National News, Local Lens?[†]
Findings from the 2019 Poynter Media Trust Survey

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Did distrust in and hostility to the media increase during President Trump's first years in office? Trump has repeatedly attacked journalists as "the enemy of the people" and derided unfavorable stories as "fake news." However, most people still get news from the media, raising questions about which sources people trust and whether their preferences and behavior diverge.

The most recent wave of the Poynter Media Trust Survey seeks to answer these questions. The survey, which updates and extends results from the 2017 and 2018 surveys, was conducted February 6–25, 2019 among 2,000 respondents by YouGov, which uses a matching and weighting algorithm to construct an online sample that approximates the U.S. population.

We report three principal findings. First, we find a slight uptick in beliefs in the media fabricating stories and support for giving the government power to revoke broadcast licenses for coverage it says is fabricated. These views are highly polarized by people's feelings toward the media and party, however. Second, we show that even people with very negative feelings toward the mainstream media consume a substantial amount of information from it, though they consume more information from partisan news sources. Finally, we show that Americans tend to prefer news from local sources over national ones, an effect that is driven mainly by Republicans.

Results

Attitudes toward the media

Our previous survey found that overall trust and confidence in the mass media has not decreased, and perhaps even increased somewhat, since Trump took office. Gallup confirmed this result in polling that it conducted in fall 2018. However, media attitudes are highly polarized. Stable overall levels of trust and confidence in the press could potentially mask increasing opposition among those with negative attitudes.
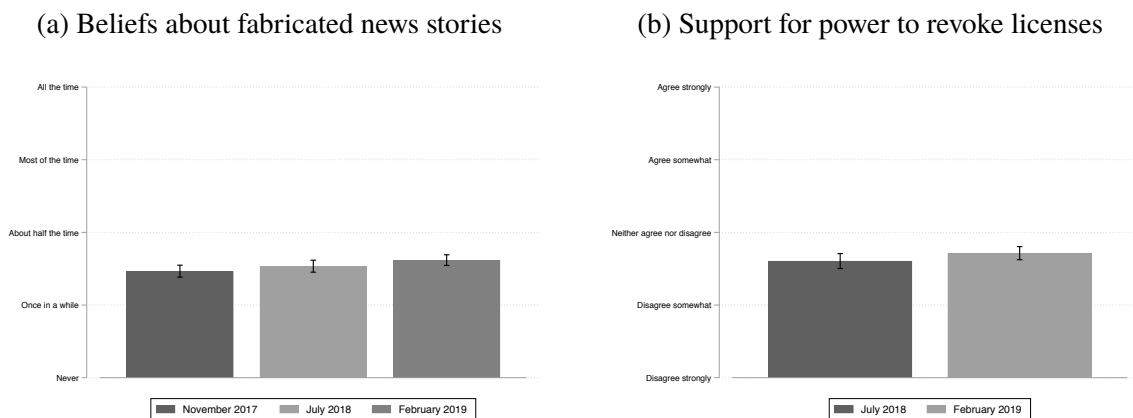
We therefore assess public support for two especially virulent attacks that Trump has leveled against the press. First, he routinely claims that the media fabricate stories, especially about him. Second, Trump has threatened that networks that run afoul of his judgments for what constitutes factual accuracy could have their broadcast licenses revoked. How much does the public support these contentions?

When asked how frequently "major news organizations fabricate news stories," the most frequent answer is "once in a while" (40%). Nearly half of the public (47%) believe that news organizations fabricate stories "about half the time" or more and just 14% believe that news outlets "never" do so. About one-third of Americans (31%) agree that the government should have the power to revoke the broadcast licenses of news organizations it says are fabricating news stories, while 26% neither agree nor disagree and 43% disagree.

Figure 1 considers how views on these questions have changed. We measured belief in fabricated news stories in our 2017, 2018, and 2019 media trust surveys and support for revoking broadcast licenses in the 2018 and 2019 surveys. As the figure indicates, belief in media fabrication and support for license restrictions have nudged upward over time, though the differences are relatively small in magnitude. Specifically, the percentage of Americans who believe the media fabricates news stories half the time or more increased from 42% in 2018 to 47% in 2019. Similarly, the percentage of Americans who support broadcast license restrictions increased from 28% in 2018 to 31% in 2019.

