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Priming and Fake News: The Effects of Elite Discourse on Evaluations of News Media

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Fake news has become a prominent topic of public discussion, particularly among elites. Recent research has explored the prevalence of fake news during the 2016 election cycle and possible effects on electoral outcomes. This scholarship has not yet considered how elite discourse surrounding fake news may influence individual perceptions of real news. Through an experiment, this study explores the effects of elite discourse about fake news on the public's evaluation of news media. Results show that exposure to elite discourse about fake news leads to lower levels of trust in media and less accurate identification of real news. Therefore, frequent discussion of fake news may affect whether individuals trust news media and the standards with which they evaluate it. This discourse may also prompt the dissemination of false information, particularly when fake news is discussed by elites without context and caution.

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After the 2016 election, speculation about the influence of what has been called "fake news" on the election outcome dominated political discourse. Within this discourse were claims that erroneous stories posted on social media perpetuated false information related to both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, exacerbating an already volatile campaign. This talk has persisted, widening the conversation about the role of misinformation in politics. Previous misinformation scholarship has chronicled the dissemination of information that is false but defended with substantial evidence (Garrett, Nisbet, & Lynch, 2013). This research notes that misinformation is hard to correct, may have a resounding effect over time if it goes uncorrected (Thorson, 2016), and may follow ideological lines (Weeks, 2015).

The rise of fake news has expanded the form of misinformation, and a new line of misinformation research. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define *fake news* as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers" (p. 213). Their research explores the prevalence of fake news and its influence on electoral outcomes, finding minimal support that fake news influenced electoral outcomes in the 2016 election. Only 15% of respondents reported ever seeing a fake news headline, whereas 8% reported seeing and believing a fake headline. Moreover, they find it would take the persuasive equivalent of 36 television advertisements for a single fake news article to have had an effect on the election's outcome. On the other hand, Silverman (2016) found that fake news stories were more widely shared than real news stories during the 2016 election and that those who read fake news stories largely believed them.

These studies addressing the form and effect of fake news have considered only exposure to fake news itself and not exposure to the larger discursive reaction. Elites, including politicians, journalists, and activists, have continued to reference fake news in their discussion of political news coverage after the 2016 election. In several cases, political elites have dismissed accusations against them as "fake news," whereas news organizations have asserted they are "real" in an attempt to distinguish themselves from prominent fake news concerns. Although the extent to which fake news influences electoral outcomes is debatable, it may have more wide-ranging effects through its prevalence in elite discourse.

We extend this research by considering how discourse about fake news may have effects on the public beyond vote choice or the proliferation of misinformation. Drawing from research on priming and media trust, we argue that the prevalence of this discourse may affect evaluations of news media in that it primes individuals to think that real news is also fake and influences overall trust in media. Like other forms of misinformation, we suggest that the priming effects of discourse about fake news may set standards for evaluating news media that individuals with different ideologies apply in unequal ways. To

address these questions, this study uses an experiment manipulating the content of fictional elites' social media posts to prime individuals with discourse about fake news. We find that individuals exposed to elite discourse about fake news expressed less trust in media and identified real news with less accuracy than those who were not primed. Moreover, partisanship did not appear to moderate the identification of real or fake news. These findings add to an understanding of how fake news influences democratic outcomes. First, talking about fake news may have wide-ranging consequences for whether individuals trust news media and the standards with which they evaluate it. Second, this discourse may encourage the dissemination of false information, particularly when fake news is discussed by elites without context and caution.

Elite Discourse and Priming Effects

Elites frequently set the political and discursive agenda. Defined by Zaller (1992) as "politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists" (p. 6), elites conceptualize ideas that reverberate in the minds of the public. Substantial evidence exists that elite messages transfer to public consciousness and conversation (Druckman, 2001). The success of elite messages then depends on the magnitude with which they are discussed and the extent to which they are broadcast across a variety of media (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Still, these effects may be limited. For those with high and low levels of political knowledge, the effects of elite messages dissipate quickly across a 2-week period (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011).

