Seeing and Believing Pro-Trump Fake News:
The Interacting Roles of Online News Sources, Partisanship, and Education

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This study examined secondary survey data (N = 3,015) that asked respondents about real and pro-Trump fake news headlines in late 2016 as well as their reliance on online news sources. Reliance on Facebook for news was a vector for exposure to pro-Trump fake news but not for believing it. Reliance on Fox News online and on nonlegacy news sites was positively associated both with exposure to and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. The Fox News relationship with perceived accuracy was moderated by party and education such that Fox News reliance was a stronger predictor for Democrats and the more highly educated. Reliance on CNN online and elite newspaper sites was negatively related with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. Implications for motivated reasoning theory and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: fake news, misinformation, Facebook, Fox News, motivated reasoning, selective exposure, misperceptions, online news

The term "fake news" burst into broad public consciousness in late 2016 and was Collins Dictionary's word of the year in 2017 (Meza, 2017). Events since then have shown that misinformation remains a problem. The storming of the U.S. Capitol, denial of a global pandemic, and skepticism of vaccines designed to fight that pandemic have all been precipitated or exacerbated by misinformation. While there are some detailed accounts of the role of fake news in the 2016 election (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Jamieson, 2020), we believe examining the processes and moderators involved in exposure to and belief in fake news could help shed light on understanding current and future crises. Gaining a better understanding of who is more likely to see misinformation and who is more likely to believe it could be vitally important.

Theories like selective exposure and motivated reasoning that examine how people find and make sense of political information boil down to the tension between wanting to hold an accurate view of the world and wanting to validate their existing view (Hart et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Motivated reasoning—the proposition that most people generally process information directionally to reach a preferred conclusion that affirms closely held beliefs, values, or identities (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006)—has been the go-to theoretical explanation for why people are prone to believing ideologically convenient falsehoods

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(Kahan, 2015; Nyhan, 2010). There is substantial evidence that partisanship affects belief. However, support has been mixed for motivated reasoning's predictions about how partisanship and education should interact—or how they should moderate the relationship that exposure to different online news sources has with embracing misinformation. Some scholars have called for a reconsideration of the motivated reasoning explanation (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Hennes, Kim, & Remache, 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

This secondary analysis of Ipsos survey data draws on selective exposure and the debate about motivated reasoning as a theoretical framework to examine pro-Trump fake news exposure and perceived accuracy shortly after the 2016 presidential election. This allows us to determine who was more likely to be exposed to pro-Trump fake news and how online news sources (particularly Facebook and Fox News), partisanship, education, and their interactions related to people's ability to discern fact from political fiction.

Fake News Exposure and the (Mis)information Ecosystem in 2016

Research definitions of fake news frequently focus on three key elements: format, falsity, and intent (Kalsnes, 2018). "Fake news" has sometimes been coopted by politicians to demean news stories and outlets they dislike, leading some to prefer broader terms not associated with news, like Kathleen Hall Jamieson's coinage "viral deception" (e.g., Landrum & Olshansky, 2019), but the phenomenon studied here more narrowly employs news formats, including headlines and site names that mimic those of news outlets. Degrees of falsity in definitions include partially true but misleading (Benkler et al., 2018) or fully false and fabricated information (Lazer et al., 2018). Concerning intent, some typologies of fake news include satire and parody (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018), although most definitions focus on intentional deception with propagandistic and commercial goals (Kalsnes, 2018; Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018). For our purposes, fake news refers to the use of news formats to intentionally disseminate fabricated stories for political or commercial purposes.

Fake news thrived on social media and in the right-wing media ecosystem in late 2016 (Benkler et al., 2018). While false stories appeared on left-wing sites as well, right-wing fake news sites were far more numerous, and their stories received much more attention on social media. Of the fake news domains taking sides in the 2016 election identified by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and listed by Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018), 87 favored Donald Trump and five favored Hillary Clinton. Guess and colleagues (2018) estimated that a quarter of Americans had visited fake news websites in the month before the presidential election, and many more likely had incidental exposure to fake news headlines on their Facebook feeds.

Facebook and Fake News Exposure

While visits to fake news sites made up only 2.6% of the viewed current affairs articles during the final weeks of the 2016 campaign (Guess et al., 2018), fake news was widespread on Facebook as unverified digital publishers exploited its algorithm's prioritization of high-engagement content (Benkler et al., 2018). From August 2016 until election day, the top 20 fake news headlines garnered more engagement on Facebook than the top 20 mainstream news headlines (Silverman, 2016).

Less than 10% of Facebook users shared fake news (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019), but one share could be seen by hundreds of friends. Facebook was a key vector of fake news exposure (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Benkler et al., 2018; Guess et al., 2018). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that 41.8% of visits to fake news sites came from social media. When Guess and colleagues (2018) examined the URLs respondents visited immediately before visiting a fake news website, they found Facebook was by far the most prevalent.