To understand how negative attitudes toward the press relate to these extreme anti-press sentiments, we divide the American public by their feelings toward the media. In our survey, we asked respondents to rate how coldly or warmly they feel toward media on a scale from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). Using their answers, we group respondents into four categories based on their feelings toward the press: "very negative" (the 28% who rate the news media 0–25), "negative" (the 25% who rate the news media 26–50), "positive" (the 27% who rate the news media 51–75), and "very positive" (the 21% who rate the media 76–100). There are dramatic differences in views of the press by partisan leanings. Democrats give the media an average

Figure 1: Extreme views toward the news media

(a) Beliefs about fabricated news stories

(b) Support for power to revoke licenses

score of 67 compared to just 29 for Republicans.[1] Similarly, 39% of Democrats and only 4% of Republicans have very positive feelings toward the media, while 49% of Republicans and only 5% of Democrats have very negative feelings.

Figure 2 considers how the belief that the news media fabricates stories varies by feelings toward the media and partisanship. Not surprisingly, people with more positive attitudes towards the press are less likely to believe the media fabricates news stories (Figure 2(a)). Notably, only the group with the most negative attitudes toward the media has an average response indicating that the media fabricates news stories half the time or more. This pattern largely holds among both parties (see Figure 2(b)), though Republicans are more likely to believe in widespread fabrication at any level of feelings toward the media.

Figure 3(a) similarly shows that support for license restrictions decreases as media feelings become more positive. Again, only the group with the most negative attitudes toward the media tends to support license restrictions on average. As Figure 3(b) indicates, this group includes both Democrats and Republicans. However, Democratic support for restrictions declines among those with less negative feelings, while Republican support is largely stable.

The relationship between media attitudes and consumption

Surveys allow us to ask people about their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings, but do not permit us to observe their behavior, which often differs from what their survey responses might suggest. In the case of media consumption, little is known about whether people who view the media negatively actually avoid mainstream media outlets. Our 2017 survey found, for instance, that partisans tended to overreport consumption of allied media outlets. We address this problem