Originating from early work on representativeness, priming research suggests that after processing information, individuals form "activation tags" that link concepts in the mind (Collins & Loftus, 1975, p. 409). These activation tags are more accessible in one's mind and influence the evaluation of subsequent information because they remain at the "top of the head" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 208). Individuals are "primed" when information is delivered, stored at the top of one's memory and recalled to evaluate subsequent information. Priming is distinct from other theories of cognitive media effects, like framing, in that it focuses on the salience of information, whereas framing focuses on the structure of information and how it is processed as a result (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Moy, Tewksbury, & Rinke, 2016; Scheufele, 2000). Therefore, studies looking at the effects of a salient topic are looking at priming rather than framing effects.

Research on priming offers substantial evidence that individuals are primed by messages seen in media. By emphasizing certain issues in their coverage, media make certain standards more accessible when evaluating issues and candidates (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Takens, Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, &

Van Atteveldt, 2015). For example, as media coverage of the Gulf War increased, individuals relied more on their perceptions of the Gulf War when evaluating President George H. W. Bush's performance (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). As media emphasize certain issues more frequently, these issues are primed in the minds of the public and are more accessible when forming judgments about policies or candidates. Moreover, priming effects seem to occur when the topic that is primed closely relates to the topic that is being evaluated (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

Elite messages, in addition to media messages, may have a priming effect on individuals' evaluations of issues or candidates (Broockman & Butler, 2017; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998). In particular, Zaller (1992) looked at the influence of elite messages on public opinion dynamics, where individuals who receive elite messages were more likely to accept messages consistent with their existing beliefs. Zaller found that recent elite messages are more accessible and thus more influential on opinion formation and updating. The frequency of elite messages may also play a role in the extent to which priming effects occur. Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) found that as messages about a liberal media bias increased, so did public perceptions of bias. Their findings suggest that the public takes cues from elites when evaluating media.

There also exists some evidence against strong priming effects (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). This is particularly true when looking at effects over time (Petty & Jarvis, 1996), across parties (Dalton et al., 1998), and across different psychological states and social contexts (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Still, priming effects are substantially documented and highly plausible when looking at elite communication with the public. Evidence that elite messages influence the evaluation of related concepts (Dalton et al., 1998; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) suggests that the prominence of fake news in elite discourse may produce a priming effect on the evaluation of news media by making fake news more accessible in the minds of the public. This means that individuals are more cognizant of fake news when it is at the top of their mind and are likely influenced by that accessibility when evaluating the validity of a news article, such that

H1a: Those who are primed by elite discourse about fake news will identify *fake news* with *more accuracy* than those who are not primed.

Because priming effects seem to transfer to relevant concepts (Petty & Jarvis, 1996), it is likely that the priming effect will transfer to evaluations of real news media. That is, as fake news is made accessible in one's mind, it will also be recalled when evaluating real news:

H1b: Those who are primed by elite discourse about fake news will identify *real news* with *less accuracy* than those who are not primed.

Media Trust

Priming effects from elite discourse about fake news may also influence the extent to which individuals trust the media. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998) defined *trust* as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (p. 395). The basic concept of trust indicates that there is a trustor and a trustee. Regarding media trust, the media represent the trustee and the public represent the trustors. In general, trust in media has been steadily declining in the United States since 1976. In 2016, Americans reported their lowest-ever levels of trust in the media, with only 32% reporting having a "great deal/fair amount" of trust in the mass media (Swift, 2016).

Consistent throughout research on media trust is the finding that mainstream media use is correlated with trust in the media and, contrastingly, use of nonmainstream or alternative media is correlated with distrust in media (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). The extent to which individuals perceive media as hostile to their beliefs also influences their overall media trust, where greater perceptions of hostility related to lower levels of trust in media (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Research suggests that media framing can influence levels of media trust, in which game-framing, or coverage of politics as a strategy, is negatively related to media trust (Hopmann, Shehata, & Stromback, 2015). In addition, Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that trust in media moderates the role of priming where individuals can be primed by media only if they trust the source.

Similarly, a distrust of media may also produce effects. Low levels of media trust are associated with "media skepticism," defined as "the perception that journalists are not fair and objective in their reports, that they do not always tell the whole story, and that they would sacrifice accuracy and precision for personal and commercial gains" (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 506). Research suggests that media skepticism has effects on media consumption and overall democratic processes (Ardèvol-Abreu, Hooker, & Gil de Zuniga, 2017; Tsfati, 2003). Tsfati and Cappella (2003) found that when individuals are skeptical of news media, they seek out alternatives to mainstream coverage. In turn, individuals high in skepticism experience less exposure to mainstream news than individuals who are less skeptical.

