You Won't Believe Our Results!

But They Might: Heterogeneity in Beliefs About The Accuracy of Online Media

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Abstract

"Clickbait" media has long been espoused as an unfortunate consequence of the rise of digital journalism. But little is known about *why* readers choose to read clickbait stories. Is it merely curiosity, or might voters think such stories are more likely to provide useful information? We conduct a survey experiment in Italy, where a major political party enthusiastically embraced the aesthetics of new media and encouraged their supporters to distrust legacy outlets in favor of online news. We offer respondents a monetary incentive for correct answers to manipulate the relative salience of the motivation for accurate information. This incentive *increases* differences in the preference for clickbait; older and less educated subjects become even more likely to opt to read a story with a clickbait headline when the incentive to produce a factually correct answer is higher. Our model suggests that a politically relevant subset of the population prefers clickbait media because they trust it more.

1 Utility and Media Choice

A central parameter in the study of political media is the process by which the public selects media to consume. The degree to which media exposure happens incidentally or as the result of an explicit choice varies with both the individual and the larger sociotechnical context, and while incidental and explicit exposure are both large components of the media diet, the latter is particularly relevant in the "hyperchoice" context of contemporary online media (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Messing and Westwood 2012).

Faced with either a blank search bar or a "feed" of articles on a social media platform (eg Facebook) or general interest web portal (eg MSN News), the citizen must take some action. She can "scroll" through the feed – a prominent form of online behavior akin to browsing newspaper headlines but far more extensive in terms of content (Settle 2018) – but the central act of media consumption only takes place after she makes a selection or "clicks". Indeed, fewer and fewer people navigate directly to media companies' homepages, and even then they have to select an article to read or video to watch (Guess 2016).

The increasing centrality of consumer choice has not been met with sufficient attention by scholars of political communication. Although there is a large literature on online media choice (especially from UT Austin's Center for Media Engagement), Sood and Lelkes 2018 identify a key theoretical limitation. The robust evidence of the preference for information from congenial sources conflates two possible causes: the preference for congenial information, and the belief in the greater accuracy of congenial sources.

Here, we present results from an experiment that transcends this limitation. We collect a sample of Italian Facebook users through a paid advertisement. The sample is thus not representative of the general population, but should be quite representative of the actual population of interest: people who click on links on Facebook. Italy is a useful case study because it has in many ways been ahead of the rest of the West in terms of disillusionment with the media establishment,[1] and the ensuing rise to power of anti-establishment politicians who embrace the credibility-through-virality that clickbait entails.

We first present subjects with a series of non-experimental choice tasks to estimate their individual "preference for clickbait," and the distribution of this propensity across the sample population. This portion of the design corroborates – in a novel national context – the findings in Munger et al. 2020 that the elderly, the less educated, and the less digitally literate have a higher "preference for

[1] In particular, longtime Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was the controlling shareholder in Mediaset, a major Italian media firm.

clickbait"; we also find this to be higher among women, frequent internet users, and supporters of the ruling coalition.

For the experiment, we present subjects with a similar choice task, but also inform them that they will read the article they rank highest. Subjects are then randomly assigned into one of two treatments conditions: being told there will be a quiz on the material, or being told there will be a quiz on the material *and* that providing correct answers to the quiz will increase their chance of winning a lottery for a financial prize; the control group is simply told they will read the article.

We find no evidence of direct effects of the addition of the financial incentive, but this masks significant and offsetting heterogeneous treatment effects. The treatment *increased* the preference for clickbait among the elderly, the less educated, and less digitally literate, while at the same time it *decreased* the preference for clickbait among those on the other ends of these respective distributions. The heterogeneity in "preference for clickbait" thus *increases* in the financial incentive for accuracy. This finding contrasts with the results in (Prior and Lupia 2008) and (Prior, Sood, Khanna, et al. 2015), which find that increasing financial incentives decreases heterogeneity in civic knowledge and perceptions of the economy. Even more importantly, the result provides strong evidence for the hypothesis that people who prefer clickbait headlines do so because they consider them more likely to be accurate. More generally, this finding supports a theory of media choice that more heavily weights perceived source accuracy than preference for congenial information.

The troubling implication of this finding in the current context is that people may not be opting to consume low-quality news sources because they are being cognitively lazy (Pennycook and Rand 2019) or because they lack the savvy to differentiate low and high quality news. Instead, our results suggest that—for a certain subset of elderly, pro-populist, less-educated individuals—they are opting to consume low-quality news sources *because they actually trust them more.*

2 Online Media and the Italian Context

In many ways, Italy has been a bellwether for the trends in media and populism that have swept through Western democracies in recent years. Silvio Berlusconi's lengthy tenure in power has been followed by a series of short-lived center-left governments. More recently, Matteo Salvini, secretary of the far-right party Lega, has taken Berlusconi's place as leader of the Italian right, espousing

a populist and xenophobic agenda.

Largely as a result, Italy was also the first European nation to be governed by a coalition of new-wave populist parties: Lega and Movimento Cinque Stelle. These parties experienced rapid growth in the past 10 years, attacking both the legacy media and the traditional parties as part of the same corrupt establishment.[2]

Both parties, who were together in a coalition government at the time when our study was conducted, have encouraged their voters to acquire information through online outlets and affiliated Facebook pages (Santoro 2012). The mechanisms for generating credibility in this context are completely different from the broadcast era of media. In particular, these mechanisms include "credibility cascades," where the extent of the spread of a given piece of news (as quantified by social media likes and shares) can generate credibility even for stories produced by media firms with little name recognition (Munger 2019). Munger (2019) calls this "Clickbait Media," and indeed the clickbait headline is indicative of a news outlet that understands the existence of this type of audience.

In Italy, this kind of communication was adopted early and successfully by the comedian, blogger and founder of the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* Beppe Grillo, whose blog became a centralized platform for all the important communications of the party, as well as "counter-information" articles reporting news that mainstream media would (Grillo claimed) not report. The internet and unmediated communication between the party and its voters played a crucial role in the emergence of the Movimento (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013) and Grillo's communication has always been characterised by emotionally-charged wording and a strong critique of the establishment and printed media.

