

MEDIA REPERTOIRES AND NEWS TRUST DURING THE EARLY TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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Levels of news media trust have been steadily declining in the United States since the 1970s and frequent attacks against the press have characterized the first year of the Trump presidency. This study focuses on the relationship between media trust, news repertoires and support for Trump. Our goal was two-fold: first, we tested how individual predispositions influence patterns of media consumption (repertoires), which in turn predict news trust. Then, we analyze how attitudes about Trump relate to repertoires and media trust. Survey results revealed four repertoires: low news users/some local news, news junkies, conservative news users, and mainstream news users. News junkies and mainstream news users trusted the media more, while conservative news users had the lowest levels of trust. Support for Trump is the strongest predictor of news distrust, even controlling for conservatism and news repertoires. Findings suggest that the impact of a White House that is hostile to the press goes beyond the way partisanship affects media trust.

KEYWORDS Political communication; media trust; Trump; news repertoires

Introduction

News media trust is crucial to the role that journalism plays in democracies. From a normative perspective, the work of the press enables informed and rational political participation by citizens in deliberative democracies (Habermas 1991). But the conceptual and operational definitions of news trust remain problematic (Kohring and Matthes 2007). Adding to the complexity surrounding the concept is the fragmentation of the informational environment, with increased competition and a push to “tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions, and tastes” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Since the 2016 election, it has become clear that whatever “news media trust” is, it may be further threatened by a discourse from The White House itself. According to many (e.g. Davis and Rosenberg 2017), frequent and intense attacks on the credibility of the United States press by the Presidency are unprecedented. This occurs in a societal context that has seen ever lower indices of news media trust (Swift 2016).

This study aims to identify the current level of news trust in US citizens and determine how those attitudes are related to the patterns of media they have chosen to use. We call these patterns “news repertoires,” and assess how demographics and political antecedents relate to them. We also analyze how attitudes about President Trump relate to repertoires and perceptions about the trustworthiness of the mainstream press. We found that a President who is continuously contemptuous of mainstream journalism and simultaneously

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laudatory about conservative media impacted his supporters' news choices and media trust beyond simple partisanship.

How did we get here?

In 2017, Trump tweeted the phrase “fake news” aimed at mainstream media more than 73 times (Rosen 2017). Barthel, Gottfried, and Mitchell (2017) report that 83 percent of Americans, including both Republicans and Democrats, say there is an unhealthy relationship between the president and the US press and 73 percent also agree that the resulting tensions interfere with Americans' access to quality political news.

From a theoretical perspective, this is a departure from the ways we understood the media as a political institution functioning within a symbiotic relationship with the government (Cook 1998). The “new institutionalist” approach describes a mutual dependency between news makers and policy makers in the negotiation of newsworthiness. On one side, the media depend on the government for information subsidies. On the other, the government needs the media for publicity (Tuchman 1978). In the early 2000s, Cook (2006) argued that the approach remained useful in a fragmented ecosystem because public and officials still relied on the mainstream press for their central function of political communication. Further, it was safe to say that mainstream media were an institution as a matter of *access* (e.g. via press passes) and *legitimacy*. President Trump's White House increasingly subverts this model by restricting access to the mainstream press, attacking its legitimacy (e.g. “not you CNN, you're fake news”), bypassing mainstream channels by using social media, second-screening live during certain shows (e.g. Fox & Friends), and giving non-mainstream outlets access to press credentials (e.g. Infowars) (Maza 2018).

The effects of Trump's critique of mainstream media must also be understood as overlaying increasing loss of news credibility by the American public. In 1976, about 72 percent of Americans trusted the mainstream press (Swift 2016). However, since 1997 there has been a slow but consistent trend downward, reaching 32 percent in 2016. Democrats have decreased perceived news credibility down to 50 percent in 2016. Republicans, however, have decreased from 41 percent in 1997 to only 14 percent in 2016. It is important to note that levels of trust in the media also vary when broken down into separate outlets: 88 percent of conservatives trust Fox News while liberals trust a much larger mix of news outlets (Mitchell et al. 2014).