This line of inquiry has primarily focused on media trust as a predictor variable of media effects. The present study seeks to extend this research by examining media trust as an outcome of priming. Individuals who are primed to think of fake news may use fake news as a representative of news media as a whole, prompting the following hypothesis:

H2: Those individuals who are primed by elite discourse about fake news will report lower levels of trust in the media than those who are not primed.

A potentially potent factor influencing levels of media trust is political ideology. Some evidence suggests that partisans rely on the perceived partisanship of the media source when evaluating claims (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014). If certain news outlets are seen as partisan, they may serve as source cues for partisanship that influence whether an individual trusts or engages with their content. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found that partisans prominently rely on source cues to anticipate agreement in news coverage and to decide whether to read an article. Source cues that convey a certain partisanship can influence perceptions of the outlet's credibility and bias (Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Hastall, 2007). When individuals simply evaluate information from a source that they suspect disagrees with their beliefs, they perceive greater bias and less credibility than when evaluating information from sources with which they suspect agreement (Dalton et al., 1998; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

In addition to research that suggests that source cues influence media trust, perceptions of bias, and credibility, the political ideology of the reader can impact the same outcomes. For instance, conservative and liberal audiences react negatively to communication that is dissonant with their beliefs (Nisbet, Cooper, & Garrett, 2015). Generally, the literature suggests that ideology affects perceptions of source credibility. Previous research notes strong associations between ideology and perceived source credibility or bias (Dalton et al., 1998; Nisbet et al., 2015), and ideology and evaluations of news media, particularly among conservatives (Pew Research Center, 2014; Stroud & Lee, 2013; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). We believe that these associations may affect news accuracy such that when conservatives see an article by the *New York Times*, their perception of the organization as liberal may influence their evaluation of the article as fake or real. We expect that even when primed with elite discourse about fake news, ideology will matter in the following way:

H3: Political ideology will moderate the relationship between elite discourse about fake news and the accurate identification of real news articles.

METHOD

The present study uses an experiment to explore the impact of elite discourse on individuals' ability to accurately identify real and fake news. Through a 2 × 2 between-subjects design, we manipulate whether participants were or were not primed by discourse about fake news and whether they received real or fake news articles. This study received Institutional Review Board approval on April 19, 2017. Data were collected from April 25–27, 2017, and an additional sample of conservatives was collected from December 11–13, 2017.

Participants

Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. Only U.S. residents older than 18 were allowed to participate (N = 299). Although our sample is not nationally representative, MTurk offers a participant pool that is more representative than convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012) and thus is frequently used for online experiments in the social sciences (Arceneaux, 2012; Clifford, Jewell, & Waggoner, 2015; Thorson, 2016). Participants provided informed consent and were paid $1.00 for their participation in the study.

The demographic makeup of the sample used in this study is primarily Caucasian men. The average age is 36 years old (SD = 12.1). The sample is college educated with the highest frequency of participants having a 4-year college degree or more (43.5%), compared to 30.3% of the U.S. general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The income levels are evenly dispersed across salary brackets although most participants reported making less than $30,000 per year, slightly below the U.S. median household income ($55,322), as reported by 2016 census data. The sample includes a smaller percentage of women (43.6%) as compared to the general population (50.8%). Politically, the sample identified as mostly Democrat (43.8%) with 23.1% who identified as Republican and 30.1% who identified as Independent. Participants were politically knowledgeable with a mean score of 3.25 on a 4-point scale (SD = 1.17).

Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in which they were exposed to one of two sets of tweets from elites. Participants were then exposed to either real or fake news articles (see Table A1). The first variable, elite discourse about fake news, was manipulated by exposing participants to tweets about fake news (treatment) or the federal budget (control). Due to the possibility of participants having preexisting attitudes toward real accounts or real tweets, the tweets used in this study were generated by researchers and were not real tweets, nor were they from real elites. To make the tweets realistic, some of them included cues about certain groups or media outlets (i.e., National Public Radio, Sierra Club). Each condition contained nine tweets from elites, conceptualized under Zaller's (1992) definition, and included three journalists, three political representatives, and three activists. To avoid the confounding effects of race and gender, names and thumbnail pictures reflected White male elites (see supplemental material). Each tweet indicated that it was a verified account by a blue checkmark.

