**Fake News in the Trump Era: Deciphering What’s True in a Fake News Environment**

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There are more than 860 million websites that we can visit on the Internet at any given moment (Examiner, 2017). The digital universe is getting bigger every day, and with its expansion comes a minefield of news outlets with varying degrees of credibility and factual information. There has been a rising prominence of fake news articles and websites that have made their way into the public sphere. Sites like *The Onion* have been around for years, presenting satirical commentary on world events, under the umbrella term of fake news. In contrast with satirical humor, “fake turns toxic with the deliberate distribution and amplification of misleading, factually incorrect, and explosive “news”, particularly when it is indistinguishable from hate speech” (Ojala, 2017). When fake news is presented as real news, it becomes problematic, especially as it becomes harder to distinguish who and what is credible in the ever-growing technology environment. “We live in a media culture where there is no time to think, to be skeptical… technology does exist to create reality that will have a profound effect on ‘what is news’...Fake news websites are designed to deceive readers into thinking they are legitimate news websites publishing real news. It is designed to deliberately change the way people think or feel about a certain person or issue” (Examiner, 2017).

The goal of this project is to study how people perceive online news sources. In the following sections, we will describe the history and current status of the fake news landscape as well as relevant theories, including the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Heuristic Systematic Model, Cultivation Theory, and Selective Exposure. We will also outline the factors affecting people’s perceptions of fake news, including time, source, likeability, online connections, political affiliation, consistency with beliefs, and need for cognition. These factors and theories formulated our hypotheses that drove the experiment we will discuss, as well as our methods and results.

**Fake News in the Past**

Across history, the chief disseminators of fake news have included government officials, media organizations, and political activists. The government’s corruption of the media dates back to the founding of the United States in the 18th century. The Founding Fathers would privately fund newspapers in return for positive coverage of their political opinions from reporters, regardless of how the reporters actually felt (Morse, 2006, p. 846). The popularity of private funding only strengthened over time; by the end of the Civil War, 80 percent of the nation’s 4,000 periodical publications were financially supported by a political party (Morse, 2006, p. 847). This private funding represented the influence politics had over the media and how the news was communicated to the public, regardless of whether the media believed in the validity of the political party funding their publication.

Because of the political spectrum’s influence on the media, fake news has been more easily pushed out to the public over time. For example, Gifford Pinchot, Chief of the United States Department of Agriculture under President William McKinley, was accused of leaking false, malicious stories to the press (Morse, 2006, p. 848). Under President Wilson, George Creel’s Committee of Public Information published approximately 20,000 articles a week, saturating the news with propaganda heavily slanted towards World War I (Morse, 2006, p. 850). The Nixon administration engineered a campaign that involved blitzing the media with phony letters that praised his administration (Morse, 2006, p. 854). More recently, the Bush administration exercised “unusually firm control over the flow of information to the press and…over the press itself” (Morse, 2006, pp. 856-857). Most noticeably, the Bush administration paid conservative columnist Armstrong Williams to positively comment on the No Child Left Behind Act when it was first enacted, setting off a huge public backlash (Morse, 2006, pp. 843-844).

The government’s hold over the media and what news gets published, whether or not it is real or fake, has led to actions meant to protect the public by maintaining that sources of information must be revealed. Under the Pinchot era with President McKinley, for example, a congressman noted the importance of the people knowing where their news is coming from as they are consuming the information (Morse, 2006, p. 849). This principle goes back to The First Amendment in the United States Constitution, which protects the following three values: “promoting the search for truth in the marketplace of ideas, ensuring a well-informed populace primed for self-governance, and allowing for autonomous decision-making by citizens” (Morse, 2006, p. 864). Because of the First Amendment, the public has the right to know not only what the truth is, but also where their information is coming from. However, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) does little to inhibit the spread of fake news because journalists argue if they always have to disclose where they are receiving information from, they lose editorial control over their stories (Morse, 2006, p. 861). A ruling by the 1983 Court of Appeals made it even easier for networks to “escape enforcement action as long as they exercised ‘reasonable diligence’ in inquiring into pundits’ government ties” (Morse, 2006, p. 862). Because of these actions, that have been taken to both encourage and dissuade people from adhering to constitutional regulations, fake news remains in limbo and more easily able to get into the public’s mainstream media messages.

One critical example of fake news engineered by the media themselves, rather than political parties, is Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* story that debuted across national radio. This story scared many people into believing that aliens had come to invade the Earth. While hype did occur surrounding this fake story, the actual impact of Welles’ story was severely overplayed by the media, in particular by those who wanted to discredit the radio as a source of information. For example, newspaper outlets “viewed radio as a major competitor, so it was no surprise that they might take part in an attempt to discredit it” (Unus, 2016, p. 404). What is significant about both the release of this fake *War of the Worlds* piece as well as the media’s attempt to bash the radio through over-exaggerated hype is that fake news is largely fueled by the medium in which the message is framed (Unus, 2016, p. 405). Regardless of whether or not it is real or fake, if the news is communicated as a reality by those who are in positions of power, such as newspaper editors or politicians, the public is more likely to believe the message.

