

Chapter 1

Introduction

Does anyone trust the news anymore? Not according to the latest Gallup Poll, which showed that only 4 in 10 Americans believe that mass media does a good job of reporting the news “fully, fairly, and accurately.” It’s a major decline since the poll was first taken in 1999, back when more than half (55%) of Americans believed the news was trustworthy [8].

And the trend has been steadily downward: in short, the majority of Americans have had little to no trust in mass media news coverage since 2007: a discouraging view for a tumultuous time in journalism.

But beyond frustrated readers and reporters, why does distrust in the news matter? For one, media bias—or at the very least, the *belief of* a biased media bias—may have a significant impact on the practice of democracy. A 2006 study from Georgetown University shows that those with more negative attitudes towards the news tend to be more highly influenced by their partisan prior beliefs and less by contemporary issues and messages when voting [5]. This implies that distrust of media plays a large role in the polarization of American politics.

In light of the upcoming 2016 elections, this thesis explores perceptions of media

trust and fairness in coverage of the presidential candidates. Claims of media bias and favoritism are especially high-stakes in election years, where trust has been shown to plummet [8]. And in this election cycle, cries of bias have been especially loud: Analysis at the New York Times showed that the news media gave Republican candidate Donald Trump a \$1.9 billion advantage in free publicity, an amount 190 times as much as paid advertising [3].

In this thesis, we examine some of the factors that contribute to the perception of media bias. In particular, how does the *content* of a story (reading level and vocabulary) affect the reader versus the *context* (publication and author)?

We break down the larger question of media bias in two dimensions: trust and fairness in reporting, and examine the role of language in influencing the reader. Although studies have been conducted to both examine the psychological effect of wording on believability and the impact of media brands and bias, separating and comparing these two factors remains largely unexamined [10, 4]

Two studies are performed: a preliminary and main experiment to collect reader’s perceptions of news stories through crowdsourcing. We manipulate the source of the story to examine effects of media brands on the reader, and also compare trust and fairness rankings between high and low reading level stories.

Although the general consensus of mistrust is clear, perception of media bias is a complex phenomenon to dissect, as it combines social and psychological effects with the traits of the story itself. This thesis hopes to shed new light on understanding what motivates readers’ trust and distrust of news media.

Chapter 2

In Media We ... Trust?

Despite the news media ecosystem’s rapid evolution in the past decade, the question of fairness in reporting remains a valued one. Although counterarguments for subjective reporting exist (Glenn Greenwald, most famous for his coverage of whistleblower Edward Snowden’s leaks, said that “All journalism is a form of activism. Every journalistic choice necessarily embraces highly subjective assumptions—cultural, political or nationalistic—and serves the interests of one faction or another”), fair treatment of subjects and sources remain a central tenant to most publications [1].

But an attempt at fairness on the side the reporter is not always perceived in equal effect under the eyes of the reader. Presenting contradictory facts to a reader’s beliefs can even sometimes *strengthen* their oppositions to it, a concept known as “motivated skepticism” [9].

In this section, we explore the theories behind three main potential sources of media distrust: In addition to the characteristics of the reader, we examine the source of the story and its use of language.

Chapter 7

Main Study

Following the limitations and patterns from the preliminary study, we designed a follow-up study to verify interactions between news source and reading level.

7.1 Experimental Design

For the second study, our experiment was revised to have a 4 x 2 mixed-factorial design. In this study, reading level of articles and candidates featured in the articles were treated as within-subject variables, and the source of the story between-subjects.

This time, we reduced the number of stories to N=8, and also changed reading level from a 3-level to 2-level variable (low, high) for clarity.

	Source: None	Source: AP	Source: Fox	Source: CNN
High Reading Level	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump
Low Reading Level	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump	Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, Trump

Table 7.1: Main Study Design

Most significantly, since we observed some significant effect from disclosing source to the reader in Study 1, we added a manipulation in this experiment to further study the effect of revealing the source:

Following Baum’s research in showing the effects of media brands and reader bias by manipulating reported brands, all eight stories in Study 2 were in fact written by the Associated Press, however, we manipulated the source shown to the reader [4]. In group A, readers were shown the headline and text of the story with no other context. In group B, readers were additionally shown that the story was from the Associated Press (true label). In groups C and D, readers were shown that the story was from CNN and Fox News, respectively.

This setup was created to eliminate some of the confounding effects from using stories from different sources (writing style, focus of content, slant, etc.), while directly observing the effect of revealing a specific source to the reader. The Associated Press was chosen as the source of the stories as it is the highest circulation newswire service in the United States, and has 14,000 members that use its content [7]. Notably, both CNN and Fox News publish content in full or part from the Associated Press, although the specific stories chosen had not been published in full by either to avoid bias.

We removed the favorability question from Study 1 (as the 3-point scale did not yield significant results), instead asking the reader more directly about media bias by ranking the fairness of the story on a 5-point Likert scale. The trustworthiness question from Study 1 was kept, also on the same 5-point Likert scale.

7.2 Data Selection

7.3 Limitations