We manipulated the type of news that participants were responsible for identifying for accuracy: real or fake news articles. All articles pertained to President Trump, not

his policy positions or administration more generally. Real news articles were taken from the politics pages of prominent news organizations (*New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*). We chose to use articles from two national outlets to maintain external validity and because they represent a liberal- and conservative-leaning newspaper (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005) and because the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have been used in previous studies on priming (Habel, 2012; Kiousis, 2004). Although source cues play into an individual's evaluation of the article's validity, exposure to these cues mimics more realistic conditions of evaluation than would articles from smaller news outlets. Following Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news articles were taken from archives on the Snopes fact-checking site (http://www.snopes.com/tag/donald-trump/). Only articles that were identified by Snopes as entirely false were selected. All fake and real articles were taken as screenshots and formatted to fit the online survey (see supplementary materials for the text from both fake and real news articles; full versions including visuals are available through the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* archives and through the Snopes website).

Nine articles were pretested on MTurk ($N = 50$) to verify their realism. Participants were placed into one of two conditions where they received either all real news articles or all fake news articles and were asked to (a) assess whether they thought the article was real or fake and (b) report the strength of that answer. Three articles from each condition of the pretest were chosen for inclusion. The articles accurately identified by the largest number of participants were chosen for the full study. The chosen real articles were each rated as "real news" by approximately 72% of participants. The chosen fake articles were rated as "fake news" by approximately 60% of participants. Pretest results revealed that 13.7% of individuals correctly identified all the real news articles. Contrastingly, 3.9% of individuals correctly identified all the fake news articles. These pretest results alone hint that people struggle with identifying news.

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to a control or an experimental condition. Participants were then asked to code a series of tweets for main topic. Participants in the experimental condition were asked to code tweets from elites discussing fake news, whereas participants in the control condition were asked to code tweets from elites about the federal budget. Following the coding tasks, participants were asked to read three separate articles, either all fake news articles or all real news articles. After each article, participants were asked to report whether the article was real or fake. Following their evaluation of the articles, participants reported how much they trust the media, their sources of news and information, how they evaluate news media, and a set of demographic items. Participants were then debriefed that the tweets they read were not actual tweets,

nor were they from actual accounts. Participants were debriefed on which articles had been identified by Snopes as fake and which had come from real news sites.

Measures

Main Topic. Participants were asked to select the main topic of each tweet from a list of five response options and an open-ended field. Both the experimental and control groups received the same five response options aside from the manipulated response option.

Identification of Fake or Real News. After reading each article, participants were asked, "Do you believe that the article you just read is fake news, real news, or are you not sure?" This question was asked of each article separately. Responses for participants who answered real news for the real articles, or fake news for the fake articles, were coded as correct. Responses for participants who reported they were not sure were coded as incorrect. A total score for accurate identification of fake news and accurate identification of real news were calculated separately ranging from a score of 0 (no articles correctly identified) to 3 (all articles correctly identified). In the fake news condition, participants accurately identified 1.67 articles on average (SD = 0.97). In the real news condition, participants accurately identified 1.89 articles correctly on average (SD = 1.03).

Media Trust. To assess overall trust in news media, we included a global measure of trust in media organizations instead of measures addressing specific media outlets. Participants were asked, "How much of the time do you think you can trust media organizations to report the news fairly?" (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), with response options of *just about always, most of the time, some of the time*, and *none of the time*. On average, across all conditions, participants trusted media organizations some of the time (M = 2.30, SD = 0.66).

Political Knowledge. Because political knowledge is often associated with elite message effects (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Zaller, 1992), it was used as a control. Political knowledge was measured using four questions asking participants to identify the political party with control of the House of Representatives, the president of the U.S. Senate, the office held by John Roberts, and which party is more liberal on a national level. Participants were limited to 30 seconds when answering each question. Correct responses were summed to form a political knowledge scale ranging from 0 to 4. On average, participants got 3.25 questions correct (SD = 1.17).

Manipulation Check

The tweet coding task served as a manipulation check. Those in the primed condition who correctly identified the main topic of the tweets as fake news indicated that the elite discourse prime was successful. In general, the percentages of those who correctly identified the main topic were similar across the primed and control conditions. Although there are significant between-group differences for several tweets, the fact that both conditions move in the same direction suggests differences are due to something shared between the tweets, like the source, and not due to differences in attention.