A more recent example of media that has attempted to discredit itself is The Yes Men’s planted fake news sources. The Yes Men are an activist collective that use political satire to level pointed critiques against corporations. The two forms of the Yes Men’s fake news involve cultivating media hoaxes that become the subject of much media scrutiny, and constructing fake news stories through more traditional media sources, such as websites and newspapers (Reilly, 2013, p. 1246). What’s interesting about The Yes Men’s tactics is that “their (ironic/parodic) critiques are not always readily intelligible to audiences,” indicating that their fake news seems so real that it can go unnoticed by the public (Reilly, 2013, p. 1247). For example, when The Yes Men created a fake version of *The New York Times* and distributed it to various audiences, the only discernible difference between the publications was “its explicit mandate to deploy satire in in the interests of bringing about progressive change in the not-so-distant future” (Reilly, 2013, p. 1254). By calling for change through satirical news publications, The Yes Men directly call out the utopian mechanisms of traditional media; in other words, the media often depicts society without offering any plausible alternatives, which is where The Yes Men come in. Then, since no one questions those sources, the audience accepts these alternatives as news and facts, indicating the power of the media to shape the narratives of truth, lies, and how to create a better America.

**Fake News Today**

Several fake news stories erupted throughout the 2016 presidential election campaign, including fabricated stories about Hillary Clinton’s involvement with ISIS and Pope Francis’ endorsement of Donald Trump. Fake news stories that favored Trump were shared a total of 30 million times on Facebook, while those that favored Clinton were shared eight million times (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). A BuzzFeed news analysis found that in the months leading up to the election, “the top-performing fake election stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets” (BuzzFeed, 2016); this compared with six months earlier, when mainstream news generated four times more Facebook activity than fake.

Many Americans and political figureheads around the world have spoken up about fake news in the wake of recent events. According to a Pew Research Center survey, “64% U.S. adults say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events” (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016). This is a common belief amongst people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and on all sides of the political divide. However, despite Americans knowing that fake news is out there and that it does wreak havoc on people, 84% of U.S. adults accredit themselves with the ability to detect fake news when they see it (Barthel et al., 2016).

Fake news stories tend to take a stance on the far right of the political spectrum, and are usually produced overseas by scammers hoping to make money off of the media illiterate (New York Times, 2016). However, fake news takes on a more serious and negative effect when people in positions of power and influence spread it and pass it off as factual information. Since Trump’s inauguration in January, we have seen him and his administration spread misinformation that ranges from false calculations of his inaugural attendance to an entirely fabricated massacre that supposedly occurred in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Fake news has become a buzzword, or phrase that is thrown around ubiquitously by people of all political inclinations. Donald Trump has used the phrase “fake news” in several of his recent tweets, calling out specific news sources such as the New York Times, NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN as “FAKE NEWS media”, and describing these news sources as “the enemy of the American People” (*Tweet*). The president’s words spark confusion, as he defines fake news as something wildly different from how media professionals describe the phenomenon.

What we find today is that fake news exists in a complex network of communication between fake news, real news, social media, television, and government media. Take the claim of widespread voter fraud for instance. A former Texas politician named Gregg Phillips tweeted: “We have verified more than three million votes cast by non-citizens” without linking the claim to evidence. That claim was then echoed by InfoWars, a “news source” known for publishing conspiracy theories. A few days later, President Trump, a regular reader of Infowars, tweeted “Look forward to seeing final results of VoteStand. Gregg Phillips and crew say at least 3,000,000 votes were illegal. We must do better!” When White House policy director Stephen Miller was asked about this claim by ABC’s George Stephanopoulos, Miller responded with "George, it is a fact and you will not deny it that are massive numbers of non-citizens in this country who are registered to vote.” This is just one example of an interaction between a social media post, a fake news article, a presidential administration, and cable news.

The most recent issue surrounding fake news is the question of who should be responsible for its regulation. Social media sites, politicians, and the government have all come out against fake news, and yet its presence on the Internet persists. Facebook and Google have both made commitments to change their algorithms to reduce the amount of fake news on their sites (Guynn, 2016). “To be truly news literate is to distinguish between hoaxes intending to undermine the integrity of a democratic system and alternative viewpoints, between fake news designed to manipulate legal outcomes and satire. As information professionals, it is our obligation to fight fire with facts. It is also our obligation to be sure of the facts” (Ojala, 2017).For the purpose of our research, we will define fake news as “sources that intentionally fabricate information, disseminate deceptive content, or grossly distort actual news reports” (Novotny, 2017).

**Relevant Theory**

**The Elaboration Likelihood Model**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model, or ELM, is a communication theory proposed by John Cacioppo and Richard E. Petty in 1984 (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). The theory holds that there are two distinct routes through which persuasion can occur between two parties. These pathways are the central and the peripheral routes (Oregon State University, n.d.)..

The central pathway is utilized by people when they exert real mental effort and actively engage with the content of the persuasive message. Another aspect of the central route is the addition of “prior experience and knowledge” as a means by which to more attentively consider the message being transmitted in context (Petty, Brinol, & Priester, 2009). When the central route is used, people are more likely to make an attempt to thoroughly comprehend all of the points made and consider the convincingness of the argument. The theory also states that if a person is given adequate time and a distraction-free environment and is also interested in the content of the message or has some some stake in the issue, they are more likely to steer towards the central route of processing (Oregon State University, n.d). In this way, they determine whether or not the persuasive argument provides adequate information to support the stance on which the message is trying to persuade the recipient (Petty et al., 2009).

