

THE FAKE NEWS CRISIS OF 2016: THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND
NEWS TRUST ON NEWS CONSUMER “INNOCENT SHARING”

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication.

Patricia L. Dooley, Committee Chair

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DEDICATION

To Patricia L. Dooley, Carol and Michael Lawrie,
my family, and dear friends

The speed of communications is wondrous to behold. It is also true that speed can multiply the distribution of information that we know to be untrue.
– Edward R. Murrow

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ABSTRACT

While journalists have shared false news for centuries, today's crisis began in earnest in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. It also has become one of the world's most polarizing buzzwords (Soll J. 2016, Seidenberg S. 2017). Fake news is a catchword that has become a stand in for fabricated news, viral false information, propaganda, mal-information, dis-information, and mis-information. Fake news comes in many forms, involves all news mediums, and is fueled by a complex mix of conditions and motivations. Many people innocently share fake news, and the conditions and dynamics of such sharing is an understudied topic. This thesis explores through an exploratory survey analyzed using a quantitative method whether an individual's political ideology and trust/or lack of trust in the news help explain their willingness to share news with others. Initial results suggest moderate associations between strong beliefs (political ideology and trust in the news) and the sharing of fake news headlines.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	1
1.1 The Origins of Fake News and Its Cycle of Reemergence	3
1.2 Current Definitions of Fake News	4
1.3 Fake News Creators and Their Motivations	5
1.4 Digital Dynamics that Contribute to Fake News	7
2. BACKGROUND AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE	12
2.1 Media Literacy	12
2.2 Post-Truth Politics	14
2.3 Trust in News Media	18
3. METHODOLOGY	22
3.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses	22
3.2 Procedures	23
3.3 Variables	24
3.4 Participants	25
3.5 Data Analysis	27
4. RESULTS	28
4.1 Research Question 1	28
4.2 Research Question 2	29
4.3 Other Findings	31
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	33
5.1 Discussion	33
5.2 Conclusion	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY	38
APPENDICES	45
A Headlines	46
B Survey	47

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Headline Participant Belief vs. Sharing	32

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Fake news has become one of the world's most polarizing buzzwords (Soll J. 2016, Seidenberg S. 2017). Today, most published news is accurate, but history reminds us that journalists have intentionally circulated false news for centuries. America's current fake news crisis began in earnest in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Along with its many synonyms, for example, fabricated news, viral false information, propaganda, mal-information, dis-information, and mis-information, the term "fake news" has entered the world lexicon. Newspapers, radio, and television are playing roles in the spread of fake news, but the Internet and social media are making its circulation easier, faster, and more lucrative. Not everyone believes everything they read, especially now that the existence of fake news is well known. Despite this, the fake news crisis has become a pressing issue of great importance across the globe.

Fake news comes in many forms, involves all news mediums, and is fueled by a complex mix of conditions and motivations. The fake news websites started by a group of industrious Macedonian teenagers serves as an example of the role money plays in today's crisis. Lacking job opportunities in their home town, their sites at least temporarily helped them earn a living through its attraction of a lot advertising revenue (Subramanian, 2017). In another case, a National Public Radio story reported on the fake news activities of Jestin Coler, the operator of *Disinfomedia*, who estimated that, in its heyday, his business generated monthly profits of from \$10,000 to \$30,000 (Smith & Sydell, 2019).

In addition to money, Coler's activities also demonstrate the important role ideologically charged partisan politics plays in the spread of fake news. In one of his fake news sites, the *Denver Guardian*, Coler ran stories so politically provocative that they were shared and "liked"

millions of times. He released one of his most notorious fake stories three days before the 2016 presidential election under the headline “FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary’s Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide.” Such stories and other research suggest that fake news undoubtedly played a role in the 2016 presidential election. *BuzzFeed* research indicates that in the last three months of the American 2016 presidential election campaign, the top 20 viral fake news stories generated 8.7 million shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook, while the top 20 real news stories only generated 7.3 million shares, reactions and comments (Silverman, 2016).

Another serious concern about the spread of fake news is that it can incite hatred that at times contributes to violence. The creator of the well-known fake news event known as “Pizzagate” alleged that Hillary Clinton was running a pedophile ring. The affair ended with a man bringing a gun into a Washington, D.C. pizza shop (Fisher, Cox, & Hermann, 2016). In India, WhatsApp ran viral fake news stories about kidnappers and mutilated children, resulting in multiple beatings and deaths (Fraye, 2018).

Not surprisingly, there has been a serious backlash against the disruptive power of fake news and the complex legal, moral and ethical controversies it has engendered. It has prompted journalists, librarians, government leaders, and scholars representing diverse disciplines to publish a large body of work about it. This thesis studies one part of the fake news dilemma such authors write about: the roles everyday news consumers play in its spread. More specifically, the thesis explores whether an individual’s political ideology and trust/or lack of trust in the news help explain their willingness to share news with others. While the author doesn’t blame the crisis on individuals who unintentionally share fake news, it’s important to know as much as possible about the dynamics of such “innocent sharing.”