In addition, of the nine tweets in the primed condition, more than 90% of participants correctly identified the topic for six of the tweets. Across the nine tweets in the condition without the priming treatment, 84% of participants correctly identified the topic. For the primed condition only, three of the tweets had variances in correct identification from 48% to 74%. These tweets were constructed to be from issue organizations (e.g., Sierra Club, Workers Defense Project). Citing a specific group, as opposed to news outlets or nonpartisan representatives, may have led participants to use organizational source cues when determining the topic of the tweet.

RESULTS

We first evaluated whether those who are primed by elite discourse about fake news identified *fake* news *more* accurately than those who were not primed (H1a). We computed a total accuracy score across all three articles by summing correct responses. As a result, this computed variable ranged from 0 to 3, where a 0 means the individual inaccurately identified all three fake news articles and 3 means accurate identification of all three articles. In computing this variable, we coded only identification of the article as fake as a correct response (1) whereas those who said they were "not sure" or inaccurately identified the article as real news were coded as incorrect (0). We filter the data so that only those who saw fake news articles were included in this analysis. We dummy coded the priming treatment variable where those who received the priming treatment were coded as 1 and those who did not receive the priming treatment were coded as 0. We then ran an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with total fake news identification score as the outcome variable,[1] the priming treatment as the independent variable, and political knowledge as a control. As shown in Model 1 in

[1] Because the computed variable of total accurate identification of fake news is more ordinal than continuous, we also ran the analysis using an ordered probit regression and found no differences in the significance level across our results for H1a or H1b.

Table A2, priming has no main effect on total accurate identification of fake news articles when holding political knowledge constant. Political knowledge has no main effect on accurate identification of fake news. H1a is not supported.

We then evaluated whether those who are primed by elite discourse about fake news identified *real* news *less* accurately than those who were not primed (H1b). Similar to the computed variable for total accurate identification of fake news, we compute a variable for total accuracy in identifying real news across all three real news articles. Again, this total score ranges from 0 to 3, where correct responses (1) include only identification of the article as real news and incorrect responses (0) as "not sure" or inaccurate identification of the article. We filter the data to include only those who saw real news articles. We ran an OLS regression with total real news identification score as the outcome variable, the priming treatment as the independent variable, and political knowledge as a control. As shown in Model 2 in Table A2, priming has a main effect on total accurate identification of real news articles when holding political knowledge constant ($B = -0.41$), $t(148) = -2.63$, $p < .01$. Individuals primed with elite discourse about fake news identified all three real news articles with less accuracy ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.04$) than those who were not primed ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.98$). When controlling for political knowledge, the priming treatment explained 16% of the variance in total accurate identification of real news. Political knowledge had a significant main effect on total accurate identification of real news ($B = 0.31$), $t(148) = 4.51$, $p < .001$. Individuals with more political knowledge identified real news with more accuracy than those with lower levels of political knowledge. These findings offer support for H1b.[2]

We turned to evaluate whether those who are primed by elite discourse about fake news report lower levels of media trust than those who are not primed (H2). To test this hypothesis, we ran an OLS regression across all conditions with the priming treatment and exposure to real or fake news articles as the independent variables and media trust as the outcome. We dummy coded the exposure variable, assigning 0 to those exposed to real news articles and 1 to those exposed to fake news articles. As hypothesized in H2, there was a significant main effect of the priming treatment on overall media trust ($B = -0.12$), $t(298) = -2.02$, $p < .05$ (see Model 3, Table A2). Individuals who were primed with elite discourse about fake news reported lower levels of trust in the media ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.63$) than those who were not primed ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.68$). In addition, there was a marginally significant main effect ($p < .10$) of receiving fake news articles on overall media trust ($B = -0.10$), $t(298) = -1.74$, $p = .08$. Individuals exposed to fake news articles

[2] We explored the influence of age in case there was an association between age and digital media literacy. We found no significant main effect of age on accurate identification of real news. In addition, age did not influence the significance level of these results.

reported lower levels of overall media trust (M = 2.24, SD = 0.65) than individuals exposed to real news articles (M = 2.36, SD = 0.66). Altogether, the model explained only 2.3% of the variance in media trust across groups. The interaction between being primed with elite discourse and exposure to fake news articles was not significant. However, the significant effect of the priming treatment on media trust falls out when we do not control for the type of article received.[3] Overall, these findings offer only modest support for H2.