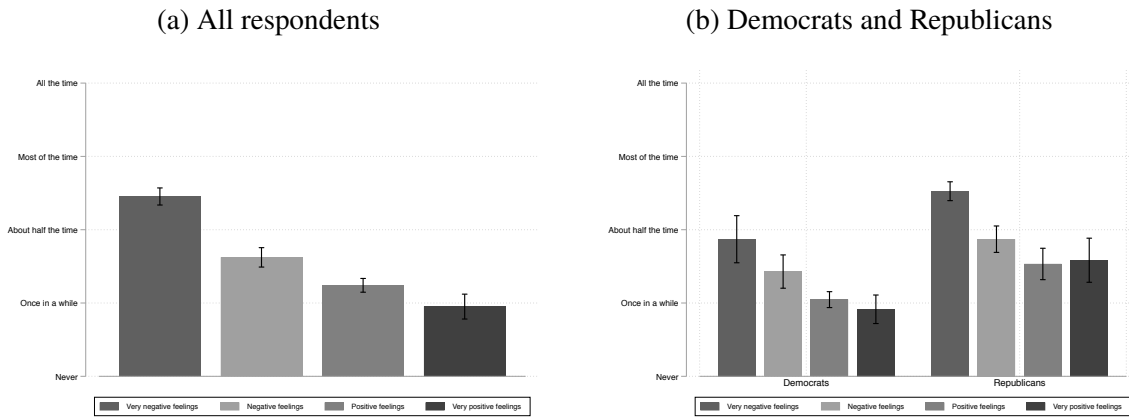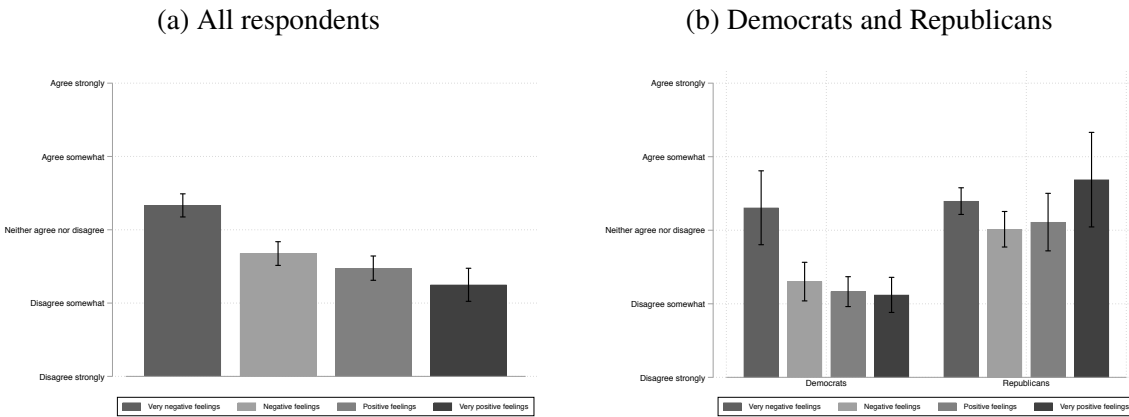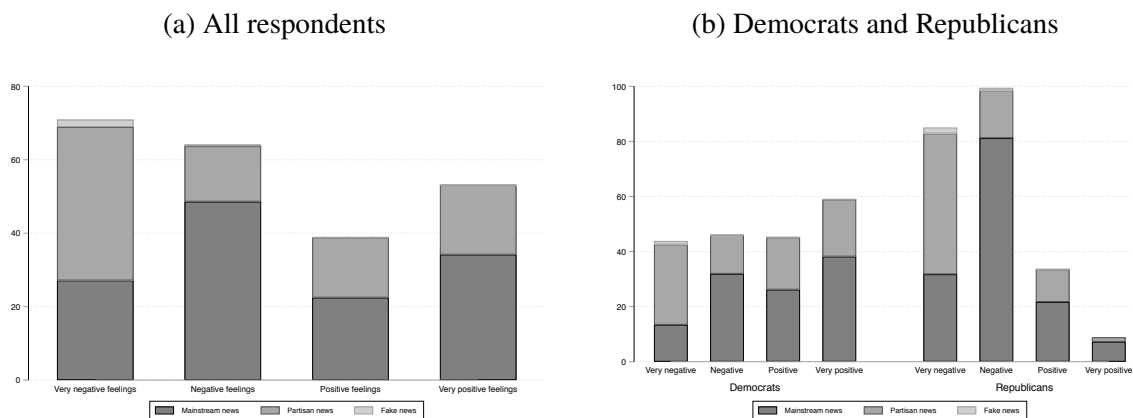Figure 2: Beliefs about fabricated news stories by media feelings

(a) All respondents

(b) Democrats and Republicans

Figure 3: Support for power to revoke licenses by media feelings

(a) All respondents

(b) Democrats and Republicans

by collecting anonymized web traffic data with the consent of our survey respondents, who are members of the YouGov Pulse panel. These data allow us to consider how people's information diets compare to their self-reported media consumption and their political and media attitudes.

In Figure 4(a), we therefore consider how consumption of articles from mainstream news outlets, partisan news outlets (high-traffic sites focusing on hard news topics that are disproportionately shared by liberals or conservatives such as Huffington Post and Fox News), and fake news outlets varied by people's feelings toward the media.[2] Interestingly, Americans with very negative feelings towards the news media actually consume *more* news media content overall, but the composition of their media diet is quite different. On average, this group consumed vastly more partisan media (41 articles) and fake news (2 articles) during the study period than

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Figure 4: News consumption by media feelings