H1:   *Reliance on Facebook as a news source will be positively related to exposure to pro-Trump fake news.*

The extent to which reliance on other news sources was related to exposure to pro-Trump fake news also deserves examination. The specific fake news headlines in this study may not have been reported by the outlets in this study, but Tsfati and colleagues (2020) argue that fake news claims are often disseminated via mainstream news outlets, which may report startling assertions from prominent people regardless of the assertions' factual basis. In the first five months of 2020, news media outlets published more than a half million stories that mentioned COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracies (Evanega, Lynas, Adams, & Smolenyak, 2020).

RQ1:   *Is reliance on other news sources related to exposure to pro-Trump fake news?*

Partisanship and Fake News Exposure

The case for the role of partisanship in exposure to fake news begins with selective exposure. This phenomenon had been disputed, especially in the era of low news choice (e.g., McGuire, 1968), but can be found reliably in more recent work, especially for political information (Hart et al., 2009; Stroud, 2011). Republicans are more likely to watch right-leaning Fox News than MSNBC or CNN, while the reverse is true for Democrats (Coe et al., 2008), and the difference is starker online (Stroud, 2011). Fake news headlines in 2016 (including those in this study) were largely on the right, and conservatives were more likely to visit fake news websites in 2016 (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

In addition to intentional partisan news exposure, partisanship likely affects the kinds of news that people come across on social media. Facebook friend networks are largely homogeneous politically (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), and Republicans and strong conservatives were more likely to share these largely right-leaning fake news stories in 2016 (Guess et al., 2019).

H2:   *Party identification will be related to exposure to pro-Trump fake news such that exposure will be more likely with stronger identification with the Republican Party.*

Perceived Accuracy of Fake News: News Source Reliance, Partisanship, and Education

This section examines potential predictors of perceived pro-Trump fake news accuracy. It considers what sources people rely on for news, with an emphasis on Facebook and Fox News. It also draws on the

debate about motivated reasoning to posit roles for partisanship and education as both predictors and moderators.

Facebook and Perceived Accuracy of Fake News

More than half of the American population reports getting news from social media at least sometimes, with more than a third saying they regularly get news from Facebook (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Of course, Facebook does not create news content itself. Assessing the credibility of political content on Facebook is complicated by multiple levels of sources—the friends or liked brands that share the story on one hand, and the (sometimes unfamiliar) news outlets on the other (Keib & Wojdynski, 2019). Facebook users may fall back on heuristics to help with these assessments (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010). For instance, the illusory truth effect (Bacon, 1979), in which prior exposure to information increases its perceived accuracy, has been demonstrated for fake news (Pennycook et al., 2018). Since Facebook use is a vector for prior exposure to fake news, it follows that it would also contribute to perceived accuracy of fake news.

In addition, Facebook's affordances include endorsements that tap into a social proof heuristic (Cialdini, 2006). Cues such as numbers of likes can positively influence credibility assessments and engagement with news (Avram, Micallef, Patil, & Menczer, 2020; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Metzger et al., 2010; Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). At the macro level, the now-defunct "trending topics" section was another avenue of endorsement by millions of Facebook users, suggesting a story was important and worthwhile.

At the micro level of social influence, credibility often comes down to interpersonal trust. People who share or like news on Facebook recommend it to a network of friends. They act as opinion leaders for their social networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), and thus Facebook has made the classic two-step flow model "more relevant than ever before" (Mutz & Young, 2011, p. 1019). Keib and Wojdynski (2019) hypothesized (but did not find) that news from a "peer" (rather than a friend known to the respondent) was more credible than news from a news organization. More to the point was an experiment that found news shared on Facebook by a respondent's real-life friend was more trusted than when the same story appeared on the outlet's website (Turcotte et al., 2015).

H3:   Reliance on Facebook as a news source is positively related to perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.

Fox News and Perceived Accuracy of Fake News

While news consumption tends to be associated with greater political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), research suggests partisan news consumption is associated with political misperceptions: beliefs about politics that run counter to fact (Garrett, Weeks, & Neo, 2016). Such beliefs are conceptually similar to considering fake news accurate. Fox News has been a robust facilitator of proconservative misperceptions. Fox News viewing was positively related to believing that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq (Garrett et al., 2016; Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003), Barack Obama was not born in the United States (Garrett et al., 2016; Hollander, 2018), Obama's proposed health-care plan would create

"death panels" (Hollander, 2018; Nyhan, 2010), and that global warming is not happening (Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Leiserowitz, 2012; Krosnick & MacInnis, 2015).

There are at least three explanations for why Fox News reliance is related to proconservative misperceptions. The first is the observed correlation is spurious, explained by the predominantly conservative viewership of Fox News. However, most of the studies discussed in the preceding paragraph controlled for ideology and/or party identification, as does this study, or involved experimental control. The second is that Fox News disseminates misinformation. This is the case for some proconservative misperceptions (Feldman et al., 2012; Harmon & Muenchen, 2009; Nyhan, 2010). Fox News ran stories with themes similar to some of the fake news headlines in this study, such as paid protesters at Trump rallies (Derespina, 2016) and Hillary Clinton's willingness to kill to prevent damaging information about her from leaking (Fox News, 2016), although we are not aware of instances in which they ran any of the fake pro-Trump news stories this study asked about.

