

Perceptions of Credibility Across the Political Spectrum: Examining the Bias in Media Among
Political Groups

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Abstract

In this study, we conducted research with 71 participants, consisting of a majority of liberals/leftists and independents, to investigate if differences exist in the perceived credibility of left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning news articles and sources. We employed two ANOVA tests. The analysis revealed no significant difference in perceived credibility among left-leaning, neutral, and right-leaning articles ($p = .957$). Similarly, we found no significant difference in the perceived credibility of the publications themselves ($p = .702$). These findings challenge the previous assumptions that individuals with political leanings perceive balanced and opposing articles and sources as problematic or less credible. However, due to potential confounding variables in this study, we recommend future research with a more diverse sample. Future research should use a systematic article and section selection process to explore possible differences in attitudes among individuals with varying political leanings.

Introduction

With the rise of social media, the occurrence of pivotal political events, and the presence of controversial political candidates over the past decade, issues like political polarization, trust, and bias have become increasingly prominent on both sides of the political spectrum. Concerns are growing over the reliability of news sources and the struggle to maintain objectivity in reporting. As the market for online publications expands, driven by lower barriers to entry and wider internet access, readers from all political viewpoints are voicing concerns about the information they receive and its impact on their trust in the media and on public knowledge.

A Pew Research study indicates that political polarization has steadily increased from 1994 to 2014. The proportion of participants who consistently identify with a specific political ideology has more than doubled, leading to decreased ideological overlap. Democrats and Republicans are not only more ideologically divided – with Democrats leaning more towards liberalism and Republicans towards conservatism – but members of both parties are increasingly viewing each other as threats. The percentage of individuals within each party who hold highly negative views of the opposing party has also more than doubled. Furthermore, individuals at both ends of the political spectrum are increasingly likely to report having close friends with similar political beliefs, a trend most prevalent among those who are politically active.

As more individuals consistently align with a particular political ideology, the perceived credibility of news sources becomes a more complex issue. Research has demonstrated that identical content is often judged differently when attributed to various news sources.

Specifically, the credibility of a news story is influenced by the perceived credibility of its source.

Kim & Pasadeos (2007) expanded upon research showing that partisan readers find opposing news media less credible by exploring these readers' perceptions of balanced news stories. They discovered that partisan news readers deemed balanced stories problematic and viewed partisan news stories aligning with their own opinions as more credible. Baek et al. (2011) further explored the implications of Kim & Pasadeos's study, finding that readers who perceived left-leaning news stories as less credible tended to hold more polarized views. Conversely, readers perceiving right-leaning news as less credible did not exhibit such polarized views. However, the researchers noted that the results are mixed and require further research. These studies suggest that the perception of non-partisan media can be highly situational, especially among readers with strong opinions or limited exposure to diverse sources.

Kelly (2018) investigated the perceived credibility of unknown or potentially fake news sources, manipulating the content to examine its effects. He found that content from unknown sources is viewed as more credible when it aligns with pre-existing beliefs, while even balanced content from unknown sources is perceived as less credible and biased. This aligns with findings that partisan readers tend to find balanced stories problematic.

In political interpersonal discussions, individuals often engage with friends holding similar beliefs. This interaction can further alter the perceived credibility of various partisan sources. A study demonstrated that supportive interpersonal discussions correlate with increased perceived credibility in liberal sources among liberals, and conservative sources

among conservatives. This increase in perceived credibility leads to greater usage of congenial sources and reduced engagement with opposing sources (Hmielowski et al., 2020).

The increasing likelihood of individuals favoring and consuming congenial partisan news sources may have various implications. Levendusky (2013) found that consuming like-minded media makes viewers feel more negatively about the opposing side and even about bipartisanship. Additionally, Dilliplane (2011) studied the relationship between the consumption of congenial or opposing partisan news and political participation. Although the consumption of partisan news did not significantly affect habitual voting turnout, it did influence participants' behaviors throughout the campaign. Moreover, the consumption of partisan news also affects the level at which voters participate in elections.