<div style="display:flex">

(a) All respondents

(b) Democrats and Republicans

</div>

any other group. Still, people with very negative feelings consumed 27 articles on average from mainstream outlets, which is comparable to Americans with positive (22 articles) and very positive feelings (34 articles).[3] However, each of these groups consumed less mainstream news than Americans with negative feelings toward the media, who consumed 49 articles on average.
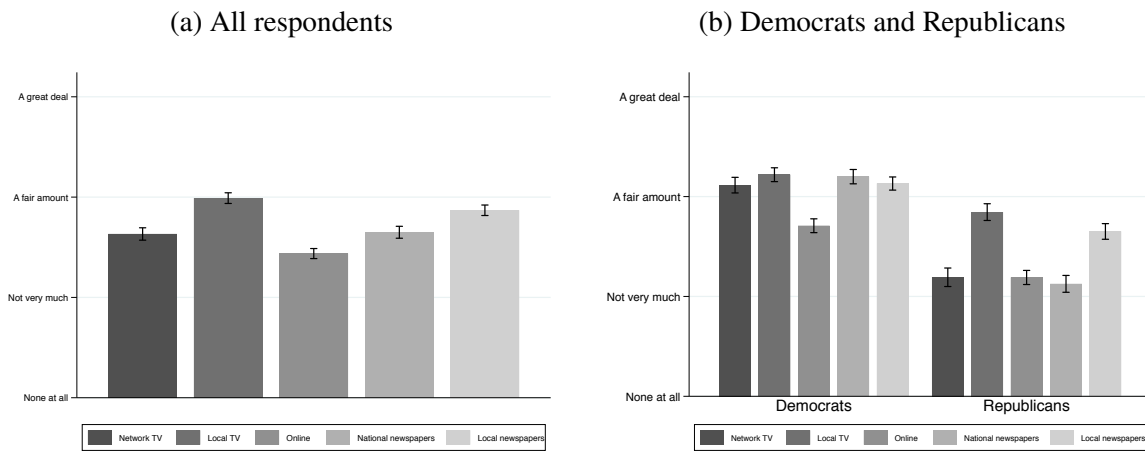
When we separate the data by partisan leanings in Figure 4(b), however, we see a striking difference. Among Democrats, mainstream news consumption tends to increase as feelings toward the media become more positive while overall news consumption levels remain approximately stable. By contrast, Republicans with more negative feelings toward the media actually tend to consume more rather than less news. However, Republicans with very negative feelings toward the media consume much more partisan news as a proportion of their news diet (an average of 31 mainstream news articles, 51 partisan news articles, and 2 fake news articles) than those with negative feelings (an average of 81 mainstream news articles, 17 partisan news articles, and 1 fake news article).

Determinants of news preference: Local vs. national

Our 2018 survey found greater trust in local television and newspapers than national television and newspapers, especially among Republicans and independents. In this survey, we sought to confirm this finding and test whether it extends to news consumption preferences.

We first asked respondents about the trust and confidence they have in news organizations "when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly" for "local newspapers" and "local television news in your community" in addition to national newspapers, network television news, and online-only news outlets. The results, which are presented for all respondents in Figure

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Figure 5: News trust by outlet type

(a) All respondents

(b) Democrats and Republicans

5(a), confirm that local newspapers and television are more trusted than network television and newspapers, which in turn are more trusted than online outlets. As Figure 5(b) shows, this pattern differs dramatically by party. Democrats express relatively similar levels of trust in each type of outlet except for online outlets, which are more distrusted. By contrast, Republicans trust local television and newspapers dramatically more than other types of outlets.

In the current study, we sought to test whether the public would choose more trusted local news outlets over national ones when given the option. It is possible that these differences do not translate into behavioral preferences. Some Americans might prefer local news in the abstract but follow national news more closely and therefore tend to consume information from national outlets instead. Others might prefer the types of stories that local newspapers and television stations tend to cover but have no independent preference for local news outlets themselves.

One way to more realistically assess media consumption behavior in a survey context is to ask people to choose between different types of news content. We designed an experiment in which people were repeatedly provided with the attributes of two news stories and asked which they would prefer to read.[4] In each choice task (out of ten overall), we randomly assigned articles to different news outlets and topics as well as different headlines, authors, and publication dates. The example below illustrates the nature of the choice offered to respondents. Importantly, the news outlets we varied included a mix of national newspapers, national news networks, online sources, and generic local news outlets.

