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The Power of a Genre: Political News Presented as Fact-Checking Increases Accurate Belief Updating and Hostile Media Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Concerns over misinformation have inspired research on how people are influenced by, and form perceptions of, media messages that aim to correct false claims. We juxtapose two seemingly incongruent expectations from the theories of motivated reasoning and hostile media perceptions, uncovering the unique effects of presenting a political news story with corrective information as a “fact-check.” We test our theoretical expectations through two online survey experiments. We find that compared to a conventional style of news reporting, a news story presented in a fact-checking genre significantly increases how accurately people are able to evaluate factual information, but it also comes with an important counterproductive effect: people will be more likely to perceive the journalist and the story as biased. We discuss the implications of our findings in theorizing the persuasion effects of corrective information in the contemporary media environment.

How people are influenced by and form perceptions of news media are two central, longstanding theoretical questions in mass communication. In recent years, answers to these questions have been complicated by heightened concerns over misinformation in the increasingly fragmented and polarized media environment. Faced with public confusion and controversy over basic facts, news media are expected to not only inform citizens about current events, but also investigate factual disputes, debunk falsehoods and arbitrate the truth (Barthel et al., 2016; Graves, 2016).

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Fact-checking, a novel genre in political journalism, has opened a new arena to study media effects and perceptions when traditional norms of news reporting are modified. While fact-checking can take a variety of forms, we define fact-checking as full-length articles that actively weigh in on the accuracy of claims made by political figures or in public texts, such as stories published on *FactCheck.org* (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). In some respects, fact-checks redefine the tenets of objectivity and balance in journalism because they make a “formal commitment to a verdict expressed in the language of truth and falsehood” (Graves, 2016, p. 69). This new genre of political journalism is expanding on a global scale. There were 210 active fact-checking organizations in 68 countries as of 2019 (Stencel & Luther, 2019), and Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Network now touts more than 70 fact-checking organizations as verified signatories that adhere to a common code of principles (IFCN, 2020).

The novelty and growth of fact-checking journalism has motivated mass communication researchers to study its various impacts on how citizens understand political and public affairs. One burgeoning line of research has examined the *knowledge* effects of fact-checking with mixed findings. Just as fact-checks are influential in correcting misperceptions and improving knowledge (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Pingree et al., 2014), fact-checks can also be interpreted more subjectively via directional motivated reasoning—the tendency to be consistent with one’s prior preference as opposed to making the optimal choice—thus potentially limiting their effectiveness (see Walter et al., 2019, for a review). Besides knowledge effects, a second line of research has examined *attitudinal* outcomes associated with fact-checking. This literature suggests that, unfortunately, getting the facts straight does not change citizens’ favorability toward the public figure who made the claim, and may even fuel other types of motivated reasoning, such as selective attribution of blame (Nyhan et al., 2019; Thorson, 2016).

Our article contributes to the scholarship on correcting misinformation by juxtaposing two seemingly incongruent theoretical expectations related to uncovering the effects of the fact-checking genre. First, we draw on the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) to test the potential of fact-checking as a unique news genre in offering accuracy heuristics and facilitating belief updating compared to conventional news reporting. A substantial proportion of corrective information, both in the media environment and in experimental research designs, debunks misinformation without describing itself as a “fact-check” in the way that many fact-checking organizations explicitly do. We show that presenting a news story containing corrective information as a “fact-check” increases individuals’ ability to more accurately assess the truthfulness of a claim, even as the substantive content of the story stays the same.

Second, we draw from the literature on the hostile media perception (Gunther et al., 2012), specifically the insights about the *relative* hostile media perception (Gunther & Chia, 2001), to test whether the fact-checking genre can also increase the likelihood of the audience perceiving the story and the journalist as hostile to their own political viewpoint. Leveraging one of the critical mechanisms in hostile media perceptions—perceived reach of the slanted story—we posit that the fact-checking genre raises the stakes of ingroup’s image being harmed and exacerbates biased perceptions. We show that effective belief updating induced by the fact-checking genre comes at a cost of increased hostile media perceptions, raising concerns for erosion of media trust in a polarized political climate.

Taken together, our work reveals that highlighting fact-checking as a unique genre can be a double-edged sword given the competing effects on belief updating and media perceptions. Study 1 tested these effects through an online survey experiment; Study 2 conceptually replicated these findings through a second experiment and further tested whether the effects vary depending on the public figure under scrutiny. We conclude by discussing how our findings create fruitful avenues for future theorization of media effects and perceptions when truth is at stake.

Belief updating and fact-checking

Past research has drawn from the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) in explaining the success and failure of fact-checking in correcting misperceptions and improving knowledge. The theory lays out two types of motivations that drive human reasoning processes: the motivation to be accurate (“the accuracy goal”) and the motivation to arrive at a desired conclusion consistent with their prior belief (“the directional goal”). There is abundant evidence of belief persistence driven by directional motivated reasoning. Across a variety of domains, scholars find that when individuals are confronted by facts that disconfirm their misperceptions, they are reluctant to update their prior beliefs (Taber et al., 2009). On the other hand, appealing to the accuracy goal is difficult, but feasible. Traditionally, scholars have used monetary incentives and social pressure to increase the stakes of being wrong and evoke accuracy goals (e.g., Prior et al., 2015). Recent research shows that taking care to consider the design and context of the message also increases belief accuracy. Effective techniques include weight-of-evidence information (Dixon et al., 2015), rating scales (Amazeen et al., 2018), and algorithmic recommendations (Bode & Vraga, 2015). In reviewing the mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of fact-checking, a recent meta-analysis found a positive, but weak, average effect of fact-checking on belief accuracy (Walter et al., 2019).

We know less about how the effects of fact-checking on belief updating compared to that of other, often more conventional, approaches to news reporting. While most research has focused on the variations of the features of fact-checking, little directly addresses how fact-checking, as a special genre of political reporting, is more or less influential than conventional political news in informing beliefs (but see Amazeen et al., 2018). Scholars have consistently found that news consumption increases political knowledge (e.g., Liu et al., 2013) and that incongruent news stories tend to be perceived as less credible (e.g., Mirer et al., 2018). Questions remain with respect to how these effects would change when it is made salient that the purpose of the news story is to fact-check. Yet, we recognize that such comparisons between fact-checking and conventional political news reporting are difficult. There is great diversity in fact-checking practices across different organizations, regarding the presentation, content, and perceived goals of fact-checking (Graves, 2018). Further, the boundaries between fact-checking and other types of political reporting is not clear-cut: Journalistic values still lie at the core of fact-checking, which share many principles and style with its conventional counterparts (Graves, 2016).