Despite evidence supporting increasing political polarization, stronger trust in congenial sources, and less support for opposing sources or even bipartisanship, Prior (2013) argues that partisan media does not necessarily change readers' attitudes. He contends that the consumption of partisan news only influences a small segment of the already radicalized population, whereas ordinary Americans may not be affected. Lee (2017) supports Prior's work by finding that the strength of partisanship did not affect information-seeking behavior. For example, participants exposed to congenial sources were still equally likely to search for opposing sources, attributable to high self-efficacy in individuals wanting to better inform themselves. Furthermore, there were no attitude changes in participants when exposed to both congenial and opposing messages. However, differences in attitude changes were observed between weak and strong partisans when exposed to congenial sources, but not to opposing sources. This finding is consistent with Prior's theory that a segment of the already partisan

population could experience attitude changes or be affected by the consumption of partisan news.

Previous research has explored the changing political landscape, individuals' perceptions of different news media, and some possible implications of these findings. However, no prior research has examined the perceived credibility of articles when the source is unknown. We hypothesize that, given an evenly distributed sample of left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning participants, there should be no significant difference in the perceived credibility of left-leaning, neutral, and right-leaning articles. This is based on the assumption that partisan participants would find congenial sources more credible than opposing ones, while independents would regard the neutral source as most credible.

Methods

Participants

A total of 71 participants, with an average age of 30.19 years (ranging from 18 to 68 years, $SD = 16.61$), were recruited by the Northwestern University psychology department. The sample consisted of 36.6% males, 59.2% females, and 4.2% identifying as non-specified or other genders. Regarding racial and ethnic backgrounds, 46.5% of the participants identified as White, 5.6% as Black, 14.1% as Asian, 14.1% as Latin American, 4.2% as Native American, and 14.1% as mixed race. The average reported annual household income was in the \$100,001 to \$150,000 range. The most common education level, either completed or in progress, was a bachelor's degree. Politically, 50% of the participants identified as liberal or

leftist, 32.9% as independents, 7.1% as conservatives, and 10% preferred not to answer.

Some participants did not report certain non-crucial demographic data, such as their income level. Their results were included in the study since no statistical analysis was conducted on the relationship between these demographic factors and the perceived credibility of the three sources. Although only a few participants omitted answers to certain descriptive questions, these demographics are still important to consider in conjunction with the actual results. They could provide possible explanations and guide future implications and research.

Measures

5-Point Likert Scale (Likert, 1932)

A 5-point Likert scale, which consists of five response options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," is used to measure attitudes or opinions in this study. This scale is chosen because it offers a straightforward way for participants to express their perceptions of an article's or source's credibility. It also captures nuances in participants' attitudes, allowing for a spectrum of responses that are more informative than a simple yes/no answer.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used to determine participants' perceptions of the articles included three questions focused on perceived truthfulness, objectivity, and credibility: "This article accurately portrays the event it covers," "This article is completely free of bias," and "This article is credible."

Another questionnaire aimed at assessing participants' perceptions of the source concentrated on trust and the likelihood of revisiting the website, with questions: “I would read more articles from this source” and “I would trust information from this source.”

Procedure

We selected three different sections, each with similar word counts, from three separate sources. All three articles covered the same story of Trump’s indictment, a trending topic at the time of the study, to ensure that the articles could be easily understood by participants.

The left-leaning source and article were from CNN. The neutral source and article were from AP News. The right-leaning source and article were from Fox News. The partisanship of all three sources has been consistently confirmed by AllSides.

Survey

All participants accessed the questionnaire via the same link. The software used, Qualtrics, discreetly divided the participants into three groups, providing different groups of participants with one of the three article sections. Participants remained unaware of the variations between the three groups.

Data Analytic Plan

Analyses were conducted using Jamovi, a statistical software package optimized for statistical analysis. An ANOVA test was performed to compare the means of three different

groups—left-leaning, neutral, and right-leaning—to see if at least one of the means was significantly different from the others; these means indicate perceived credibility.