Averaging over all the other characteristics, we find that respondents were more likely to choose articles from local news outlets over other sources of news. Figure 6(a) shows how selection probabilities vary by the source of the article (the baseline is the *Washington Post*). Articles from local television, radio, and newspapers were most likely to be chosen followed by television

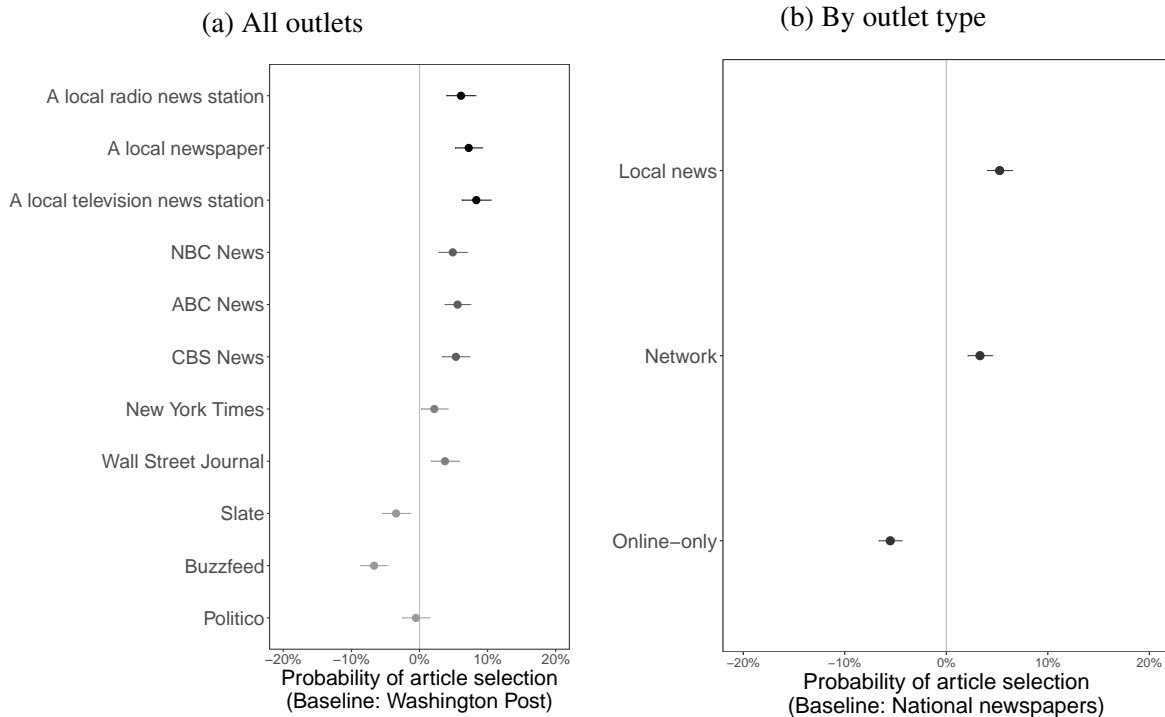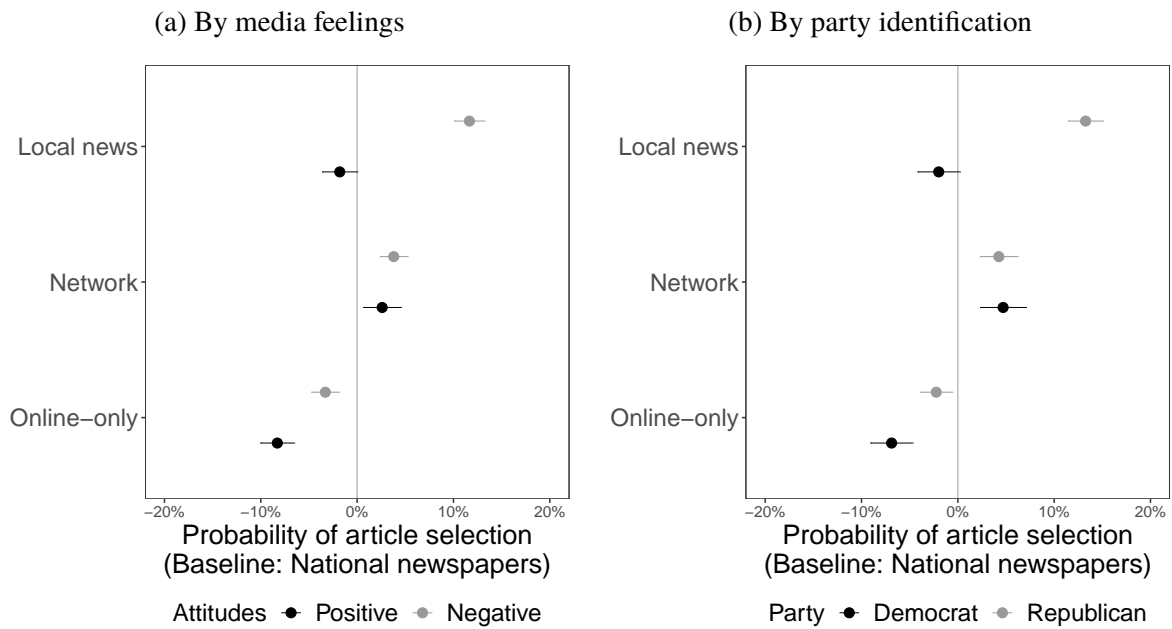Figure 6: Effects of news source on article selection probability

