

AN ONLINE EXPERIMENTAL PLATFORM TO ASSESS TRUST IN THE MEDIA

A GALLUP/KNIGHT
FOUNDATION ONLINE
EXPERIMENT

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INTRODUCTION

A GALLUP/KNIGHT FOUNDATION ONLINE EXPERIMENT

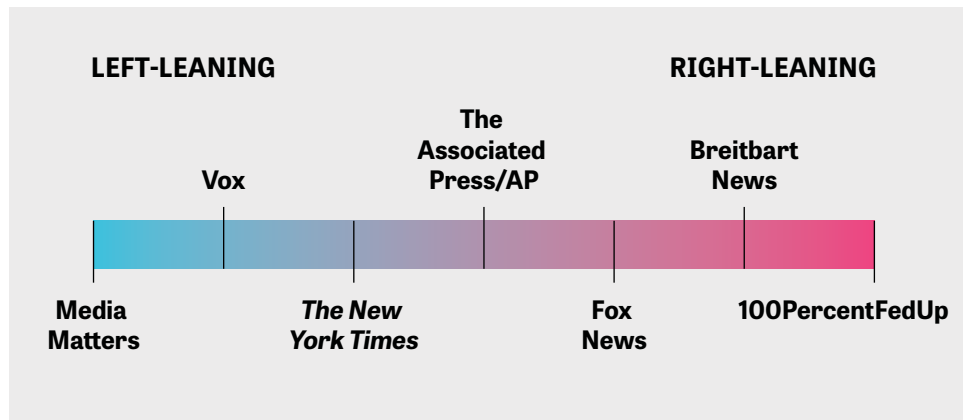
Online news outlets and social media platforms are key sources of news consumption today, yet how consumers evaluate the trustworthiness of this content remains underexplored. Gallup, in partnership with the Knight Foundation, built an online platform to assess trust in the media.

The results show that news sources provide a cognitive heuristic that strongly influences user ratings, especially among partisan respondents. The platform advances our understanding on how personal attributes, like political affiliation or political sophistication, interact with news article characteristics, like source or image, to affect perceptions of news content trustworthiness.

RESEARCH DESIGN

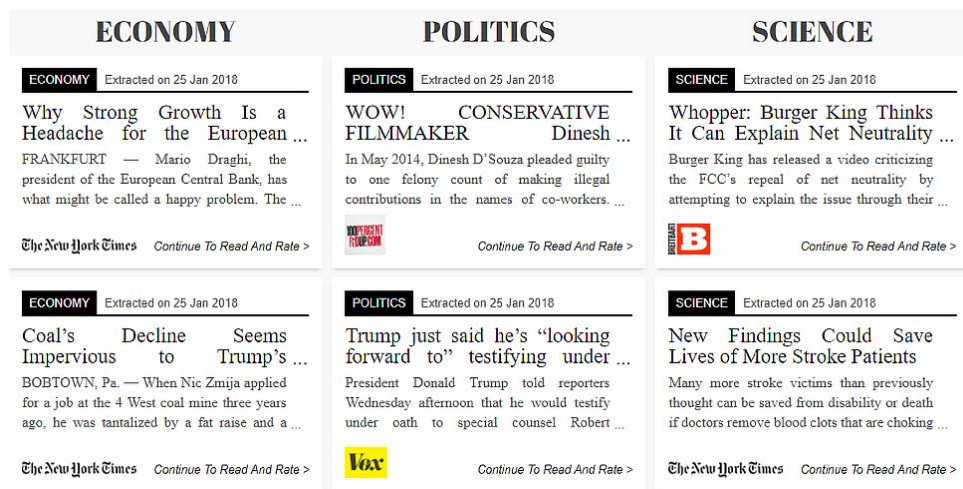
The platform is an experimental website that captures user behaviors and reactions to news content. Users rate the trustworthiness of news articles on a five-point scale ranging from low (1) to high (5). The news articles come from pre-identified media outlets across the political spectrum (Image 1).

Image 1: Media Outlets



The online system places articles into three sections: economics, politics and science (Image 2). The platform randomly picks the two most recent articles from these sections in the original news source website, and updates the content daily at 4 am EST.

Image 2: Presentation of Content



NOTE: This screenshot shows the source, no image channel.

Gallup selected 25,000 Gallup Panel members stratified by age, gender, race, state, income, and party affiliation. The platform randomly assigned these users to four experimental conditions that vary by the presence or absence of source and image with the news content (Table 1). Thus, content pulled from Fox News would show the source as Fox News and/or the image Fox News chose for the story only within certain conditions. Once assigned, users remain in that channel for the duration of the experiment.

Table 1: Experimental Conditions

	NO SOURCE	SOURCE
No Image	Channel 1	Channel 2
Image	Channel 3	Channel 4

During a four week period, users received weekly email reminders encouraging them to visit the site to read and rate articles of their choosing as often as they wished. Of the 25,000 users invited to participate, 3,432 contributed ratings on the perceived trustworthiness of the content (Table 2).