A number of theories about the continuous loss of news credibility and the bifurcation by partisanship have been developed, with scholars finding that the hostile media effect—the tendency for partisans to judge mass media coverage as unfavorable to their own point of view—is higher among Republicans (Eveland and Shah 2003; Jones 2004; Hansen and Kim 2011). Part of conservative distrust of legacy journalism comes from the ascension and establishment of a conservative media infrastructure (Hemmer 2016). It is also likely that media choice and trust are driven by a form of selective exposure (e.g. Festinger 1957) commonly known as confirmation bias (Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng 2009) wherein people choose content that supports strong pre-existing attitudes.

Beyond partisanship, there is some evidence that demographics also affect news trust, although results have been inconsistent, in part due to differences in how trust is measured (see a discussion by Kohring and Matthes [2007]). For example, Lee (2010) found effects of race and income on trust, but those disappeared when partisanship and political trust were included. Another issue is that the “news media” have drastically

proliferated, with more than half of Americans getting news from four to six different platforms every day (Pew Research Center 2010). When asking about media trust, scholars must now specify *which* media they are referring to. In this study, we specifically state that “mainstream news media” refers to news programs on the TV networks and the main cable stations, local and national newspapers and their websites, PBS, and NPR.

A fundamental assumption here is that people’s news “repertoires” must be examined in order to understand how news media choice relates to news trust. Tsfatı (2010) showed that lack of trust on various media led to specific media choices (e.g. those who trusted less used more online news than legacy news). Similarly, Yuan (2011) showed that perceptions of news source credibility influenced media choices, resulting in different repertoire compositions. For example, Schröder (2015) showed that Danes used different combinations of news media platforms (e.g. television, radio, print) depending on what kind of news they were pursuing (e.g. overviews vs. background stories). Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2016) used a sorting methodology to identify five news media repertoires: regionally oriented, background orientated, digital, laid back, and nationally oriented. Helles et al. (2015) identified Danish news repertoires using a combination of how much time people spent with various media and whether the media provided one-to-one or one-to-many interactions, and whether they were synchronous or not. These studies clearly show that the articulation of news repertoires varies depending on how news use is measured, but that nevertheless, people are combining news sources, rather than relying on any of them uniquely.

In this study, we aim to contribute to this literature by providing detailed observations about the relationships between repertoire structures and news trust, also identifying the demographic and political composition of each group. We employ latent profile analysis to identify patterns on people’s consumption of mainstream, partisan, legacy, digital-first, satire news, and entertainment journalism (See Table 1).

TABLE 1
Means of four latent profiles

News sources	Profile 1 Low news /some local	Profile 2 News junkies	Profile 3 Conservative news users	Profile 4 Mainstream news users
National nightly news on CBS, ABC, or NBC	2.61	4.31	2.05	3.71
The Today Show, Good Morning America or CBS This Morning	1.81	4.04	1.41	2.73
Local television news	3.08	4.20	2.81	3.88
CNN cable news	1.58	4.13	1.33	3.25
FOX cable news	1.69	4.07	3.63	2.41
MSNBC cable news	1.28	3.94	1.28	2.82
News programming on NPR	1.31	3.93	1.87	2.57
Conservative news websites	1.14	3.93	3.55	1.71
Liberal news websites	1.14	3.93	1.35	2.11
International news websites	1.34	3.95	2.09	2.76
Conservative talk radio	1.22	3.77	3.47	1.67
Local newspapers	2.25	4.10	2.46	3.42
National newspapers	1.45	3.90	1.82	3.14

RQ1: What types of news media repertoires can be identified among respondents?

Consistent with the overwhelming evidence of conservative orientations predicting lower news trust, we hypothesize:

H1: The higher the probability of a respondent falling into the conservative media cluster, the less trust in mainstream media there will be.

And finally, we posit that approval of President Trump predicts membership in the repertoires, and that it predicts media trust beyond the observed impact of partisanship:

H2: Positive attitudes towards President Trump will be associated with less trust in the mainstream media.