Below, we test whether presenting a story containing corrective information as a fact-check versus a conventional news report improves belief updating. Fact-checks are often explicit about the goal of the story: to verify the accuracy of a factual statement based on evidence-based research conducted by journalists. This is often shown in the story by explicitly labeling the story as a “fact-check” and by providing a clear, concise journalistic adjudication of the dispute (Pingree et al., 2014). We argue that these features of the fact-checking genre help facilitate belief updating by providing important heuristics that evoke accuracy motivations during an individual’s processing of a story.

Past research has suggested that accuracy can be achieved not only by systematic processing but also by an alternative route of heuristic processing (Chen et al., 1999). The potential of fact-checking journalism in offering such accuracy heuristics stems from both the supply and demand side of the genre. On the one hand, in establishing the status of fact-checking as a legitimate form of journalism, fact-checkers in the U.S. consciously frame themselves as journalists who are “free of partisanship, advocacy and rhetoric” and distance themselves from partisan media; the institutional framing of U.S. fact-checking helps cultivate the perception of the genre as a type of objective reporting (Graves, 2018). On the other hand, public opinion polls show that audiences do recognize the unique value of fact-checking. Despite partisan differences, a majority of Americans view the fact-checking movement favorably (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015), agree that news organizations should present facts without interpretation (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016), and see fact-checking as a part of the

media's responsibility (Barthel et al., 2016). Further, scholars argue that laypeople tend to intuitively understand the concepts of "truth" and "facts" as definitive, noncontroversial and not easy to be taken down (Graves, 2016). Compared to conventional news formats, the simple cue that a story is "just verifying facts" makes it more difficult for audiences to counterargue with a story. Together, these factors heighten the salience of accuracy heuristics, which in turn makes it more likely that the audiences accept the factual adjudication. Therefore, we hypothesize that when reading the same news story that offers corrective information on a politician's claim,

H1: Compared to a conventional news story format, presenting the news story as a fact-check increases the likelihood that the audiences will hold more accurate beliefs in the truthfulness of the factual claim.

Some variations, however, do exist *within* the fact-checking genre. One of the most notable distinguishing features of fact-checking practices is the style of adjudication. For example, while *PolitiFact's* Truth-O-Meter and *Washington Post's* Pinocchio scale provide discrete truthfulness ratings, *FactCheck.org* and the *Associated Press* place their adjudication in longer, in-text descriptions and do not provide an explicit rating. In terms of belief updating, providing an explicit truthfulness rating of claims may increase the clarity and accessibility of complex factual disputes, decrease the ambiguity of the verification process, and thus improve the audience's ability to make sense of the story (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). An important finding from recent research is that providing a rating can increase belief accuracy and does not evoke directional motivations, even if it is inconsistent with individuals' prior beliefs (Amazeen et al., 2018). In line with past research, we hypothesize that when reading the same news story that offers corrective information on a politician's claim,

H2: Compared to not giving an explicit rating, giving an explicit rating in the news story increases the likelihood that the audiences will hold more accurate beliefs in the truthfulness of the factual claim.

Hostile media perception and fact-checking

Hostile media perceptions are well documented in the communication literature (Perloff, 2015), but, to date, the connection between the theory to the emergent literature on misinformation and corrective information has been relatively limited. While the effectiveness of fact-checking on belief

updating has been examined empirically for over a decade, less scholarship focuses on the way fact-checks are perceived and how they relate to broader perceptions about media bias in news reporting.

Scholars typically explain strong partisans' hostile media perceptions via one of three psychological mechanisms: selective recall, selective categorization, and evaluative bias (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Schmitt et al., 2004). While most hostile media perception research focuses on how partisans perceive *neutral* information in different ways, scholars have also found evidence of a *relative* hostile media perception, which is theoretically identical to the original concept, but (a) generalizes the original concept to situations where the story is actually *slanted*, and (b) applies more widely to populations beyond those who are highly involved in the issue (Gunther & Chia, 2001). That is, for a story that is slanted, each partisan group will rate the story as more unfavorable to their side than the opposing group sees it (Gunther & Chia, 2001). For example, while news reports on recent election polling may contain objective information about the poll itself, the content of the poll is often favorable to one candidate and unfavorable to others, resulting in relative perceptions of bias that reflect the candidate preferences of respondents (Perryman et al., 2020). Fact-checks are similar to these examples in the sense that while they are produced by a method that is procedurally objective and fair, the stories have slanted conclusions on the truthfulness of a claim, which may trigger perceptions of media bias. Some supporting evidence comes from Shin and Thorson (2017), who find that online sharing of fact-check stories contains evidence of the relative hostile media perception, such that fact-check stories relatively advantageous to one party are more likely to receive hostile comments from the outgroup than the ingroup.

Gunther et al.'s (2012) research on more markedly partisan news content suggested that the perceived reach of slanted stories may be the critical factor in explaining some instances of hostile media evaluations. They conclude that the "perception of undesirable persuasive influence is one engine driving the hostile media perception—that partisan concerns about influence on others initiate or exacerbate the defensive processing that leads to perceptions of hostile bias" (p. 452). Fact checks have wide reach and draw specific conclusions about the veracity of claims made by partisans. When the conclusions favor the side that opposes what a partisan prefers, partisans are likely to see it as "even more polarized than it actually is" (Gunther et al., 2012, p. 451).