Finally, we explored the relationship between ideology and accurate identification of real news. Previous research suggests that the *New York Times* is seen as liberally biased, contains more liberal editorial content, and hosts a more liberal audience (Pew Research Center, 2014). Previous research suggests that the relationship between ideology and evaluations of news media are asymmetrical in that conservatives are more likely to see the collective news media as liberal (Stroud & Lee, 2013; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Watts et al., 1999). As a result, conservatives may have stronger reactions to news sources than liberals. Therefore, when looking at the effect of ideology we were most theoretically interested in conservatives' evaluations of the *New York Times* articles (H3), although we also looked at the effect of liberal ideology and the priming treatment on accurate identification of the *Wall Street Journal* article. There was no significant interaction between liberal ideology and the treatment (B = 0.44, SE = 0.37, $p > .05$, *ns*), meaning that liberals were not less likely than conservatives to identify the *Wall Street Journal* article as real.

Because our original sample was underpowered in total number of conservatives, we sampled an additional 92 conservatives on MTurk (see Table A1) and pooled our original and additional samples.[4] We filtered the data to include only participants who were exposed to real news articles (conservatives = 136; moderate/liberal = 105). For each *New York Times* article, we ran a logistic regression to predict the accurate identification of each news article with conservative ideology coded as a dichotomous independent variable, the priming treatment as an independent variable, and political knowledge as a control. In a separate block, we tested an interaction between conservative ideology and the priming treatment. For the first *New York Times* article, this interaction was not significant (see Model 4, Table A2). In addition, conservative ideology had no

[3] Like H1a and H1b, this measure of media trust is more ordinal than interval. Therefore, we ran the analysis using an ordered probit regression, in which the priming treatment had a marginally significant main effect on media trust (p = .06) when controlling for type of article and political knowledge, and a marginally significant main effect of receiving fake articles (p = .07), when controlling for the priming treatment and political knowledge.

[4] There were no changes in the results when controlling for when people took the survey and no interactions between the independent variables and when people took the survey. Controlling for age also produced no differences. Therefore, we report coefficients without these controls.

main effect. Notably, the main effect of the priming treatment remained significant when controlling for ideology ($B = -0.81$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < .05$). Looking at the second *New York Times* article, when controlling for political knowledge, there is no significant interaction between conservative ideology and the priming treatment on accurate identification of the second *New York Times* article (see Model 5, Table A2). Again, conservative ideology has no main effect on accurate identification of the news article. The priming treatment did not remain significant when controlling for ideology. Our results offer little evidence that ideology influences accurate identification of real news (H3) in that conservatives were not more likely than moderate and liberal participants to perceive either *New York Times* article as fake and liberals were not more likely to perceive the *Wall Street Journal* article as fake compared to conservatives and moderate participants.

DISCUSSION

The present study explores the extent to which elite discourse about fake news influences the public's evaluation of news media. We extend the research on fake news and media trust in several ways. First, we add to the understanding of how fake news affects the public by turning attention to other democratic outcomes in addition to electoral ones (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). We explore how the prominence of talk about fake news has effects on overall media trust and the ability of the public to accurately distinguish between real and fake news. Second, we add to research on media skepticism (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) by offering causal evidence of the relationship between exposure and overall media trust. Finally, we offer evidence that accurately identifying news as real or fake may not be explained by ideology like other priming effects (Watts et al., 1999). Our findings suggest that discourse about fake news may be doing more harm than exposure to fake news itself.

Our results indicate that elite discourse about fake news may influence the public's ability to accurately identify what is fake news and what is not. Individuals primed with elite discourse about fake news identified real news with less accuracy than those who were not primed (H1b). As expected, political knowledge related to accurate identification of real news, where the more knowledgeable were more accurate than the less knowledgeable. Neither of these findings were true for the identification of fake news. Individuals primed with discourse about fake news were not more accurate in their identification of fake news than those who were not primed, and political knowledge also appeared to have no effect (H1a). Just as news media set the standards for the evaluation of political candidates (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), elite discourse

about fake news makes it salient in the minds of the public and becomes more influential in the evaluation of real news.