Method

Research questions were answered and hypotheses tested using an online survey administered via Qualtrics in July, 2017, yielding 1112 completed responses from respondents who passed two attention checks. Quotas were established matching the US Census, following previous research (Bode et al. 2014). The questions used are briefly described below and all the items asked in each scale can be provided upon request.

Dependent Variables

News repertoires. "Please indicate how often in the last week you've consumed content from each source (using any device, for example, your phone, your television, or your laptop) (Range = 1 "not at all" to 5 = "all the time"): (a) National nightly news on CBS, ABC, or NBC, (b) The Today Show, Good Morning America or CBS This Morning, (c) CNN cable news programs (e.g. Anderson Cooper, Don Lemon), (d) FOX cable news programs (e.g. Sean Hannity, Fox & Friends), (e) MSNBC cable news programs (e.g. Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews), (f) News programming on NPR – live radio, podcasts, streaming (e.g. "All Things Considered"), (g) Conservative news websites (e.g. Instapundit, Infowars), (h) Liberal news websites (e.g. Daily Kos, Mother Jones), (i) Conservative talk radio – live radio, podcasts, streaming (e.g. Rush Limbaugh), (j) Local newspapers (online or print), (k) National newspapers (e.g. *The New York Times*; *Washington Post*; online or print), (l) Local television news about your viewing area, and (m) International news websites (e.g. BBC, *The Guardian*)".

Mainstream media trust. "In the questions below, 'mainstream news media' refers to news programs on the TV networks and the main cable stations, local and national newspapers and their websites, PBS, and NPR programming. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements (Range 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree): (a) We can depend on getting the truth from most mainstream news organizations, (b) Mainstream journalism aims to inform the public, (c) I believe news is informative, (d) Mainstream journalism is generally truthful, (e) Mainstream journalism is a reliable source of information, (f) Mainstream journalism is truth well told, (g) In general, mainstream journalism presents a true depiction of the world, (h) I feel I've been accurately informed after consuming mainstream news, (i) Most mainstream news organizations provide people with essential information" ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.07$).

Independent Variables

Demographics. This study controls for the following demographic characteristics of the participants: age ($M = 47.98$, $SD = 16.03$), gender (female = 53.4 percent), education ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.21$, range: 1 = "less than high school" to 6 = "Postgraduate or professional degree"), income ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.30$, range: 1 = "Less than \$25,000" to 5 = "\$100,000 or more") and race (white = 79.1 percent).

Political Antecedents

Political Ideology. (a) Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?, (b) On social issues, where would you place yourself, (c) On economic issues, where would you place yourself. Items were combined (0 = Strong Republican and 10 = Strong Democrat and 5 = Independent) ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 6.17$, $SD = 2.72$).

Political Knowledge: Participants were asked to respond to 14 questions on civic knowledge and current affairs, which were recorded as "right" or "wrong." ($M = 9.89$, $SD = 2.76$, Range = 11),

Political Interest. In general, how interested are you in politics and national government (1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely interested)? ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.18$).

Political Discussion: During a typical month, how often do you discuss political issues with: (a) Friends and family, (b) Co-workers and acquaintances, (c) Strangers, (d) People who agree with you, (e) People who disagree with you, and (f) People outside your family who do not share your ethnicity, socio-economic status, or gender ($\alpha = .98$, $M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.34$).

Efficacy. Six items measured levels of political efficacy on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 = strongly disagree and 10 = strongly agree: "People like me can influence government," "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics," "I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," "No matter whom I vote for, it won't make a difference," "Parties are interested in people's votes rather than their opinions," and "People like me don't have any say in what the government does." ($\alpha = .64$, $M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.66$). The last three items were reverse coded.

Trump attitudes. Two batteries of questions were used to measure how respondents felt about Trump based on questionnaires used by Gallup, Pew Research Center and the Annenberg National Election Survey (range: 1 = "strongly disagree/disapprove" to 10 = "strongly agree/approve"). Examples of the 21 questions asked include: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is: (a) handling his job as President; (b) the economy; (c) foreign policy, etc." and "How much do you agree or disagree that: (a) Donald Trump is going to make America great again; (b) keeps his promises; (c) is able to get things done, etc." ($\alpha = .98$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 3.05$).