Thus, juxtaposing research on relative hostile media perception with meta-analyses (Walter et al., 2019) and conceptually similar research (Amazeen et al., 2018) on the effectiveness of fact-checks raises a somewhat counter-intuitive possibility. Is it possible that presenting

a story as a fact-check or giving an explicit rating can trigger both accurate belief changes *and* greater perceptions of media bias? Indirect support for this argument comes from the growing evidence on counterproductive effects of getting a fact straight. Research finds that even after successful belief updating after reading a fact-check, partisans do not adjust their evaluations of the politician under scrutiny according to the conclusions of the fact-check (Nyhan et al., 2019; Swire-Thompson et al., 2019; Thorson, 2016); those with less interest in the issue under scrutiny also decrease their epistemic political efficacy (Pingree et al., 2014). In sum, it is possible that individuals continue to engage in biased reasoning processes and form identity-congruent attitudes, even when they report desirable belief updates.

Given the increasing prominence of fact-checking journalism in political news, presenting a story as a fact-check is likely to increase the perceived reach of the information, and thus increase the perceptions of media bias (Gunther et al., 2012; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). Further, as concerns and disputes over “fake news” continue to rise, cues signaling that the story will adjudicate who is the truth-teller and who is the liar can increase the stakes of the ingroup’s image harmed by unfavorable coverage, and thus make partisans more prone to perceive a fact-check as biased. These processes may be further exacerbated when the adjudication takes the form of a clean-cut rating that is easily accessible. Therefore, we hypothesize that when reading the same news story that offers corrective information on a politician’s claim,

H3: Compared to a conventional news story format, presenting a news story as a fact-check increases the hostile media perception toward (a) the story and (b) the journalist who wrote the story.

H4: Compared to not giving an explicit rating, giving an explicit rating in a news story increases the hostile media perception toward (a) the story and (b) the journalist who wrote the story.

The moderating role of news sources

We also explore whether the news source will moderate the effects of presenting a fact-checking genre and giving an explicit rating as proposed above. Even as evidence on the effect of fact-check labels on information credibility has grown (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020), the news source providing the fact-check itself has received less attention. In particular, given the prevalence of fact-checking stories not only in mainstream media but also in ideological media, it is important to examine whether the ideological

congruence of news source will moderate the effects of the fact-checking genre and rating on the extent to which audiences adopt accurate beliefs and form hostile media perceptions.

There are two competing expectations about the role of news source in the context of our study. On the one hand, it is possible that compared to a mainstream news source, an ideological news source, especially one that is incongruent with audience predispositions, will lead the audiences to see a story as less persuasive and more biased. Research has found that the source effect can overwhelm the message effect when ideological cues are salient (Turner, 2007) and that ideological media polarize audience views by providing abundant identity cues (Levendusky, 2013). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that ideological news sources will attenuate the effects of the fact-checking genre, and their associated ratings, on accurate belief updating while exacerbating hostile media perceptions.

On the other hand, however, fact-checks published by an ideological news source may not necessarily lead to decreased accuracy and increased biased perceptions. The possibility that ideological news sources do not taint the effects of fact-checking first stems from the uniqueness of fact-checking journalism in staying apart from other practices of the media outlet. Some fact-checking organizations, even funded by or remaining as a branch of ideological media outlets, still establish their reputation as being objective and credible. For example, the International Fact-Checking Network has certified the non-biased nature of a variety of fact-checking organizations, from the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker to Check Your Fact, a part of the conservative website *Daily Caller's* platform. Second, given the strong accuracy heuristics offered by the fact-checking genre and rating as discussed above, audiences may see the news source as more persuasive and less biased, even if they are often regarded as ideological *outside of* the fact-checking context. There is suggestive evidence that the source of a fact-check, regardless of ideological congruence, has relatively little impact on how audiences process the fact-check (Swire et al., 2017).

Given these competing expectations and the lack of conclusive evidence on the moderating effect of the news source in fact-checking, we ask:

RQ1: Does the news source moderate the effect of reporting in a fact-checking genre on (a) the accuracy of the audiences' belief in the factual claim and (b) their hostile media perception?

RQ2: Does the news source moderate the effect of giving an explicit rating on (a) the accuracy of the audiences' belief in the factual claim and (b) their hostile media perception?

Study 1

Methods

Sample

We conducted an online survey experiment in March 2018 through *Qualtrics*, which recruited 510 participants broadly comparable to the population of U.S. adults in terms of age, gender, race, education and income (Appendix 1).¹

Design

The survey experiment used a 3 (corrective format: conventional story vs. fact-check with no explicit rating vs. fact-check with an explicit rating) \times 3 (news source: *Fox News* vs. *MSNBC* vs. *AP*) design. First, we varied the presentation of corrective information to be either a story (a) presented as a conventional political news story, (b) presented as a fact-check but with no explicit rating, or (c) presented as a fact-check with an explicit rating. All three types of stories covered an actual claim made by Donald Trump about gun laws in Chicago and provided corrective information (average word count of all stimuli = 561; details in Appendix 2). In the conventional news story condition, the headline read, “Trump says Chicago is ‘a disaster’ despite ‘its strongest gun laws’ in the U.S.” In the two fact-check conditions, we used the same story but added (a) the phrase “FACT CHECK” to the headline, (b) a sentence “We did a fact check on the president’s claim that Chicago has the strongest gun laws in the nation” at the end of the introduction section of the story, and (c) a summary of adjudication at the end of the story. In fact-check condition with no explicit rating, the adjudication read, “Trump had a point about the high crime rate in Chicago, but his claim that Chicago has the nation’s toughest gun laws is years out of date.” In the fact-check condition with an explicit rating, we added the sentence, “We rate the claim as half-true” following the adjudication described above.²

¹Both Study 1 and Study 2 were approved by the UW-Madison IRB. Project name: Evaluation of News Styles, 2017–1559.

²Trump’s original claim contains two parts: high *crime rate* and strictest *gun laws*. The stimuli in Study 1 covered both parts, giving merit to the crime rate part while debunking the gun law part, thus rating the whole claim as “half-true.” In the survey questions, however, we specifically asked participants to rate the truthfulness of the *gun law* claim (which should be rated as false). Our stimuli were based on how Trump’s claim was actually covered in real-world news and thus kept the integrity of the claim and some level of realism (e.g., Farley, 2017; Kurtzleben, 2017); however, because this may create ambiguity for participants, we made changes to simplify this design in Study 2.