The third explanation for why Fox News reliance might be related to proconservative misperceptions is that its slant may contribute to more positive evaluations of Republicans and more negative evaluations of Democrats, which may in turn promote pro-Republican misperceptions. Fox News, and partisan news more broadly, tends to focus on generating outrage against the opposing party (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), reporting and opining disproportionately about stories and scandals that would be damaging to the opposing party (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). The tone of Fox's coverage of presidential candidates tends to be positive for Republicans and negative for Democrats (Brubaker & Hanson, 2009), which is reflected in viewers' candidate evaluations (Hyun & Moon, 2016) and changes in those evaluations over time (Morris & Francia, 2010). Beyond the specifics of a claim, a drumbeat of negative coverage of Democrats and Hillary Clinton arguably made it easier to believe a negative claim about them, just as consistently laudatory news about Donald Trump and Republicans made it easier to believe a positive claim about them. Garrett, Long, and Jeong (2019) found a mediation effect: Exposure to conservative news was associated with a more positive net affect toward Romney versus Obama, which in turn was positively related to belief in proconservative misperceptions. So even if it never reported the specific fake news stories in question in this study, Fox News exposure could still facilitate belief in them.

H4:   Reliance on Fox News is positively related to the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.

Other news sources may contain misinformation, as RQ1 suggests. Furthermore, misinformation coverage in mainstream news is only rarely accompanied by fact-checking (Evanega et al., 2020), and mere exposure to misinformation can increase its perceived credibility (Pennycook et al., 2018). However, people who rely on different sources of news also differ in their likelihood to hold false beliefs (Garrett et al., 2019; Kull et al., 2003).

RQ2:   Is reliance on other news sources related to perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news?

Partisanship and its Interactions

Motivated reasoning or "hot cognition" (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006) is the prevailing explanation for why partisanship would influence judgments of factual accuracy (Kahan et al., 2012), such as the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. According to this explanation, as a means to protect their valued partisan social identity, partisans are especially likely to accept information that reinforces their preexisting beliefs and identity and reject or refute information that does not. However, Hennes and colleagues (2020) argue that scholars have sometimes asserted motivated reasoning without sufficient evidence. Partisan differences in accuracy judgments could conceivably result from accuracy-motivated processing to the extent that partisans use and trust different sources of information (Druckman & McGrath, 2019). Indeed, partisans use different news sources (Stroud, 2011), and people tend to perceive likeminded information as more credible (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

Regardless of the theoretical explanation, the empirical evidence is quite strong. In several studies, the more strongly people identify with a party that would benefit from a false political belief, the more likely they are to hold that misperception (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Recent research on fake news also finds that people are more likely to believe false stories that are congruent (rather than incongruent) with their party identification (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2019, 2021; Vegetti & Mancosu, 2020).

H5:   *Party identification is related to perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news such that those with stronger Republican identification will perceive it as more accurate.*

Although Facebook was a vector for fake news in 2016, the content of its newsfeed was different for every individual. As noted earlier, people's friends on Facebook tend to agree with them, and the content they share tends to be like-minded. When a partisan feed is combined with a partisan tendency to believe the content on it, it makes sense to expect that the relationship between reliance on Facebook and the perceived accuracy of fake news will be moderated by partisanship, especially in a context in which most fake news served, and was more likely to be shared by, conservatives (Guess et al., 2019). Turcotte and colleagues (2015) found that respondents had greater trust in news sources shared by a friend only if they considered that friend honest and well-informed about politics—and judgment of someone's credibility is likely contingent on whether they agree with you (Lord et al., 1979).

H6:   *Reliance on Facebook as a news source and party identification will interact such that the positive relationship between Facebook reliance and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news will be stronger among those with stronger Republican identification.*

The motivated reasoning model (Taber & Lodge, 2006) might predict a similar interaction between partisanship and Fox News, but the theoretical and empirical literatures have been equivocal. In their classic study of biased assimilation, Lord and colleagues (1979) showed how balanced information could have polarizing attitudinal effects on people adhering to different sides of an issue. Similarly, exposure to like-minded partisan media contributes to affective polarization—that is, more positive feelings toward in-party members and candidates and more negative feelings toward out-party members and candidates (Levendusky, 2013)—which

may in turn contribute to misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2019). Motivated reasoning scholars point to the mechanisms of biased processing and counterarguing to explain these results. However, as Feldman (2011) points out, polarization results are rather rare; when information is partisan rather than balanced, it often leads to message-consistent persuasion across the board although effects may be greater for those congenial to the message. Levendusky (2013) found that exposure to counterattitudinal news did not make attitudes more extreme; the results were in the opposite direction although nonsignificant. Others also have found parity in effects across party (Krosnick & MacInnis, 2015). At the opposite end of the results spectrum, two studies found an interaction that produced "misperception mainstreaming" rather than polarization: significant relationships of exposure to Fox News (Meirick, 2013) and conservative media more broadly (Meirick & Bessarabova, 2016) on adoption of conservative misperceptions for Democrats but not for Republicans. Given this range of results, it is not clear how partisanship might moderate the relationship between Fox News reliance and the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.