(a) All outlets

(b) By outlet type

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Figure 7: Effects of news source on article selection probability by media feelings and party

(a) By media feelings

(b) By party identification

news sources, print sources, and online sources. Results were similar across outlets within each type of outlet. We confirm this finding in Figure 6(b), which presents selection probabilities by outlet type relative to national newspapers. We find that respondents were more likely to select articles from local news sources and network television news than national newspapers and less likely to select them from online-only sources.

We further analyze these results in Figure 7, which considers how people's choices vary by outlet type depending on their feelings toward the media and party leanings. As we show there, the preference for local news outlets is driven by Americans with negative feelings toward the media and Republicans, who are dramatically more likely to prefer news from local sources compared to other types of outlets. Other preferences are relatively similar; both Americans with negative and positive feelings toward the media and Democrats and Republicans tend to prefer network news over national newspapers and to prefer both to online news outlets.

Discussion

Our results provide new insights into media attitudes and consumption preferences at the midpoint of Donald Trump's first term in office. We first find a small but notable uptick in negative attitudes toward the media, suggesting that the resurgence we observe in media trust under Trump

may mask growing hostility — a worrisome trend that might be exacerbated by the upcoming 2020 presidential campaign.

In addition, we combine survey and digital trace data to show how media consumption behavior varies across Americans depending on their feelings toward the media. Surprisingly, more positive feelings are not correlated with more frequent visits to mainstream news websites — even people with negative feelings toward the media consume a substantial amount of mainstream media content. Consumption of partisan news content, however, is concentrated among those with very negative feelings toward the press.

Finally, we show that local media outlets are trusted more than other types of news outlets and that this difference is driven by Republicans and people with the most negative feelings toward the media (who tend to be Republicans). These findings are consistent with the idea that media trust, as traditionally measured in surveys, tends to pick up attitudes toward a narrowly defined set of established national newspapers and television networks. Media sources that are perceived as disconnected from that group of national news outlets such as local news may therefore be seen as more credible and less tarnished by debates over media bias and accuracy. Whether local news organizations can live up to this opportunity, however, remains to be seen.

Notes

[1]All partisan groupings we describe in this report include leaners (Americans who do not identify as Democrats or Republicans but indicate they lean toward the party in question).

[2]The set of websites we classify as large mainstream news organizations using prior traffic and Facebook sharing data is the following: abcnews.go.com, aol.com, buzzfeed.com, cbsnews.com, chicagotribune.com, cnbc.com, cnn.com, examiner.com, factcheck.org, fivethirtyeight.com, latimes.com, msn.com, nbcnews.com, nydailynews.com, nypost.com, nytimes.com, politico.com, politifact.com, realclearpolitics.com, snopes.com, theatlantic.com, thedailybeast.com, time.com, usnews.com, washingtonpost.com, wikipedia.org, wsj.com. The set of partisan news websites we identify were selected as high-traffic sites focused on hard news topics that are disproportionately shared by self-identified liberals or conservatives. This set includes Breitbart, Fox News, and The Blaze on the right and Huffington Post, Talking Points Memo, and Daily Kos on the left. Finally, we define fake news websites as the 673 domains identified in Allcott, Gentzkow, and Yu (2019) excluding sites with print versions and domains previously classified by Bakshy et al. (2015) as focusing on hard news topics. In addition, we exclude sites that predominantly feature user-generated content and political interest groups.