To test the moderating effect of news source, we also varied the source of the story to be either *Fox News*, *MSNBC* or the *AP*. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the nine conditions. In all conditions, after reading the news story, participants answered the following questions.

Measures

To measure whether the story helped participants hold more accurate beliefs, we asked participants to rate Donald Trump's claim on Chicago gun laws on a six-point scale (1 = true, 2 = mostly true, 3 = half-true, 4 = mostly false, 5 = false and 6 = pants on fire; $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.54$).

To measure hostile media perceptions, we asked participants to answer two questions. To measure hostile media perception *toward the story*, we asked participants, "Would you say the news story you just read was strictly neutral toward Donald Trump? Or was it biased for or against him?" To measure the hostile media perception *toward the journalist*, we asked participants, "Would you say the journalist covering the story was strictly neutral toward Donald Trump? Or was he/she biased for or against him?" Participants answered both questions on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly in favor of Trump, 7 = strongly biased against Trump; $M_{hmp_story} = 4.14$, $SD_{hmp_story} = 1.78$; $M_{hmp_journalist} = 4.19$, $SD_{hmp_journalist} = 1.67$). The Pearson's correlation coefficient between the two items was 0.65. Below, we provided separate models with each item as the dependent variable (see Appendix 4 for combined models with the mean of the two items as the dependent variable).

Participants also answered questions on party identification (1 = strong Democrat, 7 = strong Republican) as well as age, gender, race, education and income, which were used as control variables in our analyses (see Appendix 1).

Analysis plan

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions were used to test our hypotheses and research questions. First, to address H1-H4, the OLS models tested the main effects of presenting a story as a fact-check (vs. conventional news story) and giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating) in predicting belief accuracy (H1 & H2) and hostile media perceptions (H3 & H4). Next, to test RQ1 & RQ2, we added the interaction terms between news sources and presenting a story as a fact-check (vs. conventional news story) (RQ1), and between news sources and giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating) (RQ2). Given partisan leanings of the news sources, we further added three-way interaction terms of partisanship and our experimental manipulations to the models. Control variables (age, gender, race, education, income) were included in all models. We ran a post-hoc power analysis which revealed Study 1's statistical power was sufficient to detect effects that are of a small to medium size (Cohen, 1988). See Appendix 6 for details.

Results

Our finding supports H1 that compared to a conventional news story format, presenting a news story as a fact-check increased the likelihood that the audiences accurately assess the truthfulness of the claim checked in the story. Table 1, Model 1 shows that presenting a news story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) increased the accuracy of participants' beliefs ($b = 0.43$, $p = .011$). This effect is neither moderated by the news source nor moderated by partisan identity (Table 1, Model 2 & 3).

However, compared to no rating, giving an explicit rating did not have a main effect on the accuracy of participants' beliefs, disconfirming H2 (Table 1, Model 1). News source had a marginal moderation effect, such that giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating) increased belief accuracy when the source is *Fox News*, while it decreased belief accuracy when the source is *AP*, although the moderation effects did not meet traditional significance levels (Appendix 3).

Turning to the effects on hostile media perceptions, compared to a conventional format, presenting a news story as a fact-check increased the hostile media perception toward the story (H3a).³ Table 2 (Model 1) shows that presenting a story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) made participants see the story as more biased against Trump ($b = 0.41$, $p = .032$). Moreover, this effect was moderated by the news source: When the story comes from either *Fox News* or *MSNBC*, presenting the story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) led participants to see the story as more biased; however, when the story comes from *AP*, presenting the story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) lead participants to see the story as less biased (Table 2, Model 2). Figure 1a illustrates the differences among news sources.

Compared to a conventional news story format, presenting a news story as a fact-check increased the hostile media perception toward the journalist who wrote the story as well (H3b). Table 3, Model 1 shows that presenting a story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) made participants see the journalist as more biased against Trump; however, this effect did not meet a traditional significance level ($b = 0.34$, $p = .059$). Similarly, this effect was moderated by the news source in a similar way as above: the fact-check genre increased hostile media perception toward the journalist when the source is *Fox News* or *MSNBC*, while the hostile media perception toward the journalist decreased when the source is *AP*. However, only the difference between *MSNBC* and *AP* reached statistical discernibility (Table 3, Model 2). Figure 1b illustrates the differences among news sources.

³Results do not differ in substantial ways from the findings reported here when we use the mean of HMP toward the story and HMP toward the journalist as the dependent variable (see Appendix 4).

Table 1. The effects of presenting a story as a fact-check and giving an explicit rating on the accuracy of participant's beliefs.

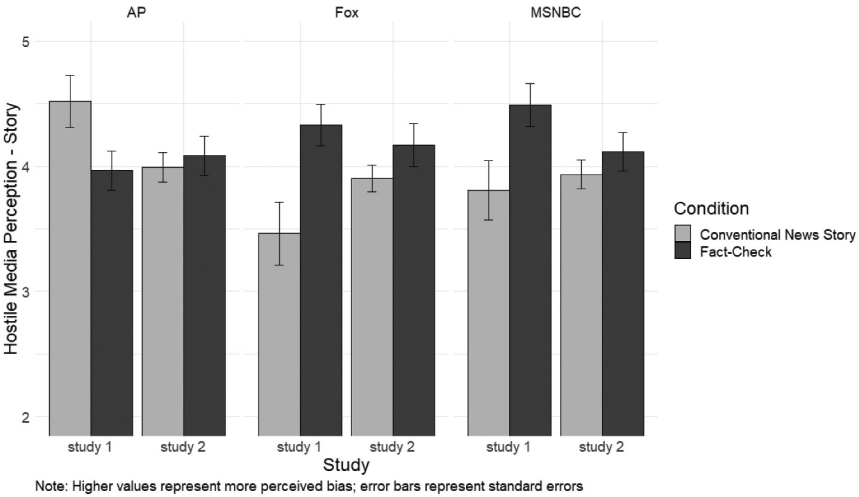
Dependent Variable: Accuracy of Participants' Rating of the Statement	Study 1			Study 2		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Main Effect	Interaction	Interaction	Main Effect	Interaction	Interaction
(Intercept)	3.13***	3.22***	3.22***	3.23***	3.24***	3.22***
Age	0.18*	0.18*	0.18*	-0.00	-0.00	-0.01
Gender	-0.33*	-0.32*	-0.33*	-0.27*	-0.27*	-0.26†
Education	0.26***	0.26***	0.27***	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05
Income	-0.02	-0.03	-0.03	0.13†	0.13†	0.12†
Nonwhite	-0.22	-0.22	-0.22	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Partisanship	-0.56***	-0.56***	-0.51***	-0.55***	-0.55***	-0.53***
Source: Fox	-0.27	-0.39	-0.40	-0.29†	-0.31†	-0.31†
Source: MSNBC	-0.18	-0.34	-0.34	-0.18	-0.18	-0.17
Condition: Presented as a Fact-Check	0.43*	0.29	0.31	0.47**	0.46*	0.46†
Condition: Giving an Explicit Rating	-0.14	-0.14	-0.16	0.13	0.13	0.13
Fox × Presented as a Fact-Check		0.18	0.51		0.06	0.11
MSNBC × Presented as a Fact-Check		0.24	0.35		-0.01	-0.02
Partisanship × Fox × Presented as a Fact-Check			-0.10		-0.30	-0.30
Partisanship × MSNBC × Presented as a Fact-Check			-0.03		0.04	0.04
Condition: Trump						
Trump × Presented as a Fact-Check				0.28*	0.28*	0.28*
R ²	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.17	0.17	0.17
F Statistic	10.07***	8.35***	7.21***	9.85***	8.31***	7.30***