Data Analysis

This study used latent profile analysis to examine the different types of news repertoires among respondents. Most studies on multi-news source use factor or principal component analysis (e.g. Edgerly 2015), however, identifying discrete groups of people instead of groups of media can be accomplished with latent profile analysis, which allows us to model not only which group people predominantly belong to, but also the probabilities of belonging to any of the groups identified (Oberski 2016). In this study, we used Mplus

to identify the news repertoires across respondents using the 13 media use variables. To identify the best model, we used entropy indices. This procedure was recorded into two new variables: (a) the probability of a respondent to belong to each group (continuous), and (b) a categorization indicating the best solution (nominal), with each individual assigned to a single group. After the repertoires were identified, regression analyses were used to assess which demographics and political characteristics were associated with membership in each group, using the probability variables as an outcome.

Finally, we examined how repertoires related to media trust using three blocks: demographics, political antecedents, and probabilities for repertoires membership. Because we were also interested in the way attitudes towards President Trump affected media trust, a final block was entered with this variable. In other words, the LPA groups were first used as a dependent variable in a model predicting the probability of a respondent falling into each group. Then they were used as independent variables in the final models predicting mainstream media trust.

Results

Media Repertoires

Four groups emerged from the latent class analysis: low news users/some local news, news junkies, conservative news users, and mainstream media news users. Table 1 shows the means for news uses across the four groups. Because of space limitations, more detailed summary statistics for each can be provided upon request.

The first group (*low news users, some local news*) comprises respondents that have lower levels of news use across the board, except for local television news ($M = 3.08$). The members of this group also watch some nightly broadcast news ($M = 2.61$) and read local newspapers ($M = 2.25$), but the scores for all other sources is lower than 2 (rarely). Those who are older ($\beta = .15, p < .05$) and less likely to discuss politics ($\beta = -.43, p < .001$) are more likely to belong to the *low media/some local news* group. Those with positive attitudes towards Trump ($\beta = .13$) and less political interest ($\beta = -.12$) are likely to belong to this group, but at the $p < .10$ level. This model explained 35.8 percent of the variance observed (Table 2).

The second group (*news junkies*) comprises respondents who report they consume news from all sources at high levels (>3.5). These users are younger ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$), male ($\beta = -.13, p < .01$), left-leaning ($\beta = .22, p < .001$), discuss politics more ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), but have lower levels of political knowledge ($\beta = -.19, p < .001$). Positive attitudes towards Trump is also a predictor of belonging to this group ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). The model explained 51.6 percent of the variance observed. It is important to note that the political ideology and Trump attitudes among this group has a bimodal distribution, i.e. news junkies tend to be those who are ardent Trump supporters or haters.

The third group (*conservative news users*) is formed by those who consume Fox News ($M = 3.63$), conservative sites ($M = 3.55$), and conservative radio ($M = 3.47$) at higher levels than other news outlets. While they do consume some local television news ($M = 2.81$) and national nightly news ($M = 2.05$), scores for all other sources average below 2 (rarely). The third column in Table 2 reveals the characteristics of this group: they are right-leaning ($\beta = -.30, p < .001$), likely to have higher levels of political interest ($\beta = .15, p < .05$) and knowledge ($\beta = .13, p < .05$), and have more positive attitudes towards Trump ($\beta = .18, p < .05$). This model explained 26.5 percent of the variance observed.