There are potential benefits to the thesis's research on this problem because relatively few studies examine the role of "innocent sharing," i.e., any news consumer's unintentional sharing of fake news. If a link between innocent sharing and individuals' trust/or lack of trust and/or their political beliefs is demonstrated by the research, media literacy programs should be designed to address the problems.

Using a quantitative exploratory case study methodology, research involved collection and analysis of data through the distribution of a questionnaire using Mechanical Turk and Facebook.

The remainder of this chapter will cover additional background information concerning the origins and contemporary development of today's fake news problem.

BACKGROUND

1.1 The Origins of Fake News and Its Cycle of Reemergence

Allcott and Gentzkow argue that today's fake news has been centuries in the making. (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In France, after the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin published a fictional newspaper called the *Independent Chronicle*. One of its stories, the "Bag of Scalps" (1782) is today considered a brilliant piece of political propaganda. A half century later, in the early years of the Penny Press, the *New York Sun* published its fictitious Moon Hoax story (1835). Less notorious examples of "fake news" appeared in many nineteenth century newspapers, a period when the term "fake news" appeared from time to time. An example includes a story titled "The Champion Calamity Faker" published in an 1897 Kansas newspaper.

Arguably, America's first widespread fake news crisis emerged during the Spanish American War (Spencer, David, *The Yellow Journalism USA*: Northwestern University Press, 2007). Press historians have characterized that period's highly sensationalized "manufactured news" environment as one filled with turbulent political, economic, and international issues that

was conducive to publications of false news. This suggests that any period marked by a certain combination of leaders, institutions, and external dynamics (i.e., technological, political, economic, and/or international tensions, etc.) may be ripe for the spread of fake news. Along these lines, today's fake news crisis emerged out of a mix of unstable conditions that contributed to its development. International politics, economic turbulence, and other uncertainties predated the 2016 presidential election. The entrance of President Elect Donald J. Trump to the White House and his anti-press campaign has deepened the crisis. Another development that has led to today's unstable press environment is the relatively recent transition of news media from a predominately newspaper/radio/television model, to one dominated by the Internet and social media (Ott, 2016). According to the Rand Corporation, today's Internet and social media news forms are contributing to "truth decay," i.e., the difficulty we have today in separating fact from fiction (Truth Decay, 2019).

1.2 Current Definitions of Fake News

In 2017, Allcott and Gentzkow defined fake news as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers," and Klein and Wueller define it as "the online publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact." In line with these conceptualizations of fake news, this thesis defines it as an umbrella term that stands for any false newsworthy information represented by its author/disseminator as factual.

Because there are many different terms used in association with fake news, discussions of it can lead to even more confusion. Terms such as "misinformation," "disinformation" and "malinformation" have connections to fake news but have definitions of their own. Some people embrace the concept of a broad definition of fake news, while others opt for more specific categorizations of false news (Bounegru, Gray, Venturini, & Mauri, 2018).

News-related satire and parody are considered by some to be fake news, largely because of the influence of contemporary news parodists such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. This thesis does not think of news satire and parody, or the unintentional mistakes of journalists, as fake news. News is often written in a hurry, a condition that makes them inevitable from time to time. Reputable news organizations notify readers of their mistakes in their publications' "corrections" columns.

Types of content that do fit under the thesis's fake news umbrella are false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content (Wardle, 2017). These terms are important in differentiating and investigating the context and circumstances of the publication of fake news. An effective definition of fake news is that it involves the use of false information to deliberate manipulate public opinion (Botei, 2017).

A common aspect of today's fake news is that a lot of it is written about public figures and/or controversial current issues and events (Klien & Wueller, 2017). In response, certain politicians and public figures have tried repurposing the phrase "fake news" to undermine traditional news that is unflattering to them (Klein & Wueller 2017).

1.3 Fake News Creators and Their Motivations

News production is a complex multifaceted process. Whether mistakes are made depends on myriad factors including, but not limited to, the skill levels of reporters and writers, the urgency of the story, the effectiveness and ethical standards of a news outlet's editorial staff and publisher, and the truthfulness of the news sources consulted in the news gathering process. News outlets, both big and small, are capable of publishing fake news. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the owners of news organizations to publish news that is accurate.

Fake news is varied, as are the motivations behind its distribution. Two primary factors that help explain the distribution of much of today's fake news are money and political ideology.

News articles that go viral “on social media can draw significant advertising revenue when users click to the original site” and some fake news producers/providers seek to advance political candidates they support (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The financial rewards of fake news must be tempting, since today, it isn't that difficult for even inexperienced people to quickly put out fake news that “in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN, or the *New York Times*” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). For example, the disseminator of a website called “Ending the Fed” spread the most fake news during the 2016 presidential campaign (Botei, 2017). “Ending the Fed” attracted 3.3 million unique visitors per month, and the *Los Angeles Times* website has 3.6 million unique visitors (Botei, 2017).