Data in the table represent standardized coefficients. † $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

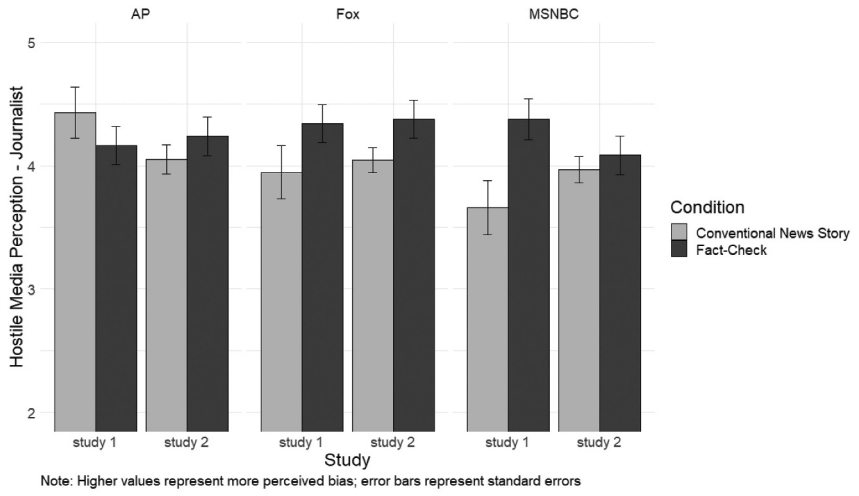
Table 2. The effects of presenting a story as a fact-check and giving an explicit rating on HMP toward the story.

Dependent Variable: Hostile Media Perception Toward the Story	Study 1			Study 2		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Main Effect	Interaction	Interaction	Main Effect	Interaction	Interaction
(Intercept)	4.07***	4.63***	4.63***	3.79***	3.82***	3.81***
Age	0.23*	0.20*	0.21*	0.09	0.09	0.09 [†]
Gender	-0.47***	-0.45**	-0.46**	-0.01	-0.01	0.00
Education	0.08	0.09	0.09	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03
Income	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	-0.00
Nonwhite	0.28	0.22	0.22	-0.10	-0.10	-0.08
Partisanship	-0.03	-0.05	-0.02	0.09	0.09	0.12*
Source: Fox	-0.10	-1.00**	-1.00**	-0.02	-0.08	-0.08
Source: MSNBC	0.16	-0.59 [†]	-0.59 [†]	-0.04	-0.07	-0.07
Condition: Presented as a Fact-Check	0.41*	-0.41	-0.41	0.25 [†]	0.16	0.15
Condition: Giving an Explicit Rating	-0.15	-0.15	-0.15	0.18	0.18	0.18
Fox × Presented as a Fact-Check		1.34**	1.46**		0.18	0.24
MSNBC × Presented as a Fact-Check		1.13**	1.22*		0.09	0.08
Partisanship × Fox × Presented as a Fact-Check			-0.04			-0.49*
Partisanship × MSNBC × Presented as a Fact-Check			-0.03			0.01
Condition: Trump					0.23*	0.24*
Trump × Presented as a Fact-Check						
R ²	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.03
F Statistic	1.95*	2.72**	2.33**	1.56	1.34	1.53 [†]

Data in the table represent standardized coefficients. [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. Moderating effect of news source on hostile media perceptions toward (a) the story and (b) the journalist.

Compared to no rating, giving an explicit rating did not have a main effect on hostile media perceptions toward the story or the journalist, disconfirming H4a and H4b (Table 2, Model 1; Table 3, Model 1). Additionally, news source had a moderation effect in a similar pattern as above: Giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating) increased hostile media perception toward the story when the

Table 3. The effects of presenting a story as a fact-check and giving an explicit rating on HMP toward the journalist.