For this study, two models were developed. The first model aims to examine whether there is a difference in the perceived credibility of the three different articles. The second model intends to investigate whether there is a difference in the perceived credibility of the three different sources.

The F statistic will be used to compare the variance between the group means to the variance within the groups. A higher F value typically indicates a greater likelihood of a significant difference between the group means. Lastly, p-values will be calculated to determine the statistical significance of the relationships being examined.

Results

Because responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale, the mean score of the responses can indicate a general assessment of the perceived credibility of the specific article: the higher the score, the greater the perceived credibility.

For the left-leaning article, participants assigned a mean score of 2.87 ($SD = 1.06$) to the article and 3.13 ($SD = 1.22$) to the publication, indicating a relatively neutral perception of credibility for both the article and the source.

For the neutral article, participants assigned a mean score of 2.94 ($SD = 1.02$) to the article and 2.89 ($SD = 1.29$) to the publication, indicating a relatively neutral perception of credibility for both the article and the source.

For the right-leaning article, participants assigned a mean score of 2.95 ($SD = .93$) to the article and 3.17 ($SD = .96$) to the publication, indicating a relatively neutral perception of credibility for both the article and the source.

Results from the ANOVA test showed no significant difference in perceived credibility among the left-leaning, neutral, and right-leaning articles ($p = .957$). Similarly, there was no significant difference in the perceived credibility of the publications themselves ($p = .702$). In the model for article credibility, the variance among the groups was similar to the variance within the groups ($F = .04$). In the model for source credibility, the variance between the groups was not significantly larger than the variance within the groups ($F = .36$). Both the F-value and the p-value indicate that the observed differences between the groups are not statistically significant and are likely due to random variation rather than a systematic effect.

Discussion

There were no significant differences between the perceived credibility of the three separate articles and sources. This finding is consistent with our hypothesis, although the premise was inconsistent. We hypothesized that there would be no differences in perceived credibility among the three sources, assuming that the participant sample would represent a diverse political demographic with similar numbers of left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning participants. However, our participant demographics were predominantly left-leaning, with only a small number of right-leaning participants. Therefore, the interpretation of the results is inconsistent with the previous belief that left-leaning participants would rate CNN as highly

credible, AP as neutral, and Fox as less credible.

There are many possible explanations for this result, requiring future research. Firstly, the article we chose could be written more objectively than those in previous research, leaving less room for disagreement. Secondly, the article's topic might not be polarizing enough for participants to find the information problematic or less credible; for instance, if independents and some conservative participants lean left on this particular issue. Another explanation could be that one side of the political spectrum is more likely to accept information and sources from the opposite side; for example, liberals might view conservative sources as offering an alternative perspective and, therefore, still read and trust these sources. Lastly, it's also possible that this conservative news source and article might be equally as credible as liberal sources on the topic of Trump's indictment.

Limitations

Although we hoped for a relatively balanced participant pool in terms of political leanings, the majority of our participants were liberals (50%), with very few conservatives (7.1%). This imbalance could skew the results, as the conservative article and source might be viewed as less credible than if the sample were more diverse.

Furthermore, using a section of one article on a singular topic might not fully represent the general credibility of the entire article or news publication. Possible confounding factors could arise when researchers decide which part of the article to pick, which article to select, and the topic of the article.

Lastly, the demographics of our participants, apart from their political leanings, might not be fully representative of the general population. Most participants reported a high income, between \$100,001 to \$150,000, and had a bachelor's degree or were in the process of obtaining one.

Conclusion

Although no significant differences were found in the perceived credibility of left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning articles and sources, future research is needed to explore the absence of these differences despite previous research indicating high levels of polarization and distrust in media that present opposing ideas. Future studies should focus on gathering a politically diverse sample and systematically selecting specific topics, articles, and sections that might best represent any differences between various media sources. Additionally, future research could include more statistical analyses to investigate whether there is a variance in trust or distrust between left-leaning and right-leaning participants towards congenial and opposing sources and articles.

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