RQ3:   *How will partisanship moderate the relationship between Fox News reliance and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news?*

Education and its Interactions

Education has long been used as a proxy for political sophistication and knowledge, and it has a strong correlation with them (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Like political knowledge, it is negatively related with political misperceptions (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008; Kull et al., 2003; Nyhan, 2010) just as political sophistication (Vegetti & Mancosu, 2020) and a propensity for analytical thinking (Pennycook & Rand, 2019) are negatively related to belief in false news stories.

H7:   *Education will be negatively related to perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.*

However, education may allow partisan reasoners to engage in effortful motivated reasoning and produce more thoughts to support congruent information and denigrate incongruent information (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Partisan polarization tends to be strongest among the most informed (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008) because those higher in knowledge and education are better able to connect their party identification to their preferences and beliefs (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), and are more attentive to cues from partisan elites (Zaller, 1992). The literature on political misperceptions has evidence for the moderating role of education and/or knowledge in the relationship between partisanship and misperceptions in more studies (Kahan, 2015; Kahan et al., 2012; Meirick, 2016; Nyhan, 2010, Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Schaffner & Luks, 2018) than not (Meirick, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

H8:   *Education will moderate the relationship between partisanship and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news such that the relationship will be stronger among those with more education.*

Motivated reasoning suggests that education would also moderate the effects of information. Taber and Lodge (2006) found the most knowledgeable individuals were more prone to overemphasizing supportive evidence while dismissing evidence counter to their prior attitudes. We are not aware of empirical tests of how education or related variables interact with Facebook news reliance. However, people's

Facebook feeds are largely like-minded (Bakshy et al., 2015), and people high in education are better able to integrate new information into their existing cognitive structures (Price & Zaller, 1993).

H9:   *Education will moderate the relationship between reliance on Facebook and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news such that the relationship will be stronger among those with more education.*

Similarly, education may also moderate the relationship of reliance on Fox News with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. Knowledgeable partisans engage in more selective exposure (Stroud, 2011) and more motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). This suggests that the Fox News audience consists disproportionately of knowledgeable Republicans seeking attitude-consistent information. Fox News viewership has been shown to have a stronger relationship with conservative misperceptions for those with more education (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008), particularly among Republicans (Meirick, 2013).

H10:   *Education will moderate the relationship between reliance on Fox News and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news such that the relationship will be stronger among those with more education.*

Method

Sample

These secondary data come from an online survey of adults (N = 3,015) in the United States conducted by Ipsos Public Opinion for BuzzFeed between November 28 and December 1, 2016. The majority of the respondents were female (54.2%) and White (85.6%, with 7.2% African-American, 3.4% Asian, and 3.2% other; separately, 7.4% identified as Hispanic or Latino). Respondents had an average age of 47.61 (SD = 16.13), and almost half (46.7%) had earned at least a bachelor's degree. Ipsos calculated sample weights to better represent the population. The analyses in the results section employ weighting, but the unweighted results are similar. For their online surveys with nonprobability samples, Ipsos reports a "credibility interval" in place of a confidence interval; for this survey, it was ± 2% for the full sample.

Dependent Measures

Fake and Real News Exposure

Each respondent was shown headlines from six stories, three real and three fake, selected from a pool of 11 headlines, five false and six true (see Silverman, 2016). The five fake news headlines were positive for Trump (e.g., "Donald Trump sent his own plane to transport 200 stranded Marines") or negative for Clinton (e.g., "FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leaks found dead in apparent murder-suicide"). For each headline, respondents were asked, "Have you seen or heard about the following story in the past few weeks?" Of the three fake news headlines respondents were shown, the number they reported seeing (M = 0.50, SD = 0.85) was included in the perceived fake news accuracy model because mere exposure effects have been observed for fake news (Pennycook et al., 2018). As a dependent variable, pro-Trump fake news exposure was a dichotomous measure coded as 1 for respondents who answered "Yes" (n = 992) to any of the three fake headlines they were shown, and as 0 (n = 2,023) if they did not. Of the three real news

headlines, the number the respondent recalled seeing (*M* = 0.87, SD = 0.93) was used in the fake news exposure model to control for a propensity to have seen (or claim to have seen) news headlines.

Perceived Pro-Trump Fake News Accuracy

For each story a respondent indicated seeing, they were asked, "To the best of your knowledge, how accurate is the claim in the following headline?" on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very accurate). Most who saw fake news recalled seeing only one of the three stories (n = 628), but some saw two (n = 204) or three (n = 160), so perceived fake news accuracy was computed as the mean accuracy of any fake stories the respondent saw (*M* = 2.86, SD = 0.95). Since no one was asked about all five fake news stories, reliability for this mean could not be computed with Cronbach's alpha, but all the zero-order correlations among the accuracy ratings of the fake news stories were significant at $p < .001$ and ranged from .39 (*df* = 74) to .73 (*df* = 36). The mean correlation, weighted by number of pairs, was .55 (SD = 0.11), which equates to a Spearman-Brown coefficient of .71.

Explanatory Variables

Reliance on Facebook and Fox News Online

Respondents were shown a list of 15 online media outlets and social media applications in random order and asked, "For each of the following, please indicate how major or minor of a source it is for you, personally, when reading news and current events online." The response scale ran from 0 ("Is never a source of news for me" or "I'm not familiar with this news source") to 3 ("Is a major source of news for me"). Responses for Facebook (*M* = 1.39, SD = 1.17) and Fox News (*M* = 1.47, SD = 1.17) were used as single-item measures of these two independent variables.