Dependent Variable: Hostile Media Perception Toward the Journalist	Study 1			Study 2		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Main Effect	Interaction	Interaction	Main Effect	Interaction	Interaction
(Intercept)	4.28***	4.61***	4.61***	3.83***	3.83***	3.83***
Age	0.26***	0.25***	0.24***	0.14***	0.14***	0.14***
Gender	-0.45***	-0.43*	-0.42*	0.10	0.10	0.10
Education	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.03
Income	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Nonwhite	-0.07	-0.10	-0.10	0.04	0.05	0.04
Partisanship	0.01	0.00	-0.05	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Source: Fox	-0.03	-0.45	-0.45	0.02	-0.02	-0.02
Source: MSNBC	-0.09	-0.66*	-0.66*	-0.15	-0.12	-0.12
Condition: Presented as a Fact-Check	0.34†	-0.16	-0.18	0.30*	0.28	0.28
Condition: Giving an Explicit Rating	-0.11	-0.11	-0.10	0.16	0.16	0.16
Fox × Presented as a Fact-Check		0.62	0.29	0.14	0.14	0.17
MSNBC × Presented as a Fact-Check		0.86*	0.70	-0.09	-0.09	-0.09
Partisanship × Fox × Presented as a Fact-Check			0.10	-0.28	-0.28	-0.28
Partisanship × MSNBC × Presented as a Fact-Check			0.05	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Condition: Trump					0.19†	0.20†
Trump × Presented as a Fact-Check				0.19†	0.19†	0.19
R ²	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.03	0.01
F Statistic	2.12*	2.24**	1.98*	1.87*	1.64†	1.55†
						1.72†

Data in the table represent standardized coefficients. † $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

source is *Fox News*, while it decreased hostile media perception toward the story when the source is *AP*; however, there was no moderation effect for hostile media perception toward the journalist (Appendix 3).

Study 2

Methods

Design

In order to account for the possibility that the findings in Study 1 reflect a unique “Trump effect,” Study 2 aimed to conceptually replicate Study 1’s results but also added a third manipulation wherein either Trump or other partisan lawmakers were under scrutiny in the news story. In the Trump conditions, the headline read “Trump Cites Chicago Violence as Proof That Gun Laws Don’t Work,” and the opening paragraphs read:

At least 74 people were shot in Chicago over the weekend, making it one of the most violent weekends of the year in the city. [President Donald Trump pointed to Chicago’s crime rate today to say that tougher gun control legislation would not have stopped the shootings.
“Look at the city with the strongest gun laws in our nation — Chicago,” Trump said. “Chicago is a disaster, a total disaster.”]

In the lawmaker conditions, the headline read, “Is Chicago Violence Proof That Gun Laws Don’t Work?” and the opening paragraphs read:

At least 74 people were shot in Chicago over the weekend, making it one of the most violent weekends of the year in the city. [Congressional leaders have reopened the debate over gun-control legislation.
On one side of the debate, the members of Congress say that tougher gun control legislation would not have stopped the shootings, pointing at Chicago’s “disastrous crime rate” despite that “the city has the strongest gun laws in the U.S.”]

The remaining parts of the stories were kept identical for the Trump/lawmaker conditions (average word count of all stimuli = 488, see Appendix 2 for details).

The manipulations of the presentation of the story and the news source were kept identical to Study 1, except that we modified the story to cover only the part of Trump’s original claim on Chicago gun law and eliminated the content on Chicago crime rate, and thus changed the “half-true” rating in Study 1 to a “false” rating in Study 2 in order to decrease ambiguity for participants.

Sample and measures

The online survey experiment was implemented through *Qualtrics* in October 2018, which recruited 652 participants who are broadly comparable

to the U.S. adult population in terms of age, gender, race, education and income (see Appendix 1 for details). Notwithstanding the new experimental condition, Study 2 used the same measures as Study 1 ($M_{belief} = 3.24$, $SD_{belief} = 1.53$; $M_{hmp_story} = 4.00$, $SD_{hmp_story} = 1.38$; $M_{hmp_journalist} = 4.09$, $SD_{hmp_journalist} = 1.31$).

Analysis plan

Apart from adopting the same analytical strategy as Study 1, Study 2 also used OLS regressions to test the main effect of having Trump (vs. lawmakers) under scrutiny, as well as the interaction effects between Trump condition (vs. lawmakers condition) and presenting the story as a fact-check (vs. conventional news story), and between Trump condition (vs. lawmakers condition) and giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating). We ran a post-hoc power analysis which revealed Study 2's statistical power was sufficient to detect effects of a small to medium size (Cohen, 1988). See Appendix 6 for details.

Results

Study 2 conceptually replicated the finding that presenting a story as a fact-check increased the likelihood of accurate belief updating on the truthfulness of the claim (H1). Table 1, Model 4 shows that compared to a conventional news story format, presenting a story as a fact-check increased the accuracy of participants' rating of the statement ($\beta = 0.47$, $p = .001$). Again, the effect of presenting the story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) on the accuracy of participant's rating was not moderated by the news source or partisan identity (Table 1, Model 5 & 6); whether Trump or lawmakers were under scrutiny also did not have a moderating effect (Table 1, Model 7). Interestingly, additional investigation revealed that *regardless of* the fact-checking genre, when Trump's statement is refuted by *Fox News*, participants were more likely to give an accurate rating of the statement (see Appendix 5). As in Study 1, giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating) did not have a main effect on participants' belief updating, disconfirming H2 (Table 1, Model 4); news sources, partisan identity, or the Trump condition also did not moderate this effect (Appendix 3).

Further, we conceptually replicated the finding that compared to a conventional news story format, presenting a story as a fact-check increased the hostile media perception toward the story (H3a).⁴ The main

⁴Results do not differ in substantial ways from the findings reported here when we use the mean of HMP toward the story and HMP toward the journalist as the dependent variable (see Appendix 4). The Pearson's correlation coefficient between the two items is 0.80.

effect, however, did not reach the traditional significance level (Table 2, Model 4; $\beta = 0.25$, $p = .07$). Additional analysis revealed a three-way interaction effect: when a *Fox News* story (as compared to an *AP* story) was presented as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format), Democrats saw it as more hostile compared to Republicans (Table 2, Model 6). Further, whether Trump or lawmakers were under scrutiny did not have a moderating effect (Table 2, Model 7).

Finally, we conceptually replicated the finding that compared to a conventional news story format, presenting a story as a fact-check increased the hostile media perception toward the journalist (H3b; Table 3, Model 4). Presenting the story as a fact-check (vs. a conventional format) lead participants to see the journalist as more biased ($\beta = 0.30$, $p = .020$). This effect was not conditioned by the news source, partisan identity, or Trump vs. lawmaker manipulation (Table 3, Model 5–7).

As in Study 1, giving an explicit rating (vs. no rating) did not have a main effect on participants' hostile media perceptions toward the story or the journalist, disconfirming H4a and H4b (Table 2, Model 4; Table 3, Model 4); news sources, partisan identity, or the Trump condition also did not moderate this effect (Appendix 3).