[3]One explanation for these findings is that Americans who feel negatively toward the media in general have differing attitudes toward the specific news sites they consume. Previous research has found that people rate both specific network news outlets and news outlets that they consume more highly than the media in general. They also tend to overstate the frequency with which other people consume partisan news.

[4]This conjoint experimental design was based on Mummolo (2016).

Appendix

Study methodology

This study was conducted among a representative sample of the U.S. population by the survey company YouGov, which recruits a large panel of opt-in respondents and then uses a weighting and matching algorithm to construct a final sample that mirrors the demographic composition of the U.S. population. Our participants closely resemble the U.S. population in both demographics (52% female, 65% white, median age 55, 30% hold a four-year college degree or higher) and political attitudes and affiliations (35% identify as Democrats and 28% identify as Republicans).

All descriptive results from this study are calculated using survey weights to ensure that the data mirror the U.S. population. All experimental results are analyzed without weights, however, per Franco et al. (2017).

Question wording

(The wording of all questions described in this report are provided below. The full survey instrument and results of this survey will be reported in a subsequent academic paper.)

Please indicate which news sources below that you have heard of, regardless of whether you use them or not. If you are unsure, please DO NOT click it.
-Fox News
-The New York Times
-CNN
-The Guardian
-The Economist

Of the news sources you have heard of, please indicate how much trust and confidence you have in each one when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?
-Great deal of trust
-Fair amount of trust
-Not very much trust
-No trust at all

How accurate, do you think, is the news posted online by news organizations?
-Very accurate
-Somewhat accurate

-Not too accurate

-Not at all accurate

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the following types of news organizations when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?

-Network television news

-Local television news in your community

-Online-only news outlets

-National newspapers

-Local newspapers in your community

In presenting the news dealing with political and social issues, do you think that news organizations deal fairly with all sides, or do they tend to favor one side?

-Deal fairly with all sides

-Tend to favor one side

Based on what you know, how often do you believe the nation's major news organizations fabricate news stories?

-Never

-Once in a while

-About half the time

-Most of the time

-All the time

The federal government should have the power to revoke broadcast licenses of major news organizations

-Agree strongly

-Agree somewhat

-Neither agree nor disagree

-Disagree somewhat

-Disagree strongly

You will now be asked to consider approximately 10 pairs of news articles. For each pair, please indicate which of the two articles you would be more interested in reading. Please consider each decision carefully. This is your opportunity to help us learn about the types of stories people like you typically read in everyday life.

	News Selection A	News Selection B
Source:	USA Today	A local newspaper in your community
Headline:	"Abortion restrictions reinstated by federal court"	"Study points to new cause of breast cancer"
Author:	Todd Mueller	Beatriz Martinez
Publication date:	<date of survey>	<month before survey>

Would you prefer to read News Selection A or News Selection B?

-News Selection A

-News Selection B

Randomized sources (3 network, 3 local news, 3 online-only, 3 national newspapers):

-ABC News

-NBC News

-CBS News

-A local television news station in your community

-A local newspaper in your community

-A local radio news station in your community

-Buzzfeed

-Politico

-Slate

-Washington Post

-New York Times

-Wall Street Journal

Randomized headlines:

-"Federal court puts abortion restrictions back in place"

-"Federal court reinstates abortion restrictions"

-"Abortion restrictions reinstated by federal court"

-"<respondent state> court puts abortion restrictions back in place"

-"<respondent state> court reinstates abortion restrictions"

-"Abortion restrictions reinstated by <respondent state> court"

-"Congress votes against bill that would ensure equal pay for women"

-"Bill to mandate equal pay for women fails in Congress vote"

-"Bill to guarantee equal pay for women blocked in Congress"

-"<respondent state> votes against bill that would ensure equal pay for women"

-"Bill to mandate equal pay for women fails in <respondent state> vote"

-"Bill to guarantee equal pay for women blocked in <respondent state>"

-"Some question Obamacare enrollment figures"

-"Obamacare enrollment numbers called into question"

-"Obamacare enrollment figures met with doubt"

-"Some question Obamacare enrollment figures in <respondent state>"

-"Obamacare enrollment numbers in <respondent state> called into question"