Once all the information has been considered by the person utilizing the central route of ELM, the final step in the process is “integrating the new thoughts into one’s overall cognitive structure” (Petty et al., 2009). Once this has occurred, it is said that the person’s attitude has been solidly altered due to their in-depth consideration of the message and all its merits/drawbacks. Key characteristics of opinions created via the central route include a few distinct attributes. These opinions tend to be “easy to access from memory, persistent over time, predictive of behavior and resistant to change until they are challenged by cogent contrary information” (Petty et al., 2009).

Because it is unrealistic to think that people have the time and energy to consistently use the central route for every piece of persuasive information that they interact in a given day, the peripheral route attempts to explain the other way in which persuasion can occur through communication. This method of persuasion consideration goes into effect when the receiver is either unable to access the central route (due, for example, to distraction) or when they are not motivated to use the central route (due, for example, to lack of interest or pre-existing knowledge about the topic of communication) (Oregon State University, n.d). In these cases, recipients react to what the theory describes as “peripheral cues.” These make the message more attractive by, for example, connecting it to things to which the recipient most likely already has a positive attitude towards (Oregon State University, n.d). Other popular peripheral cues come from the source of the message. For example, a message from a supposed expert can sometimes trigger a peripheral cue that the message is accurate because experts are to be trusted as accurate (Petty et al., 2009).

Though the peripheral route can still lead to recipient changes in opinion, the effects tend to be less substantial than those towards opinions formed via the central route. These attitudes are less likely to be “accessible, enduring, and resistant to subsequent attacking messages” (Petty et al., 2009). Overall the peripheral route leads to a more pliant, passive opinion than those formed via the central route.

The processes explained by the ELM are evident in responses to media, especially in a political atmosphere. If people see certain issues more extensively covered in the media, then “it is reasonable that [those] dimensions of judgement will become more central in evaluating the merits of political candidates” (Petty et al. 2009). The more the media covers a specific political topic, the more likely viewers are to add that information to their base of knowledge and to be persuaded by arguments that touch upon those topics. In this way, the media has indirect effects on the ELM process and persuasion in the political arena.

**The Heuristic Systematic Model**

The Heuristic-Systematic Model, or HSM, is a communication theory proposed by Shelly Chaikenin 1978 that attempts to explain how people process information. Specifically, Chaiken’s HSM proposes that there are two ways people can process information when receiving and processing persuasive messages (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). The dual-process HSM is based on the ability of humans to make judgments either by the use of learned knowledge structures, known as heuristics, by cognition and motivation effort, or the co-occurring use of both processes.

According to Chaiken’s HSM, one way people process information is systematic processing., which occurs when people actively attend to or cognitively elaborate an argument (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). The systematic processing route is more effortful and associated with the central route of the ELM. In order for systematic processing to occur, an individual must have the ability to think cognitively and have the motivation to do so (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). However, factors such as limited time, knowledge, or simultaneous processing tasks can reduce systematic processing. This leads people to rely on through heuristic processing, which can be associated with the peripheral route of the ELM (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Heuristics are judgmental rules and “knowledge structures presumably learned and stored in memory” (Chen, Duckworth, & Chaiken, 1999). When heuristics are available, acceptable, and applicable to make judgments, peripheral processing can occur (Ratneshwar & Chaiken, 1991).

The HSM is important to analyze when trying to understand why people form attitudes based on different arguments and messages. Systematic processing leads to an individual accessing and scrutinizing all information and whether a message’s persuasive argument is relevant and important to him/her (Bargh, 1989, p. 212). Heuristic processing plays a key role in how people process persuasive arguments and messages. Relying on heuristics when processing a message can lead to inferences or expectancies about a message in terms of probable validity and the nature of attitude objects (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994).

Studies have shown that heuristics lead people to affirm the validity of messages or the credibility of a source when processing the message heuristically (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Heuristics such as “Experts can be trusted, majority opinion is correct, length implies strength (Bargh, 1989, p. 216), source likability and consensus information can cause people to be persuaded and believe certain information without cognitively processing that information.

**Cultivation Theory**

Conceived by George Gerbner in 1976, Cultivation Theory has become one of the most widely cited theories in the field of mass communication. The theory claims that the more an individual watches television (TV), the more that person will perceive reality to exhibit the patterns seen on TV. For instance, because rates of violence on TV appear more frequently than rates of violence in reality, heavy TV viewers are more likely to think that there is more violence in reality. Heavy watchers of TV, he found, are more likely to consider themselves middle-class and politically moderate than light TV watchers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986).

At the time, TV was one of the most popular forms of entertainment media and the internet was being used by just academics and the military. Gerbner et al. (1986, p. 18), noting TV’s ability to transcend the age-old obstacle of literacy, claimed that “Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other primary sources,” like priests or family members. Their research led them to believe that while TV does not directly determine people’s actions, it fosters a collective understanding of what is normal, a process Gerbner calls “mainstreaming.”

Research shows that the elaboration likelihood model and cultivation theory are intertwined when it comes to their effects on processing of the news consumers receive from the media. When conveying news to the consumers, “the more vivid or frequent examples are easier to remember than less vivid or frequent examples,” which can affect how they perceive the information (Shrum, 2002, p. 76). This is because information that is presented frequently is primed in cognitive associative network models for easier access, thereby requiring less central processing from the audience to comprehend (Shrum, 2002, p. 74). Cultivation theory is influenced by this accessibility in the cognitive models. According to research conducted by Shrum and O’Guinn in 1995, when the accessibility of information to a consumer of media was controlled, “the cultivation effect was, for the most part, reduced to nonsignificance” (Shrum, 2002, p. 81). This indicates that when the consumers centrally processed information, there was no cultivation effect, but when there was peripheral processing, a cultivation effect was apparent. These results are significant because they imply an indirect relationship between the elaboration likelihood model and cultivation theory in regards to how consumers process news in the media. It can be assumed that “the less elaboration…the greater the cultivation effect” (Shrum, 2002, p. 88). Peripheral processing is more positively associated with an increased likelihood of cultivation effect, while central processing is negatively associated with an increased likelihood of cultivation effect.