The structural reasons for the emergence of Clickbait Media are complex, and outside the scope of this paper. But there exists an intrinsic connection between the business model of Clickbait Media and the style of headline that gives it that name. We argue that this style serves as a signal to readers that the media firm is not aligned with the legacy media establishment.

[2]Salvini's Lega was born as an independence movement for the North of Italy in the 1990s. As such, it never managed to go beyond 10% at the national level until Salvini changed its political message to a xenophobic anti-establishment one, receiving vote totals of 17.6% in 2018 and 34.3% in 2019. Luigi Di Maio's Movimento Cinque Stelle ran for the first time in a general election in 2013, obtaining 25.6% of the votes and improved its performance in 2018 to 32.7%.

3 Theory and Hypotheses

Clicking on a link is central to the process of online media consumption, and thus is reflected in the behavior of online media firms. Munger (2019) describes the market dynamics of "Clickbait Media" in which each online news story must compete with thousands of other stories for the audience's attention. Hundreds of new online media firms employ a novel business model enabled by two interrelated features of Clickbait Media: the sharing or retweeting of posts along homophilous social networks and the quantified accretion of these decisions in the form of the number of likes (or shares, or retweets) associated with a given post.

The role of social recommendation in online media choice is thus larger today than in previous media contexts, but other theories of media choice remain very much relevant. Sood and Lelkes (2018) summarize the state of this literature, explaining the empirical regularity of consumers' preference for congenial sources. The key argument is that researchers need to conceptually differentiate preference for congenial *sources* from preference for congenial *information*. The former is well-established but often naively assumed to be caused by the latter; Sood and Lelkes (2018) make the case that the preference for congenial sources is also a function of *perceived accuracy*.

The other major change produced by contemporary online media is the massive expansion in the number of media firms and articles from which to choose. The expansion of the media choice set reveals previously unobservable heterogeneities in consumer preference; one of the best known is Prior's argument that the roll out of cable television revealed that many Americans had a high "preference for entertainment" and thus opted out of viewing any television news if given the option of more and better entertainment programs (Prior 2007).

In the early days of the internet, online headlines were no different from newspaper headlines. But the development of "clickbait" headlines by web native media firms like Upworthy in the early 2010s introduced a new dimension of preference heterogeneity. Munger et al (2020) demonstrate that this "preference for clickbait" varies widely among the US population. Republicans, the elderly and the less educated tend to prefer clickbait headlines, holding the topic constant and in the absence of source or social recommendation cues. Possible explanations for this variation is simply that these people are less "digitally literate" (Hargittai 2001; Hargittai, Piper, and Morris 2018) or lower in analytical reasoning (Pennycook and Rand 2019), also posited as explanations for the related propensity to consume or share "fake news" (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker

2019).

The key limitation of these studies is the same described in Sood and Lelkes' summary of broader theories of selective exposure: an inability to differentiate between theoretically distinct mechanisms underlying media preferences (Sood and Lelkes 2018).

Our approach to address this problem is to adapt the framework used in Prior and Lupia (2008) and Prior et al. (2015) and experimentally add incentives for correct answers, thereby raising the relative salience of the motivation for accuracy. In Prior et al. (2015), the behavior of interest is how people respond to survey questions that probe their perception of economic conditions. As in our context, these respondents face incentives that can be in conflict: the desire to be accurate and the desire to report congenial information. In these studies, the addition of an incentive for accuracy *decreases* the heterogeneity of the responses, suggesting that in the absence of the desire to report congenial information, people's estimates would be centered on the truth.

The situation with contemporary media choice is different. Our theory is that *some* people have a preference for clickbait that is linked to a sense that legacy media is aligned with the distrusted political establishment, and that it is only from new online sources that employ the distinctive style of partisan emotional clickbait that can be trusted. Some other people have a preference for non-clickbait based on the analogous idea that only information from vetted and reputable media outlets can be trusted. As a result, our hypothesis is that the addition of incentives for accuracy will *increase* the heterogeneity in media choice, along the dimensions that predict preference for clickbait in the pre-experimental phase.

First, we aim to corroborate findings about this preference for clickbait from the US context: it is higher among the elderly, the less educated and the less digitally literate.

Hypothesis 1 *Preference for clickbait will be higher among the elderly, the less educated and the less digitally literate.*

Next, we test our main hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 *The addition of incentives for accuracy will increase the preference for clickbait among the elderly, the less educated and the less digitally literate.*

4 Sampling and demographic characteristics

We recruited survey subjects using a Facebook ad campaign, following the model of Munger et al (2020). The ad simply promoted a survey about "news consumption," and offered the possibility to enter a raffle to win €250 to all participants who finished the 15-minute survey.

The campaign ran between September 28 and October 15, 2018. Overall, around 540,000 people were exposed to the ad, 16,000 people clicked on the ad, 4,104 started the survey and 1,754 finished it. Most attrition was in the very early stages of the survey, and was not related to treatment conditions.

The campaign was run using Facebook's tool for promoting pages, which automatically "learns" the optimal target population to maximize the number of clicks to the link. As a result, we did not specify who was exposed to the ad, though we do have *ex-post* information on demographic characteristics.

Table 1 presents the full demographic breakdown. As in related studies on the "demand for spam" (Redmiles, Chachra, and Waismeyer 2018), women are overrepresented (72%), while we manage to capture a very heterogeneous population in terms of age and other main covariates. Although not representative of citizens, voters, or even Facebook users, the population contains sufficient variation in the demographics of interest.

The other variables listed in Table 1, and included in our analyses, follow. *Education* is a measure on a 1 to 5 scale of the respondent's level of education; *Like GVT* measures on a 1 to 7 scale how much the respondent likes the Conte Government, a coalition of the populist *Movimento Cinque Stelle* party and the far-right *Lega*. All of the following variables are on a 1 to 7 scale where 7 means "*Very Often*": *Internet* refers to how often respondents use the Internet; *Facebook* and *Twitter* refer to the how often they use these named social media platform; and *News Offline* and *News Online* refer to how often they consume news on TV and newspapers or on web magazines, blogs and social media. Finally, *Digital Literacy* is a % score on the 14 questions that comprise (Hargittai 2005)'s measure of "digital literacy": respondents are asked to declare how familiar they are with a set of computer-related terms (eg *phishing, selfie, tag*).