In summary, across the two studies, we observed consistent effects of presenting a story as in a fact-checking genre (vs. a conventional format). We summarized the main effects of presenting a story as a fact-check on participants' belief updating in Figure 2, on hostile media perception toward the story in Figure 3, and toward the journalist in Figure 4. In contrast, we found null main effects of giving an explicit rating across the two studies. The moderation effects of news source were only found in Study 1 but not Study 2.

Discussion

By juxtaposing the theory of motivated reasoning and hostile media perception, we have shown that presenting news stories that correct misperceptions about what is true as “fact-checks” is a double-edged sword. Our results suggest that news stories presented as fact-checks significantly increase how well people are able to understand what is true and what is not, but that this also comes with an important negative effect: that people will be more likely to perceive that the journalist and the story are biased.

Our work contributes to the growing understanding that self-serving information processing happens above and beyond accurate updating of factual beliefs. Our results support the theoretical expectations in the motivated reasoning literature: despite accepting the corrective information, people continue to engage in biased reasoning by altering their attitudes in a negative direction about the news source that informed

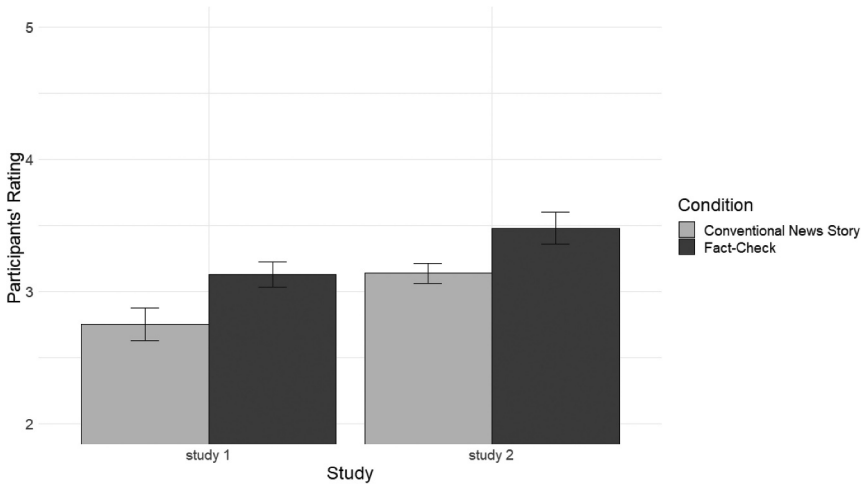


Figure 2. Main effects of the fact-checking genre on the accuracy of participants' rating of the statement.

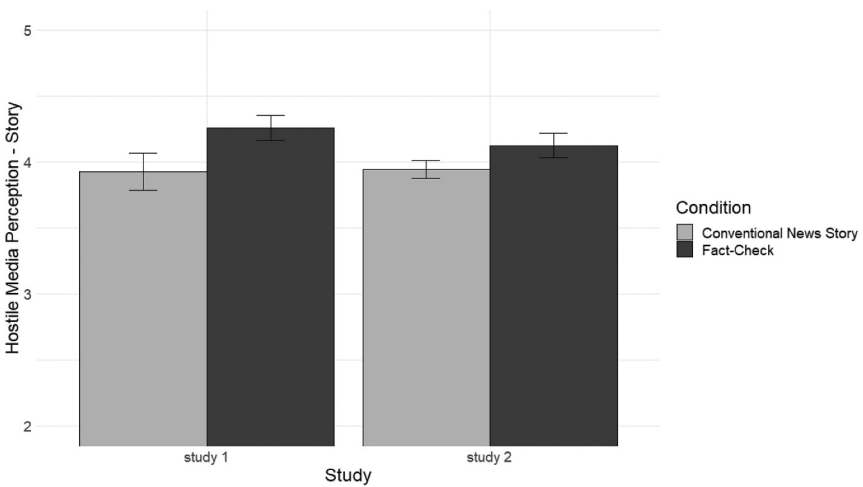


Figure 3. Main effects the fact-checking genre on the hostile media perception toward the story.

them about that truth in the first place. Further, we extend the implications of what Thorson (2016) calls “belief echoes”— the phenomenon of negative political information continuing to shape related attitudes after the information has been discredited. While previous studies such as Nyhan et al. (2019) and Swire-Thompson et al. (2019) found instances of “belief echoes” by showing that citizens *retain their evaluations of the politician* who made

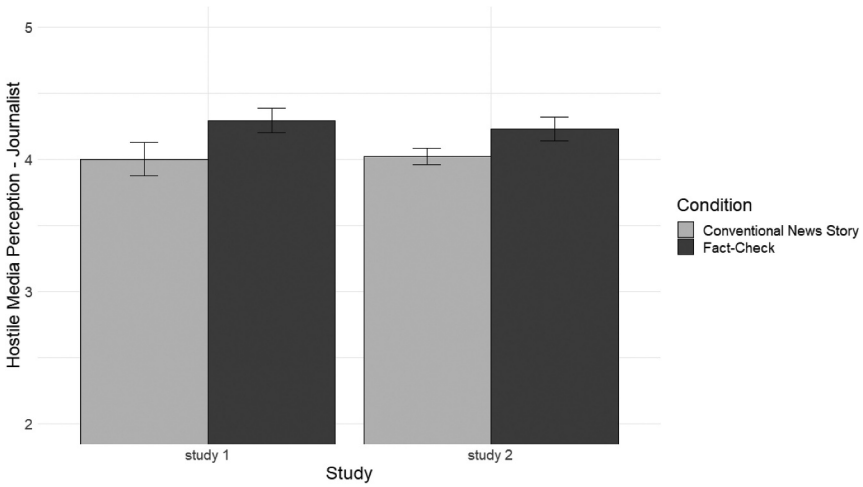


Figure 4. Main effects the fact-checking genre on the hostile media perception toward the journalist.

a claim of fact even they accept that the claim is false, our work indicates that “belief echoes” can extend from *ineffective* to *counterproductive* in the context of media perceptions: people see the news media that did a formal fact-check as *more biased*, even when they side with the conclusions of the fact-check.