Cultivation research may help us understand the prevalence and power of fake news. If patterns seen on TV that misrepresent society distort how we view society, the prevalence of false claims within fake news sources further distorts it. Additionally, it is likely that fake news sources amplify the distorted notions of reality that are cultivated by watching TV. Heavy TV watchers who, according to Gerbner, are more likely to believe people “cannot be trusted” may subscribe to fake news sources that assume the same. Furthermore, when heavy TV watchers with large audiences spread fake news that reflect their worldview, the influence of cultivation is highly evident. Since President Donald Trump, who has a massive audience, is a heavy viewer of cable news, it is likely that his perception of reality is cultivated by such programming (Cillizza, 2016). However, the increased variation and polarization of TV programming and the rise of the internet in the past three decades has undoubtedly complicated the relationship between television and the public.

**Selective Exposure**

Given the variety of media sources, perhaps more relevant than cultivation research is research regarding selective exposure. Originating in Leon Festinger’s Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957), these theories claim that people expose themselves to content that confirms their existing beliefs and perceive content differently depending on these beliefs. This tendency is rooted in the natural desire to avoid cognitive dissonance, a state of cognitive imbalance marked by an inconsistency between one’s existing beliefs and newly encountered information. Unlike cultivation theory which emphasizes the message, selective exposure emphasizes the receiver. Research shows that when it comes to political information, people are more likely to seek information that confirms their existing political beliefs. This rings true in the context of both serious and satirical news (Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Whether it’s through television, the internet, or newspapers, people have complete control over the news and information they consume. Since people are more likely to seek information that matches their views and since people’s views tend to be rooted in emotion rather than facts, the prevalence of fake news is unsurprising. Social media allows such false information to spread like wildfire.

Social media outlets, such as Facebook or Twitter, are not sources of news but are instead sites that aggregate news and connect people with similar views. A 2013 study that explored selective exposure clusters of Twitter users found that “users participate in fragmented interactions and form divided groups in which people tune in to a narrow segment of the wider range of politically oriented information sources” (Himelboim, Smith, & Shneiderman, 2013, p. 195). It is likely that there are somewhat isolated networks of Twitter users whose primary sources of information are fake and conspiracy news sites. Still, each social media site presents and organizes news differently. Many blame Facebook for the rise of fake news, arguing that the site’s newsfeed algorithms expose users to only attitude-consistent news (Ferenstein, 2016). However, a study that analyzed how 10 million Facebook users interact with socially shared news found that compared to algorithmic ranking, individual choices play a stronger role in limiting users’ exposure to attitude-inconsistent news. Interestingly, both liberals and conservatives are likely to maintain only one fifth of their friends with an opposing ideology (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Both Twitter and Facebook maintain people’s views through their choice to connect with likeminded people.

**Variables that Determine Whether People Trust News**

**Need for Cognition**

Need for cognition describes the extent to which a person is inclined to “engage and enjoy thinking”, or has the need to make sense of information (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). This is related to the person’s past experiences, their capacity to take in information and their perceived importance of the situation (Cohen, Stotland, & Wolfe, 1955). Those with high need for cognition are inherently “thinkers” who have a higher desire to engage in debate and problem solving and therefore are more likely to engage in high elaboration. These individuals are more likely to use the central route to persuasion when analyzing information. Those with low need for cognition, however, are generally unmotivated to put extended effort into cognition and therefore are more likely to use heuristics to come to conclusions and are more likely to engage with the peripheral route to persuasion (Dole & Sinatra, 1998).

For a need for cognition to be present, a person must feel tension due to their lack of understanding or knowledge so much so that they have a strong desire to achieve the goal of making sense out of it. Though the need to assuage ambiguity is not uncommon, need for cognition goes further to address the need for “cognitive clarity” as a deeper layer (Cohen et al., 1955).

While those with high need for cognition may want to research a news source that they have never heard of to validate its credibility, a person with low need for cognition would remain uninterested in digging deeper. Because they feel less of a desire to look into the information critically,

Hypothesis 1: People with low need for cognition are more susceptible to fake news than those with high need for cognition.

**Consistency with Beliefs**

Based on selective exposure principles, it is proven that people only seeking out information that is consistent with their beliefs in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. Because of this, people are more likely to read articles that are consistent with their preexisting beliefs and are less interested in whether or not the information comes from a credible source. Challenging the source credibility of an article that confirms a preconceived notion would put the reader in danger of cognitive dissonance – something that they are likely to try to avoid. It follows that

Hypothesis 2: People will be more likely to believe that a fake news article is real the more that it is in congruence with their preexisting beliefs.