Interspersed with measurement questions, we also include an attention check. We ask people to answer "*65*" to a question to show they are not replying randomly. Of the 1,754 initial respondent, 1,537 passed the attention check. In our analysis, we restrict our focus to people who passed the (pre-treatment) attention check.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics by chosen article

	None	CB-Pro	CB-Anti	NCB-Pro	NCB-Anti	Neutral	All
Men	0.23	0.25	0.30	0.20	0.25	0.38	0.27
Age	39.03	45.34	42.06	34.66	35.64	35.89	38.49
Education	1.84	2.05	2.19	2.14	2.20	2.39	2.19
Like_GVT	5.23	5.28	3.74	4.50	3.52	3.81	4.34
Internet	6.58	6.36	6.44	6.50	6.60	6.55	6.48
Facebook	5.52	5.91	5.83	5.40	5.48	5.66	5.65
Twitter	1.55	1.86	1.71	1.86	1.98	2.02	1.89
News_Offline	3.55	3.74	3.56	3.13	3.50	3.51	3.47
News_Online	6.10	5.77	5.81	5.53	5.77	5.92	5.75
Digital Literacy	0.85	0.82	0.84	0.88	0.89	0.91	0.87
n	31.00	365.00	145.00	405.00	168.00	383.00	1497.00

Cell entries are the average value of each trait among people who opted to read the headline defined by each column.

5 Experimental design

Prior to the experiment, we asked respondents to rank a set of fictional headlines in order from "most prefer to read" to "least prefer to read," to estimate each individual's taste for clickbait media. The headlines have the following structure:

- Clickbait - Pro Government (henceforth, *CB Pro*);
- Non Clickbait - Pro Government (henceforth, *NCB Pro*);
- Clickbait - Anti Government (henceforth, *CB Ag*);
- Non Clickbait - Anti Government (henceforth, *NCB Ag*);
- Neutral.

We follow Munger et al (2020) and create partisan emotional clickbait headlines by the addition of phrases like "*This will make you furious...*" or "*You won't believe this! ...*" to headlines with a strong partisan valence. The full list of headlines (and their English translations) are found in the Appendix.

We took several steps to mimic the style of Italian media. We first studied clickbait-news outlets, following examples provided by the main Italian website for debunking fake-news *butac.it*. We selected only topics that were politically controversial, where each side (Pro and Anti government) had a clear stance.

We then wrote headlines changing the slant and the style to provide something that would look like it was published from either a slanted newspaper (e.g. *La Repubblica* or *Il Giornale*) or from a non-traditional news outlet (e.g. *InformareXResistere* or *Matteo Renzi News*). While a reader who is not accustomed to Italian politics might not catch the tokens that point to the slant and style of the headline, we believe that any Italian reader could easily guess these characteristics by the headline alone.

In addition to the four slanted headlines, *Neutral* headlines report events without a clear slant or clickbait style.

The pre-treatment section consisted of two sets of 5-headline choices that needed to be ordered in terms of preference to read. We then use this ordering to construct the individual-level measure of preference for clickbait (*CB-Score*): we assigned 4 points if a clickbait headline was ranked first, 3 if ranked second, and so on. The maximum *CB-Score* is 14, which would result if a user ranked the two clickbait headlines in the top two positions for both batches (i.e., 4+3+4+3 points, adding up to 14). The mean value of this variable is 6.7, the median is 7. This variable is a strong predictor of the likelihood of choosing clickbait in the second part of the survey and is a crucial control for *ex-ante* taste for clickbait.

Table 2 shows that older, less educated, more pro-government, less digitally-literate people are more likely to choose clickbait. In column (1) we regress the *CB-Score* discussed above on the characteristics of the reader. In column (2) we run a Probit on the likelihood of ranking a CB article in the first position at least once. Both models show the strong link between choosing Clickbait and the age, gender, education and digital literacy of subjects. This finding nicely replicates previous research from the United States. However, in the Italian case, we also find a relationship between support for the government and taste for clickbait after controlling for other demographics.

5.1 Incentivized Article Selection

Next, we implement our experimental manipulation in order to understand the mechanism that explains variation in taste for clickbait. In this section, subjects had to rank 5 headlines with the same structure as above, but they were told that they would then read the article they put in the first position.

Our experimental manipulation involves changing the message that subjects receive before selecting a headline. All of the articles cover a cut in expenditure for pensions in the House of Representatives (*Camera dei Deputati*), which was one of the main campaign issues for the largest party in government (*Movimento*

Table 2: Taste for CB

	OLS	*Probit*
	(1)	(2)
Education	-0.089^{***}	-0.188^{***}
	(0.020)	(0.039)
Age	0.002^{*}	0.007^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.003)
Men	-0.127^{***}	-0.227^{***}
	(0.040)	(0.080)
Internet	0.067^{**}	0.133^{**}
	(0.031)	(0.060)
Facebook	0.0002	-0.004
	(0.013)	(0.026)
Twitter	0.002	0.007
	(0.011)	(0.022)
Like GVT	0.045^{***}	0.102^{***}
	(0.010)	(0.021)
Often Online	-0.011	-0.036
	(0.015)	(0.030)
Often Offline	0.011	0.036^{*}
	(0.010)	(0.019)
Dig Literacy	-0.761^{***}	-1.564^{***}
	(0.159)	(0.318)
Constant	0.761^{***}	0.224
	(0.231)	(0.454)
Observations	1,439	1,439
R^2	0.089	
Adjusted R^2	0.083	
Log Likelihood		-906.197
Akaike Inf. Crit.		1,834.393

$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.
In column (1) we show the results of an OLS regression having the Clickbait Score as dependent variable. In columns (2) we show the results of a Probit model on the likelihood of choosing at least one Clickabit article as first article. Coefficients and standard errors in brackets.