-" <respondent state> Obamacare enrollment figures met with doubt"

-"Congress passes bill loosening gun-control regulations"

-"Gun control limits relaxed in Congress"

-"Congress rolls back gun control laws"

-"<respondent state> passes bill loosening gun-control regulations"

-"Gun control limits relaxed in <respondent state>"

-"<respondent state> legislature rolls back gun control laws"

-"Who's running in 2020? What national politicians think"

-"What political observers say about the 2020 race for the White House"

-"Political experts rate the chances of a Democrat winning the White House"

-"Who's running in 2020? What <respondent state> politicians think"

-"What <respondent state> political observers say about the 2020 race for the White House"

-"<respondent state> political experts rate the chances of a Democrat winning the White House"

-"What's coming in politics – the year ahead in Washington"

-"Preview: The 2019 agenda for legislators in Congress"

-"Three issues likely to dominate national politics in the coming year"

-"What's coming in politics - the year ahead in <state capital>"

-"Preview: The 2019 agenda for legislators in <respondent state>"

-"Three issues likely to dominate <respondent state> politics in the coming year"

Randomized bylines:

-Alaliyah Booker

-Deja Jefferson

-Deja Mosley

-Dominique Mosley

-Ebony Mosley

-Ebony Washington

-Jada Mosley
-Jasmin Jefferson
-Jasmine Joseph
-Jazmine Jefferson
-Keisha Rivers
-Kiara Jackson
-Latonya Rivers
-Latoya Rivers
-Precious Washington
-Raven Korsey
-Shanice Booker
-Alexus Banks
-Darius Joseph
-Darnell Banks
-DeAndre Jefferson
-DeShawn Korsey
-Jamal Gaines
-Jamal Rivers
-Jermaine Gaines
-LaShawn Banks
-LaShawn Washington
-Rasheed Gaines
-Terrance Booker
-Tremayne Joseph
-Trevon Jackson
-Tyreke Washington
-Tyrone Booker
-Tyrone Joseph
-Xavier Jackson
-Beatriz Ibarra
-Beatriz Martinez
-Blanca Ramirez
-Carlita Torres
-Carmela Velazquez
-Carmen Barajas

- Carmen Lopez
- Carola Huerta
- Carola Ibarra
- Catalina Hernandez
- Catalina Juarez
- Dolores Ramirez
- Dolores Sanchez
- Magdalena Perez
- Margarita Garcia
- Margarita Velazquez
- Maria Ramirez
- Maria Rodriguez
- Rosa Orozco
- Rosa Perez
- Teresa Juarez
- Alfonso Gonzalez
- Carlos Perez
- Carlos Torres
- Cesar Vazquez
- Cesar Zavala
- Edgar Sachez
- Edgar Zavala
- Eduardo Lopez
- Eduardo Torres
- Enrique Huerta
- Hernan Garcia
- Javier Gonzalez
- Jorge Cervantes
- Jose Martinez
- Jose Orozco
- Jose Sanchez
- Juan Barajas
- Juan Hernandez
- Luis Hernandez
- Luis Vazquez

-Pedro Rodriguez
-Abigail Smith
-Allison Nelson
-Amy Mueller
-Anne Evans
-Caitlin Schneider
-Carly Smith
-Carrie King
-Claire Schwartz
-Emily Schmidt
-Emma Clark
-Hannah Phillips
-Heather Martin
-Holly Schroeder
-Jenna Anderson
-Jill Smith
-Katelyn Miller
-Katherine Adams
-Kathryn Evans
-Katie Novak
-Kristen Clark
-Madeline Haas
-Molly Kruger
-Sarah Miller
-Bradley Schwartz
-Brett Clark
-Cody Anderson
-Cole Krueger
-Colin Smith
-Connor Schwartz
-Dustin Nelson
-Dylan Schwartz
-Garrett Novak
-Geoffrey Martin
-Greg Adams

-Hunter Miller

-Jack Evans

-Jake Clark

-Jay Allen

-Logan Allen

-Luke Phillips

-Matthew Anderson

-Maxwell Haas

-Scott King

-Tanner Smith

-Todd Mueller

-Wyatt Smith

Randomized publication date:

<date of survey>

<week before survey>

<month before survey>