**Political Affiliation**

Whether you vote blue or red affects how you see the world, and in turn, how you interpret a news source as valid or fake. In the course of the 2016 election, fake news stories that were pro-Trump were shared almost three times the rate as fake news stories that were pro-Clinton. According to a study in the journal for Psychological Science, conservatives are “hyper-attuned to hazards in their world. If they spot a sign of danger, they figure trusting it is better than ignoring it” (Khazan, 2017). In a study in which participants identified themselves politically as either conservative or liberal, and then had to rate how much they believed certain statements that either focused on benefits or risks, Daniel Fessler of UCLA found that “conservative participants were more likely to believe the statements about hazards” (Khazan, 2017). What this means is that when fake news articles feature headlines that promote high levels of risk or threat, conservatives are more likely to share them and believe them. A University of Nebraska study focused on the negative bias that underlies conservative ideology found that “empirical evidence is increasingly documenting the psychological and physiological differences across people that can lead them to perceive the world so differently. One person focuses on threats but when facing that same situation another person focuses on opportunities” (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014, p. 307). In the case of fake news, it is the case that news articles directed towards conservatives are more likely to be believed and shared, as conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe in such articles. In short,

Hypothesis 3: Conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe fake news.

**Time**

Time can play a significant role in terms of how individuals process a message or argument. According to the HSM, the amount of time one has to process information controls how he/she processes that information-either systematically or heuristically. Even if there is sufficient motivation to systematically process, a time restraint can pressure reduce a person’s cognitive capacity, leading towards heuristic processing (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). A study conducted in 1994 explored how a time limit could reduce cognitive processing. Participants in the study worked in a chemistry lab and were either given or not given a time limit to mix various chemicals. The results of the study reflected the HSM and shows how a time-limit condition reduced the participants’ cognitive capacity and systematic processing, leading them to rely on heuristics (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998). In relation to fake news, it is possible that individuals with limited time don’t have the cognitive capacity to think about what news content he/she is reading or listening to. This leads to individuals relying on heuristics rather than critical thinking and fact to determine the validity of a news story. The implication is that

Hypothesis 4: The less time you have to process a news article, the more likely you are going to believe fake news.

**Online Connections**

Selective exposure plays a key role in determining the type of media individuals consume and share. Roughly 40% of people obtain their news online, according to Pew Research Center, where fake news is published and disseminated through social media like Facebook and Twitter (Mitchell, Gottfried,Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). These platforms are unique in that users shape the media they encounter based on their preferences and opinions. Research not only shows that people are more likely to seek information consistent with their existing beliefs, but also that Twitter and Facebook users choose to transform their newsfeeds into echo chambers of attitude-consistent beliefs (Bakshy et al., 2015; Himelboim et al., 2013; Knobloch‐Westerwick & Lavis, 2017). Given the dominance of selective exposure in shaping online group dynamics, we hypothesize that the likelihood of an individual to believe fake news is influenced by the online social networks they are a part of. In other words,

Hypothesis 5: The greater the percentage of an individual’s online connections to people that believe fake news, the more likely the individual is to believe such news.

**Source Likeability**

The source of a message can greatly affect an individual’s processing of information. Ultimately, source likeability can be significant in how an individual processes a message and if the individual will agree or disagree with the argument. The correlation of source likeability and accessibility can determine whether or not someone is persuaded by a message. According to Roskos-Ewoldsen, Bichsel, and Hoffman (2002), the more accessible a source’s likeability is from memory, the greater an individual agrees with that source. Source likeability can increase biased central processing, or motivated central processing. Additionally, evaluating a source’s likeability as positive can lead to peripheral processing. As a result, the use of likeability as a heuristic increases the chance of persuasion by the message. In terms of fake news, source likability can lead people to either agree or disagree with a message. For example, if an individual is an avid reader of one newspaper source, he/she’s likelihood of agreeing with a message from that newspaper, rather than a source he/she does not like. In other words:

Hypothesis 6: People are more likely to trust news the more they like the news source.

**News Sources**

Studies have shown that news sources from which the public consumes information impact their perception of which outlets they determine to deliver real or fake news. Regardless of the type of medium (i.e. radio, television, etc.), research has found “increased media use and reliance lead to increased perceptions of credibility” (Browning & Sweetser, 2014, p. 813). In other words, usage has a significant impact on a news source’s perceived credibility because there is a direct correlation between usage and validation of this information. Because of the increased popularity in infotainment programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,* journalism is in a precarious state where “boundaries between ‘fake news’ and ‘real news’ have shifted” (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2015, p. 3) since consumers are likely to trust entertainment shows they tune into regularly. This ties into the ELM model, because usage correlates with less central processing and questioning of the materials in the news sources.

A more contemporary popular news source consistently muddled with fake news are social media channels. Studies identified numerous pieces of false information spreading across social networks, which is important due to the “ubiquitous use of social networking…and the growing reliance of information seekers on user-generated content in a number of domains” (Papadopoulos, Bontcheva, Jaho, Lupu, & Castillo, 2016, p. 2). This user-generated content becomes further problematic when false because “interactions and explicit reactions among [social network] members express a form of trust directed from one member to another” (Papadopoulos et al. 2016, p. 3). If social media users are more likely to trust user-generated content without regard for its factuality, this allows for an easier dissemination of fake news pieces without proper consideration for their validity against factual stories. The implication is that

Hypothesis 7: People are more likely to trust a news the more that they trust its source.