Cinque Stelle) during the electoral campaign. We have 3 treatment conditions:

- **No Incentive**: Respondents were told that they would have the chance to read the article they put on the top of the list
- **Intrinsic Incentive**: *No Incentive* + they were told that there would be a quiz on the topic covered by the article
- **Monetary Incentive**: *Intrinsic Incentive* + users were told that there would be a second raffle for a €250 voucher and that their likelihood of winning would increase based on how many answers to the factual questions they answered correctly.

The monetary incentive is exactly as large as the raffle prize with which we recruited subjects. The five headlines and articles can be found in the Appendix.

6 Results

6.1 Descriptive Taste for Clickbait

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of those who selected the different articles. It also confirms that the choice of article was not random. *Pro Government* (*Pro*) articles were far more popular than *Anti Government* ones (*Anti*), which reflects the fact that our sample includes many more *Pro Government* people. Also striking is that the average age of those selecting *Clickbait* (*CB*) articles is much higher than those selecting *Non Clickbait* (*NCB*) articles, consistent with Hypothesis 1.[3]

6.2 Manipulation check: time spent reading the article

3 present a manipulation check, displaying the log of the time spent choosing and reading the article as the dependent variable.

We find that people spend significantly more time both choosing and reading the article when given a Monetary Incentive. However, the Intrinsic Incentive has a negative effect: people spent less time reading when they knew that there was an unpaid quiz than when they did not know there would be a quiz. It is unclear why this is the case, but we note that the effect size is only 60% as large as the increase caused by the Monetary Incentive.

[3]We also allowed people to choose no article and skip this section. This decision aimed to exclude people with no interest in politics from our experimental sample, as they would only introduce noise in our results. 31 people decided to skip the section (and therefore the quiz).

Table 3: Effort under different treatments

	Time spent choosing the article			Time spent reading the chosen article		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Intrinsic Inc		0.054	0.054		−0.025**	−0.023*
		(0.035)	(0.035)		(0.012)	(0.012)
Monetary Inc		0.056*	0.061*		0.039***	0.040***
		(0.034)	(0.035)		(0.012)	(0.012)
CB Score	−0.011**	−0.011**		−0.006***	−0.006***	
	(0.005)	(0.005)		(0.002)	(0.002)	
Study	−0.008	−0.009		0.003	0.003	
	(0.016)	(0.016)		(0.006)	(0.006)	
Age	0.011***	0.011***		0.001*	0.001**	
	(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.0004)	(0.0004)	
Sex	−0.085***	−0.084***		−0.033***	−0.034***	
	(0.032)	(0.032)		(0.011)	(0.011)	
Internet	−0.070***	−0.069***		−0.019**	−0.017**	
	(0.024)	(0.024)		(0.009)	(0.008)	
Facebook	−0.049***	−0.048***		−0.018***	−0.018***	
	(0.011)	(0.011)		(0.004)	(0.004)	
Twitter	−0.028***	−0.027***		0.0005	0.0001	
	(0.009)	(0.009)		(0.003)	(0.003)	
LIke GVT	0.002	0.002		−0.001	−0.001	
	(0.008)	(0.008)		(0.003)	(0.003)	
Often Online	−0.019	−0.020*		−0.009**	−0.009**	
	(0.012)	(0.012)		(0.004)	(0.004)	
Often Offline	−0.023***	−0.023***		−0.008***	−0.008***	
	(0.008)	(0.008)		(0.003)	(0.003)	
Dig Literacy	0.271**	0.273**		0.123***	0.123***	
	(0.127)	(0.127)		(0.045)	(0.044)	
Constant	4.063***	4.015***	3.599***	0.543***	0.528***	0.329***
	(0.187)	(0.189)	(0.025)	(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.009)
Observations	1,410	1,410	1,497	1,383	1,383	1,466
R^2	0.125	0.127	0.002	0.062	0.082	0.019
Adjusted R^2	0.118	0.119	0.001	0.055	0.073	0.017

$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.
OLS on the log of the time spent choosing and reading the article, as a proxy of the effort undergone by users
Standard error in brackets

6.3 Choice of Clickbait headlines

Table 4 depicts the main results. Each column represents the results of a Probit model where the dependent variable is whether the subject selected a clickbait article in the incentivized article task. Column 1 includes only demographic controls, and displays only the variables that were related to pre-treatment taste for clickbait and dummy variables for the two treatment conditions. Reassuringly, the likelihood of selecting a clickbait headline is strongly predicted by this *CB Score*. Even controlling for preference for clickbait, age and digital literacy remain highly significant, although not education.

In the aggregate, there are no significant effects of either incentive on the propensity to select clickbait in Column 1. The remaining columns in Table 4 demonstrate that this null main effect is masking offsetting heterogeneous treatment effects for the Monetary Incentive, as predicted in Hypothesis 2 ("The addition of incentives for accuracy will increase the preference for clickbait among the elderly, the less educated and the less digitally literate"). In contrast, there are generally null effects for the Intrinsic Incentive.

Column 2 interacts the treatment conditions with the subjects' age. There are strongly heterogeneous effects for the Monetary Incentive, with the additional salience of accuracy increasing the likelihood that older people select clickbait headlines. Figure 1 (top panel) plots this interaction as a third-order polynomial. The slope is steepest in the age ranges of 20 to 30 years old and 60 to 70 years old, while there is little difference in the 30 to 60 year old range. The Appendix presents results for the interaction effects calculated with the more flexible functional forms made possible by the R package 'interflex', by Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019.

Column 3 interacts the treatments with the subjects' education, binned into three levels (no high school diploma, high school diploma, some college or more). Respondents with low or medium education were more likely to select clickbait under the Monetary Incentive condition; those with low education were also more likely to select clickbait under the Intrinsic Incentive condition. Figure 1 (middle panel) plots the estimated probabilities at each level of education.

Column 4 interacts the treatments with the subjects' digital literacy, here split at the 25th and 75th percentiles to produce three clusters. The effects are consistent: respondents with medium or high levels of digital literacy were less likely to select clickbait under either incentive. Figure 1 (bottom panel) demonstrates that there are people at the lowest end of the digital literacy spectrum who have a markedly higher likelihood to select clickbait under the Monetary Incentive condition.