These effects appear to be relatively unaffected by ideology (H3). Conservative participants were not more likely to identify real news as fake than moderates or liberals. Unlike other priming effects for which conservative ideology was a prominent factor (Watts et al., 1999), whether one holds conservative or liberal beliefs does not explain the priming effect of elite discourse on accurate identification of real news. This is surprising when considering the effects of source cues on evaluations of media bias and credibility (Dalton et al., 1998; Sundar et al., 2007). The priming effect of discourse about fake news on evaluations of news appears distinct from cues about source partisanship despite the well-documented power of these factors on other outcomes.

General trust in the media may also suffer after exposure to elite discourse about fake news. Individuals who received the priming treatment reported lower levels of trust in news media than those who were not primed (H2). This effect was neither substantively large nor robust, although not too dissimilar from the small effect sizes found in previous media effects research (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Media trust was not influenced by exposure to fake news alone, although the effect was marginally significant. This finding modestly addresses questions of causality from previous research exploring the relationship between exposure and media trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In addition, the interaction between exposure to fake news and discourse about fake news was not significant, suggesting that these two variables do not conjointly affect media trust. Overall, exposure to fake news did not significantly affect media trust, but elite discourse did. A cautious interpretation of the priming treatment on media trust is warranted, as these effects did not persist across multiple analyses and the effect of fake news exposure itself was marginally significant. It is plausible that media skepticism is influenced by discussion of news rather than simple exposure to it, but it is also possible that exposure to fake news has an effect that was simply not fully detected in this study.

Overall, these results do point to a troubling effect. A similar ability to identify fake news between those in the prime and control conditions means that efforts to call attention to the differences between fake and real news may instead be making this distinction less clear. Tsfati and Cappella (2003) suggested that media skepticism may lead to alternative media diets and different levels of news consumption. Our findings suggest something more. Individuals appear to have a similar baseline for evaluating fake news, but standards for evaluating real news that are malleable by the thoughts of elites. As a result, skepticism produced by exposure to elite discourse about fake news seems to affect evaluations of real news rather than fake news. Because evaluations of real news were not influenced by ideology, it cannot

be compared to a hostile media phenomenon, where information is deemed biased or inaccurate when it does not match one's beliefs (Vallone et al., 1985). Considering that our results differ from media skepticism associated with political ideology, it is possible that the phenomenon exhibited here is an extreme skepticism that impedes one's ability to identify truth, what we call "media nihilism." Beyond media skepticism that questions the fairness of both fake and real news, media nihilism is a skewed perception of news media that assumes falsehood even in the face of truth. Our data reflect this skewed skepticism of real news after exposure to elite discourse about fake news. Taken together, findings suggest that the prominence of fake news in elite discourse is problematic for democracy. As fake news continues to be a point of elite attention, it becomes a more prominent standard for the evaluation of news media as a whole. These results have practical implications for how fake news is discussed publicly. Although elites may have good intentions in drawing public attention to the issue of fake news and misinformation more generally, this may highlight a minimal problem at a great expense. When discussing fake news, it may be important to provide context to qualify the extent to which it is actually present. Moreover, as news organizations look to distinguish themselves from fake news alternatives, they should do so with linguistic caution. Simply echoing the language of "fake news" may have a boomerang effect on the public's trust in and evaluations of their own work.

Despite these implications, it is important to address potential limitations of this study. There is research to suggest that public deliberation may limit the influence of elite framing effects (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). We only look at elites without consideration to, or incorporation of, variables related to public discourse and deliberation about fake news. Future research should consider examining how public deliberation moderates the influence of elite discourse about fake news. There are also many ways to operationalize counterideological information. In this case, we look at the source cue to test whether political ideology influenced the identification of real news. This is one measure of counterideological news media. Others may find it valuable to look at article content, for example. Finally, it is possible that there are different effects on the identification of real news when it is combined with fake news. Future research should explore different combinations to see if the presence of a single fake article in combination with real articles is evaluated differently after being primed.