Reliance on CNN Online, Elite Newspapers Sites, and Other Online Sources

Three variables were created from the other news reliance items. First was reliance on CNN, the website of a legacy cable news outlet frequently contrasted with Fox News (*M* = 1.60, SD = 1.12). Second was reliance on two elite legacy newspaper sites that operate online with a paywall, *The New York Times* (NYT) and *The Washington Post* (WaPo; *M* = 1.11, SD = 1.01, *r* = .71, Spearman-Brown coefficient = .83). Third, the remaining 10 sources (Google, Yahoo, The Huffington Post, Buzzfeed, Business Insider, Vice, Vox, Drudge Report, Twitter, and Snapchat) were solely online (or primarily, in the case of Vice) and were combined in an "Other Online News" index (*M* = 0.72, SD = 0.68, α= .88). An exploratory factor analysis of these 10 items showed a unidimensional structure and one factor that accounted for 54.24% of variance.

Party Identification

Party identification was measured with a set of questions similar to those used in the American National Election Studies. A seven-point scale from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7) was derived from the responses (*M* = 3.72, SD = 2.21).

Education

Education was assessed with a seven-point scale ranging from 1, "some grade school," to 7 "post-graduate education" (mode = 6, "bachelor's degree"; median = 5, "associate's degree"; *M* = 4.98, SD = 1.50).

Other Demographics

Regression models included age, sex, race, and income. Sex was dummy-coded, with higher values for women. Race was dummy-coded as 1 for Whites who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino (80.1%) and 0 for any racial or ethnic minority. Income had 23 levels of response categories, with the first 16 employing $5,000 intervals up to $79,999, followed by two $10,000 intervals, two $25,000 intervals, two $50,000 intervals, and finally a category for more than $250,000 a year. The median category was the 12th, $55,000 to $59,999 (*M* = 12.41, SD = 5.99).

Results

To examine exposure to pro-Trump fake news, a logistic regression model was created in SPSS. See Table 1. In support of H1, reliance on Facebook as a news source was positively related to pro-Trump fake news exposure. The only other news source related to seeing pro-Trump fake news (RQ1) was the "other online news" reliance index. As predicted in H2, Republican party identification was positively related to pro-Trump fake news exposure.

Table 1. Predictors of Pro-Trump Fake News Exposure.

Predictor	b	SE
Income	−.016^	.008
Sex (female = 1)	−.056	.092
Age	−.001	.003
Race (White = 1)	.398***	.101
Education	.057	.035
Party (strong Rep. = 7)	.120***	.023
Real news stories seen	.800***	.052
Facebook reliance	.165***	.044
Fox News reliance	.216***	.043
CNN reliance	−.043	.050
NYT/WaPo reliance	.041	.063
Other online news reliance	.573***	.102
Nagelkerke R^2	0.30	

Note. *N* = 3,015. Logistic regression.
Coefficients are significant at *** *p* < .001, ** *p* < .01, and * *p* < .05.
^ approaches significance at *p* < .10.

Next, multiple regression models were created for the perceived fake news accuracy hypotheses and research questions. To probe for the nature of any party or education interactions, separate models were run for those identifying with or leaning toward the Republicans or Democrats and for those with or without at least a four-year college degree. See Table 2.

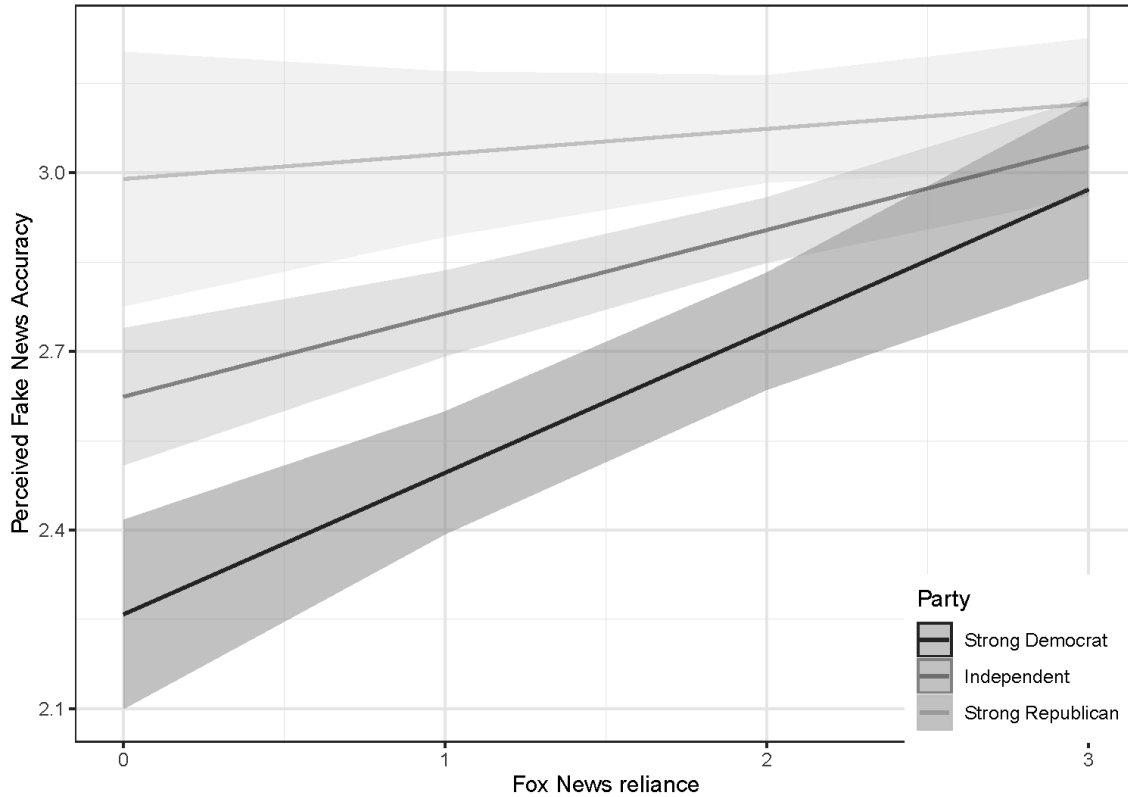**Table 2. Predictors of Perceived Accuracy of Pro-Trump Fake News.**