Table 4: Likelihood of choosing CB

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Intrinsic Inc	0.046	−0.053	−0.016	0.172**	0.037
	(0.034)	(0.085)	(0.068)	(0.070)	(0.147)
Monetary Inc	0.030	−0.190**	−0.137**	0.190***	−0.237*
	(0.034)	(0.081)	(0.067)	(0.069)	(0.135)
CB Score	0.040***	0.040***	0.041***	0.039***	0.041***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Education	−0.005	−0.006		−0.008	−0.035
	(0.015)	(0.016)		(0.015)	(0.042)
Age	0.004***	0.001	0.004***	0.004***	0.002
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Dig Literacy	−0.436***	−0.439***	−0.449***		
	(0.126)	(0.126)	(0.128)		
Intrinsic Inc*Age		0.003			0.001
		(0.002)			(0.002)
Monetary Inc*Age		0.006***			0.005**
		(0.002)			(0.002)
Intrinsic Inc*Low Educ			0.197*		0.155
			(0.101)		(0.108)
Monetary Inc*Low Educ			0.364***		0.339***
			(0.081)		(0.088)
Intrinsic Inc*Medium Educ			0.039		0.035
			(0.083)		(0.084)
Monetary Inc*Medium Educ			0.161*		0.177**
			(0.083)		(0.084)
Intrinsic Inc*Medium Dig Lit				−0.169**	−0.128
				(0.077)	(0.084)
Monetary Inc*Medium Dig Lit				−0.206***	−0.127
				(0.073)	(0.083)
Intrinsic Inc*High Dig Lit				−0.146*	−0.089
				(0.085)	(0.099)
Monetary Inc*High Dig Lit				−0.190**	−0.059
				(0.081)	(0.101)
Num. obs.	1410	1410	1410	1410	1410
Log Likelihood	−887.558	−883.547	−879.501	−883.532	−874.126
Deviance	1775.115	1767.093	1759.002	1767.063	1748.251

$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.
Probit model on the Likelihood of choosing a CB articleeffects and standard error in brackets

Finally, Column 5 includes all three interaction terms. The interaction terms between the Monetary Incentive and both age and education remain highly significant, but the relationship with digital literacy disappears.

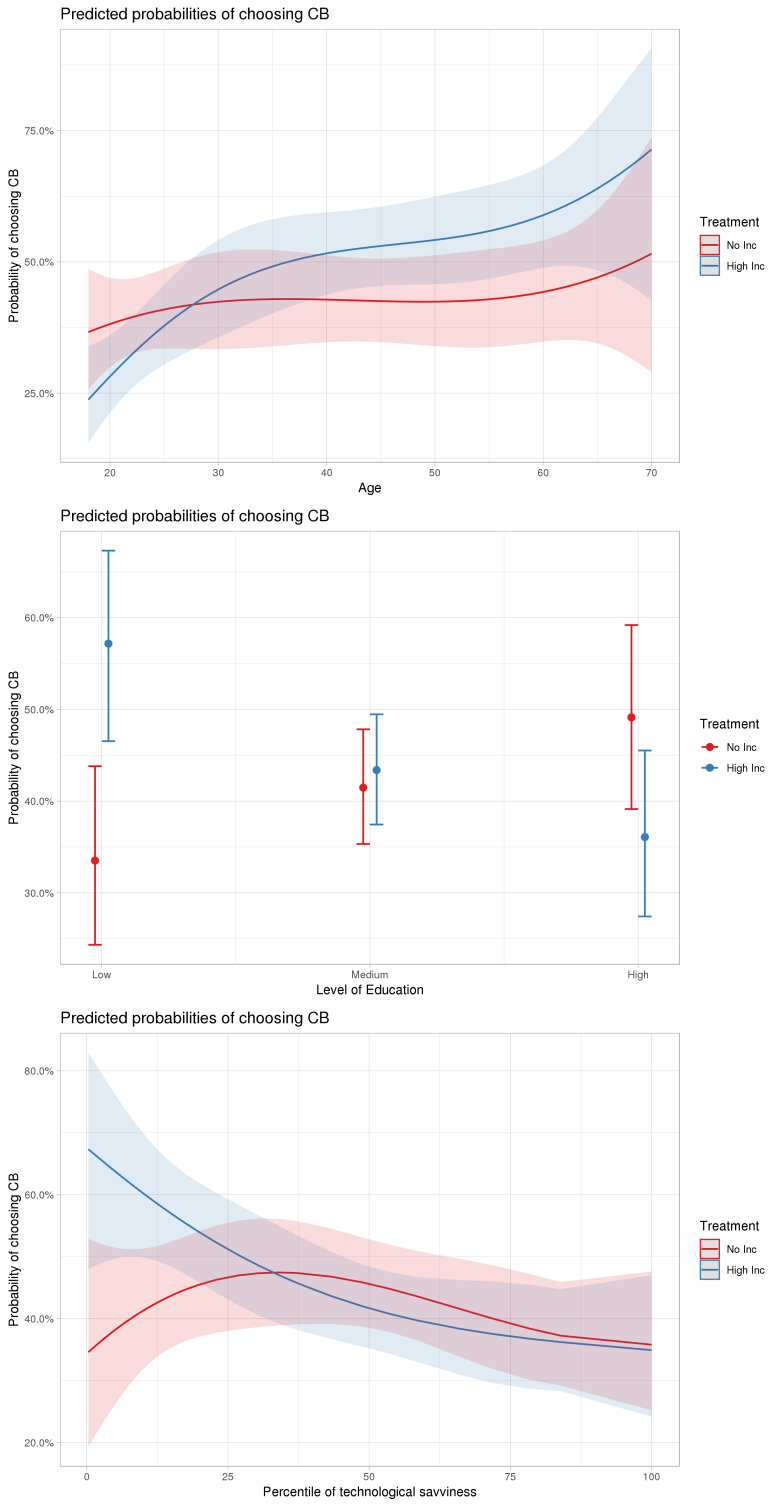

Figure 1: Interaction between treatment and *Age* (top panel), *Education* (middle panel), and *Digital Literacy* (bottom panel).