**Methods**

**Survey**

To test our hypotheses, we created a survey using fake and real online news articles to test a large sample on whether or not they could distinguish between the two. We fabricated our own fake news sources, and wrote fake headlines. We interspersed real headlines (from the “liberal” outlets CNN and the Washington Post and “conservative” sources The Washington Times and Fox News) with our fake ones (from the supposed conservative sources The Daily National and the Eagle Review and fictional liberal outlets Progress Today and The Reform Report) and asked participants to discern which they believed to be real and fake. Out of eight total articles, four lean towards the conservative side, and four are more liberal. Of the four partisan articles on each side, two are real and two are our own fabrications. We set a time limit on four of the articles, two real and two fake, in order to test whether or not processing time has an effect on cognitive abilities. The design is thus a 2 (liberal versus conservative) X 2 (real versus fake) X 2 (time limit versus none) design.

Following the fake news articles section, we asked participants several questions that give us some background knowledge on their political affiliation and help us to prove our other hypotheses. In order to categorize participants’ political affiliation, we asked them to rate themselves on a five-point scale from conservative to moderate to liberal, then we asked them whether or not they voted in the 2016 presidential election, and if yes for which candidate they voted (Clinton, Trump, Stein, Johnson). Next, we presented a ten-item version of the Need for Cognition scale, described in detail below.

To test the effectiveness of source credibility and trust, we then presented participants with each of the eight news article described earlier. First, we asked them to rate how familiar they were with each news source, and how much they like each one. As a follow up question, we asked them to tell us how much they trust the different sources that they just rated. Next, participants were asked to report whether they believed the item was true, that it was false, or that they did not know. Finally, to test our hypothesis about online connections, we asked participants whether they thought their friends would believe our fake news stories. All five of these questions used five point scales.

The section of the survey that tests for need for cognition comes from Cacioppo and Petty’s (1982) Need for Cognition Scale. Here, we asked participants to rate to what degree they agree with relevant statements that address their individual need for cognition. Statements such as “I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve” and “The notion of thinking abstractly is not appealing to me” help us categorize certain levels of need for cognition among our sample, and thus test whether or not need for cognition is a significant factor in considering a fake news article or source. These questions were also on five point scales.

**Participants**

202 people participated in the study. 126 participants were students in a research methods class at the University of Delaware. Of the participants, 16 people (7.9%) claimed to be conservative, 29 people (14.4%)claimed to be moderately conservative, 45 people (22.3%) claimed to be politically neutral, 57 (28.2%) claimed to be moderately liberal and 55 (27.2%) claimed to be liberal. Participants were gathered from a variety of sources. The survey was distributed in communication research classes with male and female students ages 18-24 as an incentive for extra credit. The authors also sent the survey via email to family members of all ages, but in particular those who are out of college who are 35 years old and over. The authors continued to disperse the survey across social media, sharing the link to the survey on their Facebook profiles and in respective Facebook groups with college students with varying political views. Finally, the survey was shared with targeted political groups on the University of Delaware’s campus, including College Republicans, College Democrats, and Students for the 2nd Amendment.

**Results**

**Validation**

Our survey was designed to decipher whether or not participants believed each news article was real or fake, i.e. if it came from a real and credible news source. Participants found the real news items to be more trustworthy (Mean = 3.00, S.D. = .60) than the fake news items (Mean = 4.32, S.D. = .62). They also found the real news article to be more familiar (Mean = 2.70, S.D. = .81) than the fake news articles (Mean = 4.69, S.D = .52).

**Hypothesis Test**

*Hypothesis 1* stated that people with low need for cognition are more susceptible to fake news than those with high need for cognition. This hypothesis was supported (r = .23, p < .001).

*Hypothesis 2* indicated that people will be more likely to believe that a fake news article is real the more that it is in congruence with their preexisting beliefs. This hypothesis was supported for conservatives (r = .41, p < .001) but not for liberals ( r = .02 , p = .82). In addition, both conservatives (r = .23, p < .001) and liberals (r = .36, p < .001) were more likely to believe real news that corresponded with their preexisting beliefs.

*Hypothesis 3* predicted that conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe fake news. This hypothesis was not supported (r =.08, p = .27).

*Hypothesis 4* stated that the less time you have to process a news article, the more likely you are going to believe fake news. This hypothesis was not supported, Timed: Mean = 3.10 , S.D. = .53; Untimed: Mean = 3.11 , S.D. = .47; t (201) = .20, p = .80)

*Hypothesis 5* indicated that the greater the percentage of an individual’s online connections to people that believe fake news, the more likely the individual is to believe such news. We computed four correlations, one for each of the fake news items. Two of the fake news items were more liberal topics and two were more conservative. Of the four, three were significant (two conservative, r = .34 and .29, both p < .001 and one liberal, r =.23, p < .001). This hypothesis was mostly supported.

*Hypothesis 6* predicted that people are more likely to trust news the more they like the news source. This hypothesis was supported for all four fake and real news items. Fake: r = .16, p = .02; r = .22, p = .002; r = .289, p < .001; r = .19, p = .007. Real: r = .41, r = .29, r = .37, r = .42, all p < .001.

*Hypothesis 7* stated that people are more likely to trust news the more that they trust its source. This hypothesis was supported for all four fake and real news items. Fake: r = .76, r = .80, r = .77, r = .62, all p < .001. Real: r =.61, r = .48, r = .66, r = .63, all p < .001.

**Discussion**

**Summary**

The survey we conducted was designed to discover whether or not certain people were more likely to believe fake news based on their need for cognition, whether or not the news article was consistent with their preexisting beliefs, their political affiliation, the amount of time they had to analyze the article, how much influence their online networks play into their beliefs, the likability of the source and their preconceived notions about the news source. We provided a variety of real and fake news sources with real and fake articles within our survey. We based our study on a variety of social science theories - the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Heuristic Systematic Model, cultivation theory, selective exposure and selective perception.