Additionally, scholars have suggested that attitudes incongruent with corrective messages can be formed either through an automatic route as a byproduct of online processing, or through a deliberative route where people consciously construct explanations to make sense of the information (Thorson, 2016). The former might point to why fact-check stories from *Fox News* and *MSNBC* continue to be perceived as biased, since these sources carry heuristic cues related to having ideological slant, and such cues are strong enough to counterargue readers’ belief updating. On the other hand, the latter helps elucidate the moderating role of partisanship in hostile media effect: partisans may attempt to maintain their worldviews and resist attitude change through deliberate message elaboration, despite initially updating their beliefs after reading a fact-check. Future research can fruitfully unpack the differential mechanisms of our findings: the perception of a fact-check as biased, despite being persuasive, may either be an automatic reaction based on misunderstandings of the fact-checking genre and the discomfort over its modification of traditional journalistic norms, or a deliberate effort to maintain the preferred worldview by adjusting the mental model of fact-checking to cope with the newly learned facts.

Our findings also point to fruitful directions in studying various factors that help attenuate potential counterproductive effects of different forms of corrective information. For example, we find that even when covering elites that are less likely to trigger group identity than the President of the United States, the effects of the fact-checking genre on hostile media perceptions still hold. Moreover, the findings on types of news sources raise the need for future research to pay closer attention to who is doing the fact-checking in the increasingly fragmented media ecology. Although we only observed in Study 1 that the fact-checking genre decreased hostile perceptions toward *AP* but increased hostile perceptions toward *Fox News* and *MSNBC*, Study 2 did also show that the effect of the fact-checking genre depends on both news sources and partisanship, which is consistent with previous literature on relative hostile media perception (Gunther & Chia, 2001).

Our findings have implications for journalists and media organizations who view fact-checking as a prestigious exercise. On the one hand, since correcting misperceptions while making an explicit notation that the story is a formal fact-check improves belief updating, it would seem that the fact-checking genre is warranted and the “fact-checking movement” is somewhat successful—at least if a news organization’s goal is to persuade people to believe what is verifiably true. On the other hand, however, our findings point to the importance for practitioners to consider the long-term risks and benefits of fact-checking as a novel genre. While explicitly adjudicating the truth is important and has even become a part of the public’s expectations of the news media, it is necessary to consider the trade-offs of such modification of traditional journalism norms, such as increased perceptions of media bias and polarized trust in the news media.

Finally, our work points to an opportunity to continue considering research examining motivated reasoning and hostile media perceptions in the same theoretical space. Future questions related to the reach of imbalanced, but accurate, news coverage (like fact-checks) must take into account our findings that attitudes about what is true can be updated in counter-attitudinal ways, even as biased processing continues to occur regarding individual conclusions about perceived biases in both news coverage and the reporters that produce them. It suggests a linkage between several questions articulated in Druckman and McGrath (2019) review of motivated reasoning. They ask for whom and when directional motivated reasoning is likely to occur, how people arrive at directional goals, how different people articulate evidence quality when they are accuracy-motivated. Rather than pursuing these questions in isolation from one another, our work suggests that accuracy goals related to knowing the verifiable truth can operate simultaneously with directional goals related to evaluations of issues or leaders. As Winter et al. (2016)

conclude, “it will also be important to ask how prevalent accuracy, defense, and impression motivation are in people’s actual media usage and which circumstances elicit various motivations,” as they occur in different combinations (p. 687).

Limitations

Limitations with respect to the generalizability of our results include several factors. First, we only examined one issue and used a single story as the manipulation in each study. It could be that fact-checks about issues that are less controversial and well-sorted ideologically as gun control/gun rights would result in a reduced hostile media perception. On the one hand, by using both real claims Donald Trump made and composites of actual fact-checks that adjudicated the veracity of his claims, our story has the advantage of mirroring what people see when using well-known fact-checking sites, improving external validity. On the other hand, relying on one issue/story means that we must interpret our results with caution, calling for future work to replicate our findings across contexts. Notably, we did vary the partisan elites who made the statement in Study 2.

Second, given research on explicit ratings that used striking visualizations and found effects of ratings in contrast to our study (e.g., Amazeen et al., 2018), it is possible that our null findings on the effects of explicit rating is affected by the text-only presentation of the rating. Nevertheless, the finding that participants were able to report accurate beliefs in the truthfulness of the claim after reading the fact-checks offers indirect support that they paid considerable attention to the stimuli. It is thus possible that the text-heavy stimuli led to high elaboration processing where the explicit rating was just one of the many dimensions participants processed, leading to the dilution of the efficacy of the explicit rating.

Additionally, while we chose to test the “Trump effect” potential in Study 2, we did slightly alter the story from a “half-true” rating to a “false” rating to decrease ambiguity. This again speaks to the challenges of trying to mirror real fact-checks, which can be messier than tightly controlled experiments. Fortunately, we saw consistent findings across the studies, giving us confidence that a potential confound did not affect the interpretation of our analyses. Finally, the effects we uncovered in our one-shot experiments, although conceptually replicated with different samples and with care to generalize beyond a “Trump effect,” may not hold up over time. Based on previous research (Mitchell, 2012), it is reasonable to suspect that the effect of the belief update might decay at a more rapid rate than the general perception that a news source is biased. Future research should replicate our findings with a longitudinal design.

Finally, our power analyses show that scholars hypothesizing subtler effects in an environment mirroring our factorial design would need a slightly larger sample size due to the number of conditions in each study.

Conclusion

Contrasting two seemingly incongruent expectations from the theory of motivated reasoning and hostile media perception, we uncover the unique effects of the fact-checking genre compared to more conventional news reporting. Our findings show that presenting the same story with corrective information in the form of a fact-check can result in success—at least with respect to individuals' beliefs about what is true. However, we also show that this comes with an important negative side effect: that people will be more likely to perceive that the story and the journalist are biased. As the popularity of fact-checking continues to explode, improving our understanding of the conditions under which beliefs can be updated, without resulting in a simultaneous process in which people become more skeptical of the source that persuaded them of the verifiable truth, is more important than ever in today's contentious political climate.

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