TABLE 2

Membership of the Profiles by demographics, political antecedents and attitudes towards Trump

	Profile 1 Low news/ some local β (bootstrap SE)	Profile 2 News junkies β (bootstrap SE)	Profile 3 Conservative media β (bootstrap SE)	Profile 4 Mainstream media β (bootstrap SE)
Constant	(0.20)***	(0.14)	(0.13) [†]	(0.20)*
Age	0.15 (0.00)*	−0.22(0.00)***	0.10 (0.00)	−0.02 (0.00)
Gender (female)	0.02 (0.05)	−0.13 (0.03)**	0.02 (0.03)	0.08 (0.05)
Education	−0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.07 (0.01)	0.06 (0.02)
Income	−0.04 (0.02)	0.07 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.03 (0.02)
Race (white)	0.05 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.05)	−0.07 (0.04)	0.02 (0.07)
ΔR^2 (%)	12.8%	29.8%	3.5%	2.5%
Political Ideology (left)	0.04 (0.01)	0.22 (0.01)***	−0.30 (0.01)***	−0.04 (0.01)
Political Efficacy	−0.06 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	0.05 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)
Political Interest	−0.12 (0.03) [†]	0.10 (0.02) [†]	0.15 (0.02)*	−0.07 (0.03)
Political Discussion	−0.43 (0.01)***	0.25 (0.01)***	0.09 (0.01)	0.17 (0.01)*
Political Knowledge	0.01 (0.01)	−0.19 (0.01)***	0.13 (0.01)*	0.07 (0.01)
ΔR^2 (%)	22%	17.3%	21.5%	10.4%
Attitude towards Trump	0.13 (0.01) [†]	0.31 (0.01)***	0.18 (0.01)*	−0.53 (0.01)*
ΔR^2 (%)	1%	4.6%	1.5%	13.3%
Total R^2	35.8%	51.6%	26.5%	26.1%
N	1112	1112	1112	1112

*** $p < .001$.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

[†] $p < .10$.

The final group (*mainstream media users*) comprises those who consume nightly TV news ($M = 3.71$), local TV news ($M = 3.88$), CNN ($M = 3.25$), local newspapers ($M = 3.42$) and national newspapers ($M = 3.14$) at higher levels. To a lesser extent, they also consume some NPR ($M = 2.57$), morning news ($M = 2.73$), MSNBC ($M = 2.82$), Fox News ($M = 2.41$), and international news sites ($M = 2.76$), but have a low rate of consuming liberal and conservative sites and talk radio. Those who engage in higher levels of political discussion ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) and who dislike Trump ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .001$) are more likely to be *mainstream media* users. As we anticipated, negative Trump attitudes are strongly correlated with the probability of belonging to the group.

Media Trust

The second set of research questions and hypotheses refers to the way news media repertoires are related to trust in the work of the mainstream media in general. Table 3 shows the regression models predicting mainstream media trust. In the first column, we do not control for Trump attitudes and results show that left-leaning ideology ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), probability of being a *news junkie* ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$) and *mainstream news* ($\beta = .16$,

TABLE 3
Predictors of media trust

	β (bootstrap SE)	
	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	(0.43)***	(0.46)***
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender (female)	−0.01 (0.12)	0.00 (0.11)
Education	−0.02 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)
Income	0.00 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)
Race (white)	−0.01 (0.15)	0.03 (0.15)
ΔR^2 (%)	6.4%	6.4%
Political Ideology	0.36 (0.02)***	0.16 (0.03)**
Political Efficacy	0.08 (0.04)	0.09 (0.04) [†]
Political Interest	0.06 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)
Political Discussion	0.07 (0.03)	0.12 (0.03) [†]
Political Knowledge	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.07 (0.02)
ΔR^2 (%)	29.3%	29.3%
<i>Probability of being on profiles</i>		
Low news	(ref)	(ref)
News junkies	0.16 (0.24)*	0.22 (0.23)**
Conservative news	−0.29 (0.24)***	−0.25 (0.23)***
Mainstream news	0.16 (0.16)**	0.09 (0.16)
ΔR^2 (%)	10.8%	10.8%
Attitudes towards Trump	−	−0.35 (0.03)***
ΔR^2 (%)	−	10.8%
Total R^2	46.5%	51.4%
N	1112	1112

*** $p < .001$.
** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.
[†] $p < .10$.

$p < .01$) users are predictors of more trust, while being a *conservative news* user is the opposite ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$) (H1 supported).