There are several limitations to the study design as well. First, we did not account for whether individuals were exposed to the real or fake news articles prior to the study. In this case, we chose to run this risk at the expense of having externally valid stimuli. However, if respondents were previously exposed to the fake news articles, the findings we present here are conservative representations of the effects. In addition, for the control condition of the study we use articles from newspapers known to elicit partisan cues. Although it is plausible that partisan heuristics could

influence our findings, the results show no interaction of political ideology with the outcome variables. If participants relied on cues, we would expect a significant interaction here. Our choice to use articles only about Donald Trump is potentially problematic as well. Our justification for choosing this topic came down to (a) wanting a highly salient topic and (b) being limited by the topics at the time that appeared on Snopes.com as 100% false. We also believe that the valence of the story likely influences whether a conservative or liberal identifies the article as real or fake. Our stories did not have a strong valence, suggesting that the priming effect we observe may be more attributable to the priming treatment than to the effects of political ideology or partisanship. Still, these stories may fall short in our ability to test ideology's interaction with the priming treatment. Finally, the duration of priming effects is often short (Scheufele, 2000), suggesting that the effects observed here may be temporary. However, reinforcement through prominent and continued elite discussion of fake news might mean that these effects are more long-lasting than other priming effects from messages that are not consistently reinforced over time.

The findings described here present a variety of avenues for future research. This study explores the influence of fake news on assessments of articles strictly pertaining to President Trump. This could be extended in the future to include news coverage across a wider range of topics. In addition, we looked strictly at online news articles as they appear on their respective news sites, but individuals consume news stories and headlines in ways that may not include visiting the news website itself. For instance, future research should consider looking at how accurate individuals are at identifying fake news when it is shared via social media. Finally, the present study looked only at priming effects and not framing effects. Future research should explore the effects of *how* fake news is discussed, in addition to *if* fake news is discussed. Research on framing may offer a solution to the problem we document here in that changing how fake news is discussed may mitigate priming effects on the evaluation of real news media.

CONCLUSION

To understand the role of fake news in the contemporary political environment, it is necessary to study the effects of its prominence in public discourse. Recent research has examined the prevalence of fake news and its possible effects on electoral outcomes. The present study extends existing literature on the implications of fake news by examining how elite discourse surrounding fake news influences individual perceptions of news media more broadly. We find that exposure to talk about fake news may lower individuals' trust in media and lead them to identify real news with less accuracy. A decline in media trust and a questioning of truth represent important

implications for the media's role in democratic processes. Most important, an inability to distinguish between news that is true and news that is false poses severe consequences to the extent that it impedes the public's ability to incorporate accurate information and use that information to hold their representatives accountable.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1
Number of Participants per Condition with Additional Conservative Sample

	Primed with Tweets About Fake News	*Not Primed with Tweets About Fake News*
Real news articles	Original sample = 78 Additional conservatives = 46 $N = 124$	Original sample = 71 Additional conservatives = 46 $N = 117$
Fake news articles	$N = 71$	$N = 79$

TABLE A2
Predicting Identification of Fake and Real News and Media Trust

	Model 1: Identification of Fake News		*Model 2: Identification of Real News*		*Model 3: Media Trust*		*Model 4: Identification of Real* NYT *Article 1*		*Model 5: Identification of Real* NYT *Article 2*	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	1.34**	(0.24)	1.09**	(0.26)	2.50***	(0.13)	−0.67	(0.48)	0.68	(0.49)
Political knowledge	0.11†	(0.07)	0.31**	(0.07)	−0.03	(0.03)	0.42*	(0.12)	0.11	(0.12)
Priming treatment	−0.05	(0.16)	−0.41**	(0.16)	−0.12*	(0.08)	−0.81**	(0.27)	−0.47	(0.29)
Fake articles	—	—	—	—	−0.10†	(0.08)	—	—	—	—
Priming × Fake Articles	—	—	—	—	−0.15	(0.15)	—	—	—	—
Conservative	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.28	(0.28)	−0.02	(0.29)
Conservative × Priming	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.52	(0.56)	−0.31	(0.57)
Nagelkerke R^2	—		—		—		0.13		0.02	
Adjusted R^2	0.01		0.16		0.01		—	—	—	—
n	150		149		299		241		241	

Note. The identification and media trust analyses use ordinary least squares regression and include only those who saw either fake news articles or those who saw real news articles; the ideological analysis uses logistic regression due to the dichotomous dependent variables. *NYT* = *New York Times*.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $^{\dagger}p < .10$.