7 Conclusion

This paper takes seriously the role of perceived accuracy in media choice, investigating the source and the depth of the bond between mistrust for traditional media and support for anti-establishment, populist politics.

First, we find that the "clickbait style" associated with the anti-establishment parties currently in government Italy is preferred by people who are older, less educated and more likely to support the Italian populist government. This provides face validity for our theory, and corroborates results from the US.

Our main result is achieved by manipulating the salience of *accuracy* in respondents' choice of media consumption. Some models of online media choice suggest that people opt to consume low-credibility online media because of a desire for congenial information, others because they are not taking the time to think seriously about their choice, and others because they are being deceived because they lack the digital literacy to evaluate source credibility online.

However, we find that offering a monetary incentive for accuracy *increases* the likelihood that certain respondents (older, less educated) will select a clickbait headline. This result is not consistent with other models of media choice. The partisan content of the choice task is held constant. Rather than rushing through unreflectively, the monetary incentive causes responds to spend considerably longer selecting an article.

Indeed, the only model that is consistent with our results is that the people who prefer clickbait headlines do so *because they think they are more accurate.*

These results suggest that the challenge facing the media and political establishments is more serious than some observers appreciate. The standard journalistic style that is designed to signal high-credibility reporting has the intended effect for the young and educated, but a sizable portion of the Italian population—and the key constituency of the current governing coalition—makes the opposite inference.

This is a serious problem, one unlikely to be addressed by recent developments around attempts to signal article quality to readers. Indeed, publishing fact-checking articles and emphasizing institutional credibility as the main distinction between good quality and bad quality information may paradoxically serve to further alienate an already skeptical portion of the audience.

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8 Online Appendix

Figure 2: Recruitment Instrument for Facebook Sample

8.1 Pre-treatment articles

8.1.1 Batch 1, ITA

- **CB Pro** Il PD è furioso! Ecco cosa non vogliono farti sapere sull'Air Force Renzi.
- **CB Anti** Basta chiacchiere! Tutte le menzogne sull'aereo di Stato
- **Non-CB Pro** Il costo dei voli di Stato aumentato durante gli ultimi 5 anni
- **Non-CB Anti** Un aereo di servizio è necessario per i voli ufficiali e fa risparmiare soldi
- **Neutral** Quanto costano i voli di Stato

8.1.2 Batch 1, ENG

- **CB Pro** The democrats are furious! Here's what they do not want you to know about the Air Force Renzi.
- **CB Anti** Stop the fake-news! All the lies on the State Aircraft
- **Non-CB Pro** The cost of the State Aircraft rose during the last 5 years
- **Non-CB Anti** A State Aircraft is useful and it actually saves us money
- **Neutral** The cost of the State Aircraft

8.1.3 Batch 2, ITA

- **CB Pro** "■Abbiamo paura ad uscire di casa", ecco quello che la sinistra non vuole farvi sapere

  CB Anti La propaganda leghista vi sta mentendo! Ecco la verità sulla sicurezza in Italia

  Non-CB Pro 2013-2017, in aumento la criminalità in tutta Italia

  Non-CB Anti Nonostante un piccolo aumento, la criminalità in Italia resta ai minimi storici

  Neutral Tutto quello che c'è da sapere sulla criminalità in Italia

8.1.4 Batch 2, ENG

- **CB Pro** "We're afraid to get out", here's what the democrats do not want you to know
- **CB Anti** The League's propaganda is lying to you! Here's the truth about safety in Italy
- **Non-CB Pro** 2013-2017, crime is on the rise throughout the country
- **Non-CB Anti** Despite a small increase, crime is still at the historical low
- **Neutral** Everything you need to know about crime in Italy

8.2 Treatment articles: Endogenous choice - Italian

8.2.1 Neutral

Le cifre sulla riforma delle spese della Camera

L'ufficio di presidenza della Camera ha approvato la delibera proposta dal presidente Roberto Fico che prevede il ricalcolo dei vitalizi degli ex deputati. Il ricalcolo porterà a una riduzione dei vitalizi tramite un meccanismo chiamato "ricalcolo contributivo". Significa che i vitalizi concessi in passato e il cui ammontare era stato calcolato con il metodo retributivo saranno ricalcolati con il metodo contributivo, che prevede che l'assegno pensionistico sia proporzionato ai contributi effettivamente versati durante il mandato parlamentare. Il nuovo sistema entrerà in vigore dal prossimo primo novembre e dovrebbe portare a 42 milioni di euro di risparmi all'anno.

A percepire il vitalizio sono oggi circa 2.600 ex parlamentari tra Camera e Senato, per una cifra che nel 2017 ha raggiunto i 206 milioni di euro. Cala l'assegno di tutti quelli che sono stati in Parlamento in passato e sono in età da pensione. Ciononostante, il budget complessivo della Camera salirà di 18,8 milioni di euro, raggiungendo 969,2 milioni.

8.2.2 Clickbait Pro

I vecchi partiti sono furiosi! Guardate cosa è successo ai vitalizi!

Buon inizio per il Governo del Cambiamento! L'ufficio di presidenza della Camera ha approvato la delibera proposta dal presidente Roberto Fico che prevede il ricalcolo dei vitalizi degli ex deputati. Il ricalcolo porterà a una riduzione dei vitalizi tramite un meccanismo chiamato "ricalcolo contributivo". Significa che i vitalizi concessi in passato e il cui ammontare era stato calcolato con il metodo retributivo saranno ricalcolati con il metodo contributivo, che prevede che l'assegno pensionistico sia proporzionato ai contributi effettivamente versati durante il mandato parlamentare. Il nuovo sistema entrerà in vigore dal prossimo primo novembre e porterà ad addirittura 42 milioni di euro di risparmi all'anno. Finalmente un po' di pulizia tra i privilegi dei soliti noti.