Predictor	All	GOP	Dems	Low Ed	High Ed
Income	−.03	−.02	−.04	−.08^	.00
Sex (female = 1)	−.04	−.11*	.03	.00	−.05
Age	.03	.09	.00	−.02	.08^
Race (White = 1)	−.08**	.02	−.15**	−.06	−.10**
Education	−.06	−.08	−.08	.04	.03
Party (strong Rep. = 7)	.19***	.11*	−.03	.15*	.23***
Fake news headlines seen	.13***	.12*	.16**	.11*	.13**
Facebook reliance	.05	.04	.02	.01	.07
Fox News reliance	.16***	.09^	.24***	.14**	.18***
CNN reliance	−.09**	−.07	−.09^	−.13*	−.06
NYT/WaPo reliance	−.18***	−.11	−.19***	−.18**	−.16**
Other online news reliance	.28***	.23**	.28***	.17*	.35***
Party × education	.03				
Party × Facebook	−.03			.01	−.07
Party × Fox News	−.10**			−.14**	−.06
Education × Facebook	.03	−.01	.12*		
Education × Fox News	.07*	.15*	.00		
Adjusted R^2	.23***	.11***	.30***	.09***	.33***
N	980	435	429	452	528

Note. Multiple regression with standardized coefficients. Party subgroups included party identifiers and leaners (1–3 for Democrats and 5–7 for Republicans), excluding pure independents (n = 116). Education subgroups were those without (low) or with (high) at least a four-year degree. For party and education subgroups, interaction terms involving the grouping variable were not included to avoid excessive collinearity.
Coefficients are significant at *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, and * $p < .05$.
^ approaches significance at $p < .10$.

It was expected that reliance on Facebook (H3) and Fox News (H4) would be positively related with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. H4 was upheld for Fox News, but H3 for Facebook was not. Of the remaining news variables (RQ2), reliance on websites for legacy news organizations CNN and two elite newspapers (NYT and WaPo) was negatively related with perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news, while those who relied more on other online news or saw more fake news stories rated pro-Trump fake news as more accurate.

***Figure 1. Partisanship's moderation of the relationship between Fox News reliance and
perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.***

As predicted, Republican party affiliation (H5) was positively associated with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news stories. Party affiliation was expected to moderate the relationship between Facebook reliance and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news such that the relationship would be stronger and more positive for Republicans than for Democrats (H6), but the interaction term was nonsignificant. In answer to RQ3, a significant interaction was observed such that Fox News reliance was positively associated with perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news for both parties, but more so for Democrats; see Figure 1.
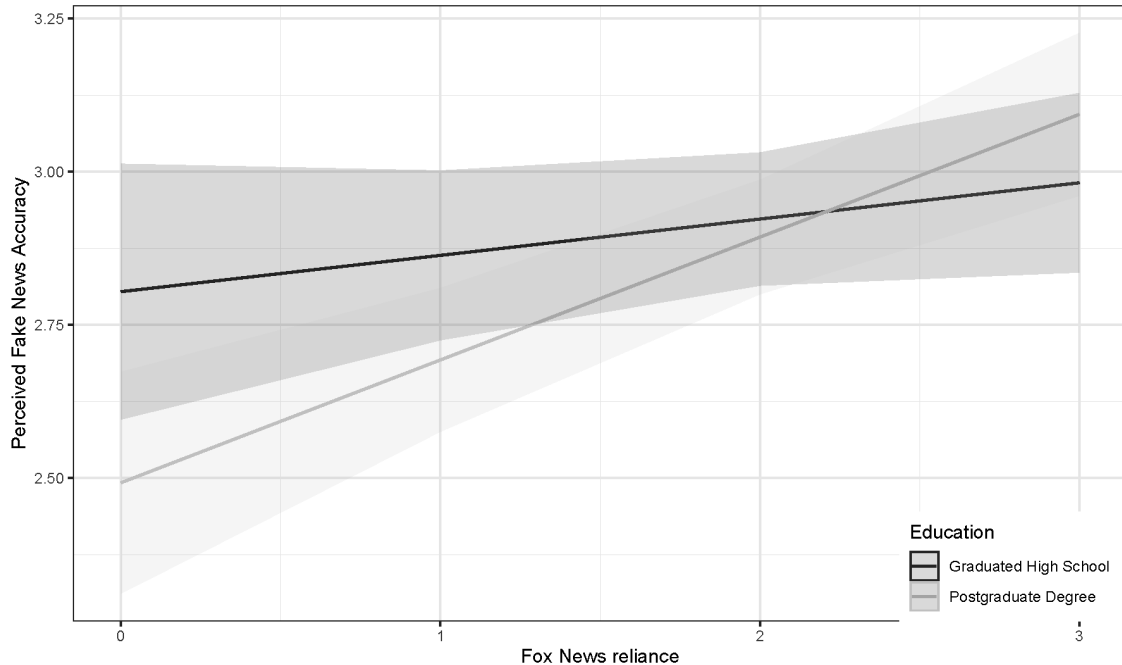
Figure 2. Education's moderation of the relationship between Fox News reliance and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.