Our study was disseminated over social media and emailed to what we believed to be a diverse group of people in terms of age and political affiliation. We reached a total of 202 participants, which turned out to be made up of predominantly liberals. Our findings suggest that people are more likely to believe real news than fake news. Liberals were no more or less likely to believe fake news than conservatives. Those with a higher need for cognition were less susceptible to fake news than those with a low need for cognition. Conservatives were more likely than liberals to believe fake news that was consistent with their preexisting beliefs. Time restraints made no difference to participants’ abilities to decipher fake news from real news. The hypothesis that people were more likely to believe fake news if their peers do was somewhat supported. We also found that people are more likely to trust news sources when they like and trust the source.

**Supported Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1 is based on the need for cognition and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Based on these theories and our research findings, people with a higher need for cognition are less likely to use peripheral processing and therefore less likely to believe fake news.

Hypothesis 2 relates to selective perception.According to the results, conservatives are more likely to believe that a fake news article is real the more if it is in congruence with their preexisting beliefs. This hypothesis was supported for conservatives but not for liberals. In other words, conservatives were selectively perceiving the fake news articles based on their existing worldview. In addition, both conservatives and liberals were more likely to believe real news that corresponded with their preexisting beliefs. We can deduce that both conservatives and liberals selectively perceived the real articles and believed them to be true based on their disposition to believe news that goes along with their pre-existing beliefs.

Hypothesis 5 somewhat relates to selective exposure. The hypothesis indicated that the greater the percentage of an individual’s online connections to people that believe fake news, the more likely the individual is to believe such news. Of the four fake news sources that we tested, three were significant, revealing that the hypothesis was mostly supported. What’s key is that people have control over their online environment and can pick and choose who and what they’re exposed to online.

The support of Hypothesis 6 reinforces selective perception and how people’s pre-existing opinions on news sources influences analyses of the validity of information. If people like a news source, they are more likely to trust the information from that source, regardless of whether it is real or fake. This is significant because it indicates that consumers are less likely to believe news from sources they find less favorable. This aligns with the concepts rooted in selective perception because consumers are more likely to dismiss the information from news sources if they do not like them.

The results of Hypothesis 7 are somewhat related to Cultivation Theory. Cultivation Theory claims that the more one watches television programming, the more similar he or she will think reality is to the programming. While this theory dealt mostly with all television programming in the later half of the twentieth century, our research solely analyzed the current news-website environment. The major difference between these two media are the processes by which the messages are received by viewers. Prior to the internet, the public received most of their entertainment and information from the limited selection of channels they could receive via television and thus, as Cultivation Theory claims, their perception of reality was influenced by these select channels. With the advent of the internet, people could selectively choose the entertainment and information they received. However, we can interpret Cultivation Theory to be relevant to website-news content. If this is the case, the information one receives on the internet influences their perception of reality. Our results in fact support this claim. Hypothesis 7, which was supported for all fake and real news items, stated that people are more likely to trust news content the more that they trust its source. We assume that the more familiar one is with a source, the more he or she trusts that source. So the more familiar people are with the worldview presented by a source, the more likely they are to believe information coming from that source. We can extrapolate from this claim that the more news an individual obtains from a specific news website, the more his or her perception of reality conforms to the information from that site.

**Unsupported Hypotheses**

Not all of the suggested hypotheses were supported. Hypothesis 2, for example, stated that people would be more likely to believe a fake news article the more that it was congruent with their preexisting beliefs. This provided compelling – though mixed – results. According to the collected data, Hypothesis 2 was substantiated for conservatives but not for liberals. This suggests that conservatives more so than liberals are likely to endorse a fake news source as real if it corresponds with their inherent, preexisting views. In comparison, both liberals and conservatives were found the be more likely to believe real news that also happened to correlate with any preexisting views. Selective exposure appears to have played a role in the results of this hypothesis.

Similarly, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. It proposed that conservatives would be more likely than liberals to believe fake news, but the results were not significant. Interestingly though, Hypothesis 3 seems to contradict the findings of Hypothesis 2 (that conservatives *are,* in fact, more likely to believe fake news that correlates with preexisting beliefs). More research into this variance might be useful in determining the reason for this inconsistency, and in ascertaining how important the role of preexisting beliefs is in creating the difference.

Hypothesis 4, which stated that the less time you have to process a news article the more likely you are to believe fake news, was also not supported. It is possible that this hypothesis failed to meet statistical significance because the survey time constraints may have been inadequate. Overall though, this suggests that the survey participants who were able to discern the fake news articles from the real pieces, did so even while faced with limited amounts of time.

Hypothesis 5 proposed that the greater the percentage of an individual’s online connections to people that believe fake news, the more likely the individual would believe such news as well. This hypothesis was mostly, however not entirely, supported. For each of the four fake news items in the survey (2 liberally biased, 2 conservatively biased) we calculated correlations and found that both conservatively biased articles proved significant, versus only one of the liberally biased articles. The liberally skewed article that did not prove significant was focused on Michelle Obama making a run for the presidency. The data suggested that liberals did not believe that their online friends would think that Michelle Obama was actually running for president. It is possible that this result occurred because if it were actually true, it would be top news broadcast heavily – not something many people would miss. Also, with further research, the results of Hypothesis 5 could be useful in determining whether or not liberals are more susceptible to the third person effect, wherein they believe their friends to be smarter than other groups of people and therefore unlikely to be tricked into believing fake news.