A percepire il vitalizio sono oggi circa 2.600 ex parlamentari tra Camera e Senato, per una cifra esorbitante che nel 2017 ha raggiunto i 206 milioni di euro. Cala l'assegno di tutti quelli che sono stati in Parlamento in passato e sono in età da pensione. Malgrado gli sforzi, il budget complessivo della Camera

salirà di 18,8 milioni di euro, raggiungendo 969,2 milioni. In soli tre mesi, sono cambiate più cose che negli ultimi 10 anni! Avanti tutta!

8.2.3 Non Clickbait Pro

Diminuisce la spesa pubblica grazie ai tagli alle istituzioni

L'ufficio di presidenza della Camera ha approvato la delibera proposta dal presidente Roberto Fico che prevede il ricalcolo dei vitalizi degli ex deputati. Il ricalcolo porterà a una riduzione dei vitalizi tramite un meccanismo chiamato "ricalcolo contributivo". Significa che i vitalizi concessi in passato e il cui ammontare era stato calcolato con il metodo retributivo saranno ricalcolati con il metodo contributivo, che prevede che l'assegno pensionistico sia proporzionato ai contributi effettivamente versati durante il mandato parlamentare. Il nuovo sistema entrerà in vigore dal prossimo primo novembre e porterà ad addirittura 42 milioni di euro di risparmi all'anno.

A percepire il vitalizio sono oggi circa 2.600 ex parlamentari tra Camera e Senato, per una cifra esorbitante che nel 2017 ha raggiunto i 206 milioni di euro. Cala l'assegno di tutti quelli che sono stati in Parlamento in passato e sono in età da pensione. Malgrado gli sforzi, il budget complessivo della Camera salirà di 18,8 milioni di euro, raggiungendo 969,2 milioni.

8.2.4 Clickbait Anti

Non ditelo ai grillini! Nonostante le promesse, poco è cambiato nella spesa dello Stato

Tanto rumore per nulla. Dopo anni a parlare di vitalizi, l'ufficio di presidenza della Camera ha approvato la delibera proposta dal presidente Roberto Fico che prevede semplicemente il ricalcolo dei vitalizi degli ex deputati. Il ricalcolo porterà a una riduzione dei vitalizi tramite un meccanismo chiamato "ricalcolo contributivo". Significa che i vitalizi concessi in passato e il cui ammontare era stato calcolato con il metodo retributivo saranno ricalcolati con il metodo contributivo, che prevede che l'assegno pensionistico sia proporzionato ai contributi effettivamente versati durante il mandato parlamentare. Il nuovo sistema entrerà in vigore dal prossimo primo novembre e porterà ad un magro risparmio di 42 milioni di euro all'anno. Una bazzecola rispetto alle spese esorbitanti della Camera.

A percepire il vitalizio sono oggi circa 2.600 ex parlamentari tra Camera e

Senato, per una cifra che nel 2017 di soli i 206 milioni di euro. Cala l'assegno di tutti quelli che sono stati in Parlamento in passato e sono in età da pensione. Come previsto, il budget complessivo della Camera salirà addirittura di 18,8 milioni di euro, raggiungendo 969,2 milioni. Come sempre, dopo tanti proclami, nulla è cambiato.

8.2.5 Non Clickbait Anti

L'impatto dei tagli alle spese della Camera si rivela quasi inesistente

L'ufficio di presidenza della Camera ha approvato la delibera proposta dal presidente Roberto Fico che prevede semplicemente il ricalcolo dei vitalizi degli ex deputati. Il ricalcolo porterà a una riduzione dei vitalizi tramite un meccanismo chiamato "ricalcolo contributivo". Significa che i vitalizi concessi in passato e il cui ammontare era stato calcolato con il metodo retributivo saranno ricalcolati con il metodo contributivo, che prevede che l'assegno pensionistico sia proporzionato ai contributi effettivamente versati durante il mandato parlamentare. Il nuovo sistema entrerà in vigore dal prossimo primo novembre e porterà ad un magro risparmio di 42 milioni di euro all'anno.

A percepire il vitalizio sono oggi circa 2.600 ex parlamentari tra Camera e Senato, per una cifra che nel 2017 di soli i 206 milioni di euro. Cala l'assegno di tutti quelli che sono stati in Parlamento in passato e sono in età da pensione. Come previsto, il budget complessivo della Camera salirà addirittura di 18,8 milioni di euro, raggiungendo 969,2 milioni.

8.3 Treatment articles: Endogenous choice - English

8.3.1 Neutral

The numbers of the spending cuts of the House

The House just approved the measure proposed by its Speaker Roberto Fico to revise the retirement benefits of former MPs. This reform will reduce the expenditure through the "contributive scheme". This means that past benefits whose amount had been calculated with the retributive method will not be calculated with the contributive method, which implies that the benefit is proportional to the retirement taxes actually paid by the MP. This new system will be effective starting next November and it should bring to a saving of 42 million Euro.

Now around 2600 former MPs of the House and Senate receive retirement benefits, for an overall expenditure of 206 millions Euro per year. All those who have been in the Parliament and are now about to retire will receive less. Nevertheless, the overall budget of the House will increase of 18,8 millions, reaching 969.2 millions.

8.3.2 Clickbait Pro

Old parties are furious! Here's what happened to pensions!

Great start for the Government of Change! The House just approved the measure proposed by its Speaker Roberto Fico to revise the retirement benefits of former MPs. This reform will reduce the expenditure through the "contributive scheme". This means that past benefits whose amount had been calculated with the retributive method will not be calculated with the contributive method, which implies that the benefit is proportional to the retirement taxes actually paid by the MP. This new system will be effective starting next November and it should bring to a saving of 42 million Euro. Finally, a cut to the privileges of the élite.

Now around 2600 former MPs of the House and Senate receive retirement benefits, for an overall record expenditure of 206 millions Euro per year. All those who have been in the Parliament and are now about to retire will receive less. Nevertheless, despite the efforts, the overall budget of the House will increase of 18,8 millions, reaching 969.2 millions. In just 3 months, we changed more things that (the other governments) in the last 10 years! Let's keep going!