Finally, there were hypotheses about education (H7) and its interactions (H8–H10). Education's posited negative relationship with perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news fell short of significance. It was predicted that education and party would interact (H8) such that education's relationship with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news would be more positive among Republicans than among Democrats, but the interaction was not significant. Education was expected to interact with Facebook (H9) and Fox News (H10) such that reliance on those sources of news would be more positively related to perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news among the more educated. This was not found for Facebook for the sample as a whole or among Republicans, but it was (surprisingly) so among Democrats. In support of H10, education and Fox News reliance did interact as hypothesized; see Figure 2. It is worth noting in Table 2 that the predicted interaction of education and Fox News reliance was significant among Republicans but not among Democrats.

Discussion

This study set out to examine correlates of seeing and believing pro-Trump fake news. Its findings suggest that both the (mis)information environment and motivated reasoning processes such as selective exposure and biased processing played a role in pro-Trump fake news exposure and belief. However, not every result was consistent with motivated reasoning on one hand or processing with an accuracy goal on the other.

First, this study concurs with previous research (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Benkler et al., 2018) that Facebook was a vector for exposure to pro-Trump fake news in 2016. However, reliance on Facebook as a news source was not associated with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. Previous research had found a direct role for social media news reliance in political persuasion broadly considered (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016), but for all the public consternation about Facebook's difficulties in dealing with fake news, it may have mattered less than people feared. Facebook has since taken some steps to address fake news. In 2017, it created "Tips to Spot Fake News," a media literacy intervention that improves recognition of fake news (Guess et al., 2020). That said, future research would be well advised to consider the homogeneity of respondents' social networks, which Allcott and Gentkow (2017) found was positively related with belief in fake news. Network homogeneity may become increasingly important as new social media platforms like Parler and MeWe, billed as (conservative) alternatives to Twitter and Facebook (Rodrigo, 2021), contribute to the ideological sorting of social media.

Fox News reliance was associated both with exposure to pro-Trump fake news and perception of it as accurate. The perceived accuracy relationship was predicted based on previous relationships between Fox News use and conservative misperceptions (e.g., Kull et al., 2003; Nyhan, 2010), Fox News coverage of themes similar to those in the study's fake news headlines, and the potential for conservative news to promote more positive affect for Republican figures and more negative affect for Democratic figures, which in turn makes pro-Republican misinformation easier to believe (Garrett et al., 2019). The Ipsos survey did not measure affect toward the candidates, but this theoretical mechanism may explain how reliance on Fox News, with its persistent negative news about Hillary Clinton and positive coverage of Trump, could be related to the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news even if it never ran the fake stories itself. Fox News reliance's positive relationship with perceived accuracy of and exposure to pro-Trump fake news may also reflect how central Fox News was to the "insular and densely interconnected" conservative media ecosystem (Faris et al., 2017, p. 18). Reliance on Fox News may also imply reliance on sources such as Breitbart, InfoWars, and The Daily Caller, which are more partisan and willing to spread misleading information than Fox News itself.

Therefore, while it was not surprising that Fox News reliance would be related to seeing and believing pro-Trump fake news, it was surprising that reliance on other online sources not generally known for their conservative leanings would have similar relationships. Although the Drudge Report is considered conservative, it carries links to news across the spectrum. Business Insider is considered centrist, and stories from Vox and Vice are more commonly shared by liberals (Faris et al., 2017). Twitter in 2016 was considered more partisan than the rest of the online media environment, with a rightward lean in the sites it linked to, although Facebook exceeded it in those respects (Faris et al., 2017). Reliance on online information is

positively related to the perceived credibility of online news (Cassidy, 2007), so it may be that a willingness to rely on nonlegacy, online-only news outlets is related to willingness to view and give credence to fake news sites as well.