After adding the block for Trump attitudes, we found that positive attitudes towards Trump is a negative predictor of mainstream media trust ($\beta = -.35, p < .001$) and by itself explains 10.8 percent of the variance observed (H2 supported). The full model explains 51.4 percent of the variance.

Discussion

This study sought to expand our knowledge of the relationship between media trust and the news repertoires that people consume. Our goals were: (a) To determine the common news repertoires for Americans, (b) To understand how these repertoires relate to media trust, (c) To assess if support for Trump differs across repertoires, and (d) To analyze how Trump attitudes relate to news trust beyond partisanship.

Results reveal four main repertoires: low news/some local users, news junkies, conservative news users and mainstream news users. It is important to note that different political antecedents explain membership for each group. For low users/some local, demographics (age) and political discussion are the only predictors, while partisanship and support for

Trump are more closely associated with the other groups. Interestingly enough, for conservative media users, support for Trump is a strong predictor beyond partisan alignment.

The second goal of this paper refers to how these repertoires relate to trust on the work of the mainstream press. Not surprisingly, results show that those who are left-leaning, news junkies and mainstream news users have higher trust levels, and conservative media users have more negative attitudes towards the press. This study, therefore, adds to the vast body of evidence that shows conservatives have higher levels of distrust in the mainstream press. Furthermore, it is clearly illustrative of where the line falls in the conflict between mainstream media and liberals at one side versus the conservative movement and its separate news apparatus on the other.

The impact of Trump attitudes in this model is remarkable: it explains more than 10 percent of the variance observed and is more than double the impact of partisanship alone. This finding strongly suggests that the influence of the President's rhetoric goes beyond the traditional impact of Republican identification found by the literature. Our numbers show that attitude towards President Trump is not only associated with more consumption of conservative media and less consumption of mainstream content but it is also the strongest direct predictor of news trust regardless of what repertoires and political antecedents people had.

This finding demonstrates that the mutual dependency between mainstream news makers and the White House in the negotiation of newsworthiness is considerably different in the Trump Era. It is clear that when these two institutions clash, citizens do "pick sides:" those who consume mainstream media have deep levels of mistrust towards the President, and those who are fervent Trump supporters gravitate towards consuming their news exclusively via conservative media platforms. This effect is significant beyond the impact of conservative partisanship.

Taken together, our evidence suggests that Trump supporters are strongly engaging in selective exposure, shutting off from mainstream news sources that challenge their perspectives beyond the levels observed among Republicans in general. In addition, there is also evidence of stronger hostile media effects among this group, who trusted the press significantly less than other conservatives. Future scholarship should explore the impact of selective exposure to political polarization among this sub-group of conservatives, as suggested by prior studies (Stroud 2010).

From a normative perspective, this project has important implications: if the role of journalists is to hold public officials accountable, what happens when citizens simply tune out as public officials attack the very notion of the press? Conversely, if mainstream media users already have high levels of mistrust towards the President, would watchdog journalism really be just preaching to the choir?

It is important to note that we also found that news junkies included a small but noticeable percentage of Trump supporters. That is, not all Trump supporters are choosing the conservative news media pattern, but some are using a wide variety of news sources and spending significant time with them, which defies stereotyped demographics of this group. The motivations behind this media pattern are worthy of further investigation.

Our design comes with some limitations. First, we rely on self-reported data about media consumption patterns and, as such, results could be affected by social desirability bias. Further, inspection of our political knowledge variable revealed odd patterns: news junkies spent less time completing the survey but also had the lowest knowledge scores, while low news users had the highest ones. Further methodological research is needed,

especially considering we found the same patterns in data collected by The University of Texas, for example. We also rely on cross-sectional data, which limits our ability to make causal inferences.

Finally, in this study we defined specifically what we meant by mainstream media, but it should be kept in mind that what people perceive to be the mainstream press is fluid now. Future studies should probe these questions from a more qualitative perspective, asking “what does mainstream media mean to you?” It is possible that different respondents were weighting the different outlets we listed in the description more than others when reporting their perceptions.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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