8.3.3 Non Clickbait Pro

The spending decreases thanks to the cuts on pensions

The House just approved the measure proposed by its Speaker Roberto Fico to revise the retirement benefits of former MPs. This reform will reduce the expenditure through the "contributive scheme". This means that past benefits whose amount had been calculated with the retributive method will not be calculated with the contributive method, which implies that the benefit is proportional to the retirement taxes actually paid by the MP. This new system will be effective starting next November and it should bring to a saving of 42 million Euro.

Now around 2600 former MPs of the House and Senate receive retirement

benefits, for an overall record expenditure of 206 millions Euro per year. All those who have been in the Parliament and are now about to retire will receive less. Nevertheless, despite the efforts, the overall budget of the House will increase of 18,8 millions, reaching 969.2 millions.

8.3.4 Clickbait Anti

Don't tell Beppe Grillo! Despite the promises, nothing has changed in the House spending

Much ado about nothing. After years talking about retirement benefits, the House just approved the measure proposed by its Speaker Roberto Fico to just revise slightly the retirement benefits of former MPs. This reform will reduce the expenditure through the "contributive scheme". This means that past benefits whose amount had been calculated with the retributive method will not be calculated with the contributive method, which implies that the benefit is proportional to the retirement taxes actually paid by the MP. This new system will be effective starting next November and it should bring to a saving of just 42 million Euro. An insignificant amount with respect to the overall expenditure.

Now around 2600 former MPs of the House and Senate receive retirement benefits, for an overall expenditure of just 206 millions Euro per year. All those who have been in the Parliament and are now about to retire will receive less. Nevertheless, the overall budget of the House will increase of 18,8 millions, reaching 969.2 millions. As usual, we had a lot of talking and nothing changed.

8.3.5 Non Clickbait Anti

The impact of the new House cuts is almost inexistent

Speaker Roberto Fico to just revise slightly the retirement benefits of former MPs. This reform will reduce the expenditure through the "contributive scheme". This means that past benefits whose amount had been calculated with the retributive method will not be calculated with the contributive method, which implies that the benefit is proportional to the retirement taxes actually paid by the MP. This new system will be effective starting next November and it should bring to a saving of just 42 million Euro.

Now around 2600 former MPs of the House and Senate receive retirement benefits, for an overall expenditure of just 206 millions Euro per year. All

those who have been in the Parliament and are now about to retire will receive less. Nevertheless, the overall budget of the House will increase of 18,8 millions, reaching 969.2 millions.

9 Flexible model specification for interaction effects

Imposing a functional form (linear or otherwise) on multiplicative interaction models can produce misleading estimates, per Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019, so we used the R package 'interflex' to flexibly determine the most appropriate model for our data. The marginal interaction effects displayed in Figure 1 are replicated below.

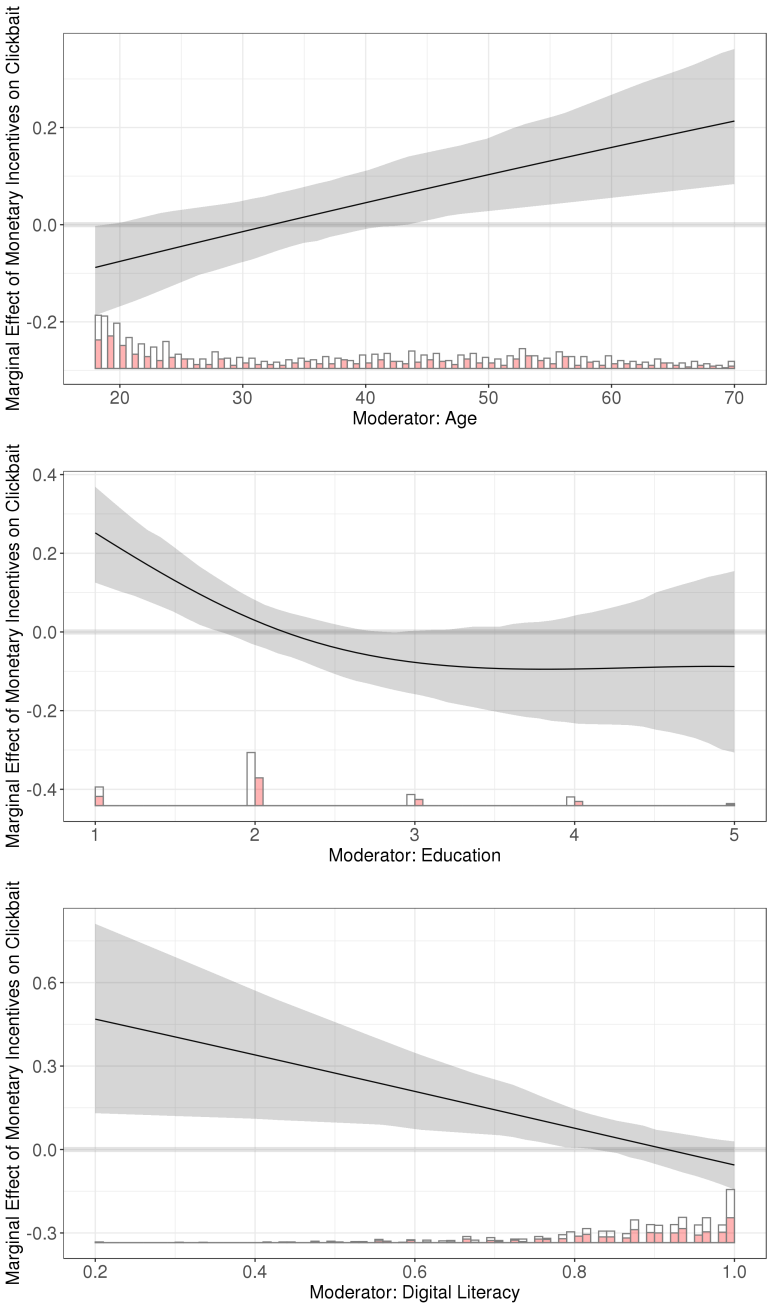

Figure 3: Flexibly calculated interaction between treatment and *Age* (top panel), *Education* (middle panel), and *Digital Literacy* (bottom panel).