The negative relationship between legacy news site reliance and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news makes some sense. Faris and colleagues (2017) identified outlets such as CNN, WaPo, and the NYT as central nodes of the center-left media, and all the pro-Trump fake news stories used in the Ipsos survey served conservative narratives. The findings here are consistent with past research as well. Newspaper use has a strong track record in encouraging political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and discouraging misperceptions (Meirick, 2013) although CNN viewers held fewer misperceptions about the Iraq War than Fox News viewers did (Kull et al., 2003). Despite record low trust in the news media (Swift, 2016) and having the epithet "fake news" directed at them, legacy media sites still proved to be a bulwark against belief in pro-Trump fake news.

Party identification related to the dependent variables as we had expected, such that Republicans were more likely to see and believe pro-Trump fake news. But as a moderator, it did not perform as motivated reasoning would have predicted. First, its interaction with Facebook was nonsignificant. Second and more telling, Fox News viewing was linked to greater perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news for both Democrats and Republicans, but more so for the former. This result is somewhere between the message-consistent persuasion Feldman (2011) observed and a significant Fox effect on misperceptions being found only for non-Republicans (Meirick, 2013). While viewing like-minded news tends to increase affective polarization, viewing cross-cutting news (Levendusky, 2013) and networks (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004) tends to increase ambivalence, perhaps creating an opening for proconservative misperceptions among Democrats (Garrett et al., 2019). Moreover, given meta-analytic evidence that liberals tend to be more tolerant of ambiguity than conservatives and have a lower need for cognitive closure (Jost, Sterling, & Stern, 2018), it may be that Democrats are more open to persuasion from cross-cutting news than are Republicans. Indeed, among Republicans, CNN and elite newspaper reliance did not have significant relationships with perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news.

The findings for education provided little support for motivated reasoning. Education itself did not reach significance as a negative predictor of pro-Trump fake news perceived accuracy. Moreover, the predicted party-by-education interaction did not manifest here. In retrospect, perhaps the most germane previous finding was from Pennycook and Rand (2019), who found no interaction between partisanship and effortful thinking in discerning the accuracy of fake news, a result that suggests accuracy is a more common processing goal than motivated reasoning would predict in evaluating fake news. No interaction between Facebook reliance and education was found among the full sample, while among party subsamples, this interaction emerged for Democrats rather than Republicans: Democrats with high education who relied more on Facebook for news were more likely to consider pro-Trump fake news accurate. This result, like the one for the party-by-Fox News interaction, suggests processing with an accuracy goal rather than motivated reasoning. It is also consistent with the idea that while friend networks on Facebook may be largely like-minded (Bakshy et al., 2015), people encounter more political disagreement there than in other settings (Barnidge, 2017).

However, education moderated the relationship Fox News reliance had with perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news such that Fox News reliance had a stronger positive relationship with perceived accuracy for those with more education. This education-by-Fox News interaction was most pronounced among Republicans, which is where motivated reasoning would most predict it, similar to Meirick's (2013) finding. But motivated reasoning would have also predicted that Democrats with high education would counterargue more against cross-cutting information on Fox News so that the relationship between reliance and perceived accuracy would be attenuated or reversed. Instead, Fox News reliance had the same positive relationship with perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news for both Democrats with low and high education. It may be that Democrats who decided to watch Fox News were paradoxically more interested in accuracy, seeking out opposing views, and were thus less likely to engage in motivated reasoning.

This study has limitations that point to avenues for further research. The sample, despite its size and weighting, was not drawn at random, so additional study with probability sampling would lend confidence to the findings here. The data are cross-sectional, limiting causal inference-making, so panel and experimental designs are encouraged for future work. The online media measures were extensive but self-reported, which tends to overstate exposure (Prior, 2009) although the main effects for exposure to pro-Trump fake news found here are consistent with research using unobtrusive observation of online behavior (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Like all secondary data analyses, this study would have benefited from measures not in the data set, such as respondent ideology and use of sources such as Breitbart and InfoWars. The inclusion of only pro-Trump fake news was perhaps warranted by the survey's context, but it is unfortunate that no liberal fake news headlines were included. Motivated reasoning is not restricted to one end of the political spectrum (Crawford, 2012), therefore, further study with additional stories should be pursued.

Conclusion

One takeaway from this study is the dog that didn't bark: Facebook as a (non)predictor of the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. Another takeaway is how loudly nonlegacy online news sources seem to have barked, with reliance on them positively associated with exposure to and perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news. More broadly, this study shows the importance of examining how party and education may moderate the relationships that news reliance has with belief in falsehoods, sometimes in unexpected ways. The only moderating relationship that supported motivated reasoning was that Fox News reliance had a stronger positive relationship with the perceived accuracy of pro-Trump fake news among more highly educated Republicans than among those with less education. But contrary to what motivated reasoning would predict, Fox News reliance also had a stronger positive relationship with perceived fake news accuracy among Democrats than among Republicans. One way of viewing these results is that educated Republicans seem to have processed Fox News as motivated reasoners while Democrats processed it as accuracy seekers—to the detriment of both. Future work should further consider the mechanisms that might explain these asymmetric relationships.

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