Table 2: Number of users who logged into the system

	NUMBER OF ACTIVE USERS
Channel	
1 (No Source; No image)	913
2 (Source; No image)	841
3 (No source; Image)	827
4 (Source; Image)	851
Total	3,432

**THE ONLINE
PLATFORM
DESIGNED BY
GALLUP HAS
THE ABILITY TO
COLLECT NEWS
ARTICLES AND
RUN CONTROLLED
EXPERIMENTS BY
DYNAMICALLY
ASSIGNING
PARTICIPANTS
TO VARIOUS
EXPERIMENT
GROUPS.**

HIGHLIGHT 1: SOURCE LOWERS GENERAL TRUSTWORTHINESS, IMAGE SHOWS NO EFFECT

We hypothesized that source attribution serves as a reminder of distrust toward certain news media outlets, causing users to rate the content as less trustworthy. In contrast, news stories accompanied by images may create a personal connection or convey a greater sense of professionalism, causing users to rate the content as more trustworthy. We calculated the mean rating per article in each channel to test these hypotheses (Table 3).

Table 3: General Effect on Users

ALL USERS	
Channel	
1 (No source; No image)	3.22
2 (Source; No image)	3.08
3 (No source; Image)	3.23
4 (Source; Image)	3.07

The data offer support to the source hypothesis. Channels with source attribution had a lower overall mean trustworthiness rating per article, dropping from 3.22 to 3.08 in channels with no images and 3.23 to 3.07 in channels with images. The difference between no source and source conditions is statistically significant. This finding may suggest that source attribution lowers content trustworthiness by reminding users of personal preferences and biases toward particular sources. One takeaway for news aggregator sites is the possibility to create an option for users to decide whether to hide the news source.

The image hypothesis is not supported by the data. The effect of attaching an image to content was similar at 3.22 to 3.23 in channels with no source attribution and 3.08 to 3.07 in channels with source attribution. Images selected for content do not seem to affect the overall trustworthiness level.

We ran a robustness check to verify that ratings from the small cohort of heavy users who rated three or more articles did not unduly influence the results. We find no statistically significant difference in the effect between those who rated more, or fewer, articles.

HIGHLIGHT 2: SOURCE ATTRIBUTION LOWERS TRUSTWORTHINESS FOR ONLY SOME NEWS OUTLETS

Digging deeper, we analyzed the mean rating per article by specific news outlets (see Table 4).

Table 4: General Effect of Source Attribution on Users by News Outlet

Source	CHANNEL 1 (NO SOURCE; NO IMAGE)	CHANNEL 2 (SOURCE; NO IMAGE)	DIFF (CHANNEL 1 VS. 2)	CHANNEL 3 (NO SOURCE; IMAGE)	CHANNEL 4 (SOURCE; IMAGE)	DIFF (CHANNEL 3 VS 4)
Media Matters	2.63	2.56	-0.07	2.55	2.46	-0.09
Vox	3.35	2.98	-0.37**	3.40	2.94	-0.46**
<i>The New York Times</i>	3.31	3.37	0.06	3.45	3.25	-0.21**
The Associated Press/AP	3.42	3.54	0.12**	3.47	3.41	-0.06
Fox News	3.22	2.91	-0.31**	3.19	2.99	-0.20**
Breitbart News	2.83	2.17	-0.66**	2.55	2.29	-0.26**
100PercentFedUp	2.24	2.09	-0.15	2.31	2.34	0.03

* significant at $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$

A statistically significant drop in trustworthiness occurs when the source of the news story is shown to come from Vox, Fox News, and Breitbart News. With the key exception of the *The New York Times*, the results based on this subset of media outlets suggest source cues decrease general trustworthiness of content carried by news outlets, if they are better known and perceived to have a partisan agenda.

The Associated Press/AP is the news outlet with the highest mean trustworthiness rating per article across all channels, followed by the *The New York Times*. In the no source conditions, Vox reaches a similar mean trustworthiness rating per article as The Associated Press/AP and *The New York Times*, but this rating declines sharply once source is revealed. Breitbart News, 100PercentFedUp, and Media Matters have the lowest trustworthiness ratings when source is hidden suggesting that users, on average, hold the content of these sources in lower regard.

HIGHLIGHT 3: PARTISANSHIP DRIVES TRUSTWORTHINESS RATINGS WHEN SOURCE IS SHOWN

Source attribution functions as a heuristic that provides a cognitive shortcut about what content to trust. Partisans rate news stories as more or less trustworthy depending on whether the source is viewed as sympathetic or hostile to their political preferences.

The data offer general support for this hypothesis (Table 5). With the exception of Vox, Democrats rate liberal sources as more trustworthy, and conservative sources as less trustworthy, when source is shown. Conversely, Republicans tend to consider conservative news outlets more trustworthy and liberal ones less trustworthy in the source attribution conditions. However, the difference in the mean rating per article remains statistically significant only for Fox News and *The New York Times* across all conditions and affiliations – channels 1 to 2 and 3 to 4.

**NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE
A COGNITIVE HEURISTIC
THAT STRONGLY INFLUENCES
RESPONDENT RATINGS,
ESPECIALLY AMONG
PARTISAN GROUPS.**

Table 5: General Effect of Source Attribution on Users by Party ID & News Outlet

	POLITICAL AFFILIATION	CHANNEL 1 (NO SOURCE; NO IMAGE)	CHANNEL 2 (SOURCE; NO IMAGE)	DIFF (CHANNEL 1 VS 2)	CHANNEL 3 (NO SOURCE; IMAGE)	CHANNEL 4 (SOURCE; IMAGE)	DIFF (CHANNEL 3 VS 4)
Source							
Media Matters	Democrat	3.12	3.77	0.65*	2.99	3.81	0.82**
	Independent	2.56	1.66	-0.9*	2.75	1.78	-0.97**
	Republican	2.32	1.64	-0.68	2.13	2.16	0.03
Vox	Democrat	4.07	3.95	-0.12	3.96	4.11	0.15
	Independent	3.20	2.54	-0.66**	3.61	2.04	-1.57**
	Republican	2.71	1.87	-0.84**	2.77	2.51	-0.26
<i>The New York Times</i>	Democrat	3.86	4.30	0.44**	3.78	4.32	0.54**
	Independent	3.20	2.93	-0.27*	3.85	2.89	-0.96**
	Republican	2.86	2.16	-0.7**	3.04	2.59	-0.45**
The Associated Press/AP	Democrat	3.93	4.22	0.29**	3.83	4.34	0.51**
	Independent	3.35	3.34	-0.01	3.78	3.19	-0.59**
	Republican	3.02	2.58	-0.44**	2.92	2.98	0.06
Fox News	Democrat	3.26	2.10	-1.16**	3.13	1.94	-1.19**
	Independent	3.30	2.69	-0.61**	3.09	3.29	0.2*
	Republican	3.31	3.95	0.64**	3.43	3.63	0.2*
Breitbart News	Democrat	2.70	1.22	-1.48**	2.69	1.32	-1.37**
	Independent	3.11	2.35	-0.76**	2.17	3.01	0.84**
	Republican	2.83	3.63	0.80**	3.15	3.10	-0.05
100PercentFedUp	Democrat	1.64	0.86	-0.78**	1.56	1.16	-0.4*
	Independent	2.85	2.44	-0.41	2.05	2.84	0.79**
	Republican	3.13	3.67	0.54*	3.32	3.08	-0.24

* significant at $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$

Democrats and Republicans both favor sources representing their ideological preference when source is hidden, but Democrats appear to make a sharper distinction.

Interestingly, Democrats appear to view content from The Associated Press/AP as more trustworthy when source is shown, while Independents and Republicans show no change or a decrease in trustworthiness depending on the channel comparison.

These results also help gauge how much partisans see news stories from specific news outlets as trustworthy when content is attributed to source. The greatest drop in the mean trustworthiness rating per article occurs among Democrats when Breitbart News and Fox News are attributed as the source of news stories. This finding suggests Democrats alter their assessment of content trustworthiness most when consuming information from Fox News or Breitbart News. In other words, the “brand” reputation of these sources affects perceived trustworthiness of the content more than the information presented.

Among independents, the mean rating per article significantly drops for “liberal” news outlets when source is shown. The effect on trustworthiness for content attributed to “conservative” news outlets is less consistent.

**“BRAND” AFFECTS
PERCEIVED
TRUSTWORTHINESS
MORE THAN
INFORMATION
INCLUDED IN AN
ARTICLE.**

CONCLUSION

The first cycle of experiments conducted on the platform show a statistically significant decline in overall trustworthiness in conditions that reveal the news source. This finding has interesting implications for news aggregators that compile news stories from a variety of sources. In contrast, the presence or absence of images selected by news outlets does not appear to have an overall effect on how users perceive the trustworthiness of the written news content.

Gallup also confirmed that perceived trustworthiness of news content depends on how one views the news source. Particularly striking was the magnitude of devaluation in perceived trustworthiness Democrats exhibited when rating Fox News and Breitbart News articles when source was shown. The small partisan differences in perceived trustworthiness of Fox News content when source is hidden similarly constitutes a novel finding.

ABOUT THE JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION

The Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots. We invest in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Our goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which we believe are essential for a healthy democracy.

For more information, visit www.knightfoundation.org.

ABOUT THE FORD FOUNDATION

The Ford Foundation is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization. For more than 80 years it has worked with courageous people on the front lines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has offices in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. www.fordfoundation.org

ABOUT THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people — especially those with the fewest resources — have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Sue Desmond-Hellmann and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

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The **Open Society Foundations** work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable and open to the participation of all people. In the United States, the Open Society Foundations aim to nurture the development of a society that allows all people to participate equitably in political, economic and cultural life; encourages diverse opinions and critical debate; protects human rights; and promotes broadly shared prosperity and security.

ABOUT GALLUP

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.

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