**Limitations**

We were faced with a few limitations in going about our study. Our main limitation was the fact that of the 256 participants who took our survey, only 23.4% identified as either conservative or mildly conservative. Compared to the 56.4% who identified as either liberal or moderately liberal, this means our data was skewed towards a liberal perspective. Most of our sample was made up of college students at the University of Delaware, which in itself is a limitation as our sample does not represent a large amount of older people, or noncollege young adults. Delaware is primarily a blue state, and universities are often linked with liberal thinking. Because of these reasons, we were not able to get the wide base of conservative participants that we wanted to take our survey.

Another limitation in our research centers around our Hypothesis 4 that states that the less time a person has to process a news article, the more likely they will believe it if it is fake. This hypothesis reflects the Heuristic-Systematic Model, and the possibility of limited time reducing a person’s cognitive processing of a news article. We tried to test this by timing four of our news items. A news article would pop up (two real, two fake), and then disappear after five seconds, leaving participants to answer follow-up questions. The simulation of a quick reading experience does not match the real life experience of quickly scanning a news article, especially since the participants were unaware that they were being timed. The results of our survey proved our hypothesis false, but perhaps under further research in a more realistic setting, this finding could be overturned.

The fact that our survey only used written articles to test whether people believed fake news was also a limitation. There could be a lot more said for televised news, and how people respond to face to face retellings of news. When we originally looked into the theories connected to fake news and how people process information, we spent a lot of time discussing cultivation theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and elements of persuasion theory. There are several of these elements that are only relevant when there is a speaker who is presenting the news, whether real or fake. From a live speaker we can test credibility, attractiveness, and general first impressions, all of which influence whether or not a person trusts what the speaker has to say.

We also wanted to test whether people’s friend groups had an influence on whether or not they believed fake news. Our original hypothesis was based on the fact that a lot of fake news is shared on social media sites, but we didn’t want to directly ask people so we asked the question “Would your friends believe this article?” This question itself is a limitation because it doesn’t get to the bottom of what we really wanted to explore, and we did not find much significant data for it.

**Further Research**

There is further research we proposed that can be done in relation to our study of fake news. Research ideas include the different ways in which the presentation and origin of fake news affect how people interpret such information. One idea to consider is if the type of platform a news article is delivered on affects how people interpret the article. Additionally, more research can be conducted on the aesthetics of news articles and what people look for to determine if a source is credible based on its visual appearance. Another possible research topic is to analyze Facebook and research within the company to see how fake news articles are published and shared on the website.We suggest studying the different algorithms that exist in social media can help determine how fake news is facilitated to users on different platforms, and if that affects how people analyze these stories. Lastly, our research inspired us to wonder about the origins of fake news, and where the stories directly come from - for example, tracking the origins of new stories can show researchers if most story ideas come from a major conspiracy site or a powerful administrative figure.

**Practical Implications**

Because Hypothesis 1 was supported, educators must consider the implications of not breaking down the difference between real and fake news at an early age. Media literacy classes teach students how to deconstruct and analyze news through a critical lens. By breaking down media literacy at an early age, the need for higher cognition later in life when reading fake news versus real news pieces will be significantly less. It will become easier for people to spot the differences between real and fake news if educators can reinforce basic tactics for media literacy early in a child’s lessons.

Social media platforms can also combat news through changes to their algorithm settings while remaining vigilant towards the spread fake news across their channels. Hypothesis 5 was mostly supported in our study, indicating people are more likely to believe fake news if their online connections also believe fake news. Additionally, Hypothesis 2 found both conservatives and liberals are more likely to believe real news that corresponds with what they already believe. These two factors heavily influence algorithms across social platforms that curate the content available on users’ news feeds. If users positively respond to a friend’s content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, for example, the social platform’s algorithm will queue more content in that user’s feed similar to the news they like. While this is an effective strategy from an economic standpoint, the executives of these digital media companies need to consider the political implications of allowing the spread of fake news just because consumers respond well to it. Executives should put policies in place that flag articles as fake news in feeds in order to lessen consumers’ trust in the source. This way, they let consumers organically change their own algorithms without the network’s own manipulation playing a true part (i.e., not having the network simply hand-pick articles for users, as that is construed as morally wrong).

Journalists themselves must also take action to ensure their news channels do not spread fake content. Because Hypotheses 6 and 7 were supported, it is clear news sources that are trusted and liked by their readers have an obligation to validate their consumers’ beliefs in them by maintaining journalistic integrity. Organizations that set standards for journalists, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), could release new rules and regulations that help stop publications from promoting fake news. Additionally, the role of fact checkers should become more important in verifying that the information in news sources is correct, creating a policy that ensures that readers know these stories were fact-checked and are real. On the other hand, full disclosure on fake news sites about the falsity of their claims would help consumers better distinguish the difference between real and fake news, regardless of whether they like or trust the source’s content.

In conclusion, four of seven of our hypotheses were mostly supported in regards to the differences in how consumers perceive real versus fake news. The implications of this study are particularly significant in today’s political climate, with the role of fake news in the 2016 election and major political figures questioning the validity of current news sources. Further research and combating of the limitations faced in this study will continue to elaborate on consumers’ perceptions of fake news, which will ultimately help power players in the media make policy decisions that will uphold the integrity of real news.

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