment, it would be ideal to have an equal representation of media sources along the political spectrum. The treatment group would be given the sources of each article, while the control group would only be able to read the content of the articles without knowing the source. Each subject would read every single article given to them and assign the articles with a rating of how trustworthy the content is. The resulting ratings of trustworthiness will be analyzed and compared to see whether or not the treatment group is significantly less or more trusting of the articles than the control group. Furthermore, because we have descriptions of each subject's political affiliations, we can compare the effect sizes of each political group to the different news sources.

The Proposed Experiment

I believe the most challenging part of this experiment will be to provide a fair representation of the average American. The United States is such a big country with so many different types of people, that the best way to represent the average American would be to truly do a random draw from the entire population of the United States. However, this is not achievable because I do not have the complete list of American adults where I can randomly pick out names and force them to participate in the experiment. I might have to concede to the fact that I cannot generate a truly random sample to represent the average American. One possible solution would be to reduce the scope of the experiment to target the average person from Virginia (I chose Virginia as an example because of its status as a swing state). However, even though it is more feasible to represent the average Virginian, it would still be challenging to get a large number of participants who are willing to participate in the experiment. The idea of picking out random names from a phone book and then cold calling them to see if they would participate in the experiment seems very daunting. Changing the scope of the experiment to target the average MIDS student would make it easier to get participants. However, it is very likely that the majority of Berkeley students are leaning towards the left on the political spectrum, and I would prefer to also get the conservative input. I will remain flexible in terms of the scoping of this experiment and would be open to input from my teammates or professor in terms of designing the most interesting and viable experiment.

I believe the most feasible way to get our sample of participants would be to use Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). With that tool, we can easily acquire participants to help with our experiment, but our sample will only be representative of the AMT workers. Therefore, we must mention how we obtained our participants in our report and emphasize that our findings will not be truly representative of the average American. Hopefully other data scientists will

recreate the experiment with a better sample set to verify or challenge our findings. The added benefit of AMT is that we can specify how many conservative and liberal workers we want if we choose to give both sides of the political spectrum an equal impact on the results. An alternative method would be to apply for a random group of participants and then ask them for their political affiliations after they're chosen. However, I do not know what percentage of AMT workers are liberal and conservative or whether the distribution is even representative of the American public. If doing a random sample of AMT workers doesn't give us a better representation of the American public, then this process might be unnecessary. For this reason, I prefer the first method because we can justify it by wanting to give liberals and conservatives an equal voice to help determine our results.

Like the ideal experiment, I believe blocking should be implemented when assigning the control and treatment groups. The most important category to block by would be political affiliation because I believe Republicans and Democrats will have very different levels of trust in the articles that we show them. I believe age might also be an important category in which to implement blocking because older individuals may have a different level of established trust towards the various news medias. Blocking for age can be done by generation such as Millennial versus Baby Boomers. Other possible blocking categories such as gender and ethnicity can also be implemented if necessary. However, if we end up blocking on too many variables, the sample size and/or recruitment might get challenging to fill out each of the combinations. Therefore, I would prefer to do blocking on only political affiliation and age for this experiment.

Similar to the ideal experiment, each individual of both groups will be given the same handful of articles to read and then provide a rating of how trustworthy the content of that article is. The treatment group will receive articles that contain the source of the news while the control group will be deprived of the source. Deciding which articles to provide to the subjects might be a bit challenging. One potential pitfall I worry about is that the control group will be able to guess which source the article comes from based off of how it is written. I think it would be best to avoid op-ed articles and instead only utilize articles that provide facts. This way the control group will be less likely to guess the source of the article based on the opinions provided. Using political news would likely result in the strongest reaction in the treatment group and will probably yield the most interesting results. However, I plan to also include non-political news to see if the results would be any different. The sources that I choose from would also be difficult to decide. I would like to get at least one political article each from CNN and Fox News. If the AMT workers are willing to read 10 articles based on the payment we provide, then I would also try to include a variety of other sources. I want to make sure that half of the articles come from sources with a liberal reputation and half come from sources with a conservative reputation.

Even though I would like to use a large variety of different types of articles, I am aware that asking people to read 10 articles might be too much. As the exercise gets tedious, people might begin skimming the articles which might make the results from the latter articles less reliable. There needs to be some discussion within the group about the ideal number of articles

to achieve balance between variation and acceptable workload. One possible way to address this issue is to give the AMT workers one article a day to read for 10 days. This method might be able to allow the subjects to put in a fair effort into reading each of the articles as well as increasing the time between the readings. If you read two articles back to back, the first article might bias your opinions on the second article. Therefore, the increased amount of time between articles can help reduce that effect. Another issue is that we cannot supervise the subjects while they are reading the articles. It is possible for them to use Google to try and figure out where the article comes from if they have a curious nature. I think it is important to give clear instructions to the control group to avoid looking up the source of the articles before they've reported their feelings about it.

After the data is collected, my main interest would be to compare the overall trustworthiness rating given by the control and treatment groups. In addition, it would be interesting to see if there's a different treatment effect between conservative subjects and liberal subjects to each of the news sources. The same analysis can be done for subjects of different age groups. Finally, I would also want to see if there's a difference in trust between political articles and non-political articles. Maybe the source of the news only breeds mistrust if the topic at hand is about politics as opposed to another topic such as sports.

Works Cited

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