Fake news posts can be “shared millions of times and generate tens of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue” (Klein & Wueller, 2017). With minimal computer and writing skills, almost anyone can turn the publication of fake news into a business (Ștefăniță, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018). In addition, anyone who wishes to publish fake news can do so easily because of the low costs involved (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). For example, Facebook reaches huge numbers of people around the world each month, and its automated advertising model rewards such high traffic (Holan, 2016). In 2016, four in 10 Americans got their news online (Mitchell, Shearer, Gottfried, J., & Barthel, 2016). This encouraged those willing to make money misleading the public to enter the fake news business.

While it's been noted that news satire and parody are not considered fake news in the thesis, certain incidents of fake news develop out of the misuse of satire or parody by fake news purveyors (Klein & Wueller 2017). The point is that “sharing news on social media can obscure the origin of the content, and thus allowing [misappropriated] satire to be mistaken for real news” (Emery 2018; Ștefăniță, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018). One example of a fake news purveyor is Paul Horner, who manipulated a news parody for financial reasons. Horner operated several

websites that resembled legitimate news organizations. One of his "stories" was a parody that claimed protesters at Trump rallies were paid \$3,500 simply for showing up (Holan, 2016). The piece went viral and "Trump himself repeated the claim about paid protesters at a rally" (Holan, 2016).

The goal of some politically motivated providers of fake news is to shock news consumers in order to amass ideological power (Kingsbury, 2018). During times of socio-political, economic and cultural unrest, such tactics are especially troublesome (Seidenberg, S. 2017). Some argue that fake news has been used to sway votes and elections (Kurtzleben, 2018). Some research suggests that elite discourse about fake news may influence some news consumers' ability to accurately identify what is and isn't fake news (Duyn & Collier, 2018). According to Schwartz (2018) and Meyer (2018), Russian intelligence operatives used false information to influence and amplify divisive rhetoric in the United States during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and after the school shooting at Parkland, Florida.

1.4 Digital Dynamics that Contribute to Fake News

Today's Internet and social media platforms are complicated infrastructures for the uploading, commenting, liking, and sharing of news (Waldrop, 2017). Unfortunately, unscrupulous individuals, organizations, and even hostile governments use them to spread false information in order to control public opinion. On social media, every user can be at once a reader, a writer, and a publisher (Meyer, 2018). In minutes, individuals can record and share news online (Xiaoning, et. al, 2018).

Researchers at MIT Sloan School of Management have found that fake news on Twitter "diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, in all categories of information, and in many cases by an order of magnitude" (Dizikes & MIT News Office, 2018). Rebekah Tromble, a professor of political science at Leiden University in the Netherlands,

explains that the key takeaway from Twitter fake news research is that “content that arouses strong emotion spreads further, faster, more deeply, and more broadly on Twitter” (Meyer, 2018).

Because today's Internet and social mediums have become what are known as “echo-chambers” (also known as “filter bubbles”), they worsen the negative effects of the fake news they circulate (Törnberg, 2018). Such filter bubbles severely constrict what news certain individuals are privy to. If a person gets all of his or her news on Facebook, they only see what their friends post, and if their friends only post ideologically skewed fake news, the effects of filter bubbles can be even more harmful (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Digital algorithms control the news and perspectives that individuals are exposed to through clustering, a dynamic that can contribute to the viral spread of misinformation (Törnberg, 2018). Social medium echo-chambers have thus made the dissemination of fake news even more alarming and hard to control.

Fake news stories posing as fact often originate on websites that are made to look like legitimate news organizations and circulated through social media for profit or social influence (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Klein & Wueller 2017). Additionally, it's now possible to convincingly digitally replace the face of someone in an online video with that of another (Resnick, 2018). Unscrupulous people who call themselves journalist will use any technologies and other resources they can find to transform what was once real news into fake news (Fischer, 2017).

“Bots” (also known as “botnets”) have begun to play a central role in the manipulation of public opinion (Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2016). In 2017, Salge and Berente reported an estimated 23 million bots on Twitter and 140 million bots on Facebook. Dave Karpf, a political scientist at George Washington University, argues that bots are being strategically deployed to spread fake news (Meyer, 2018). By micro-targeting individuals who fall into

certain demographics (Frayer, L.), unscrupulous people are using bots to inflate the engagement numbers on fake news posts. Even worse, research suggests that the average social media user tends to rate popular posts as higher in quality than posts with fewer likes (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Despite how fake news is initially spread, bots can lead people to accidentally spread false information. People help bots by liking and sharing the information that the bots pushed without reading the information that they are sharing to their networks (Burkhardt, 2017). Sharing without reading can artificially inflate the “popularity” or “trending” nature of an article (Burston, et. al., 2018). The world is becoming increasingly polarized and technologically advanced, conditions which help create environments where people are plugged into separate feeds of information (Resnick, 2018). Social media has created an environment where it is acceptable for people to act on the basis of headlines without reading the article, use social media to convey popularity of information, and use partisanship as a mental shortcut (Burston, et. al., 2018).

Some businesses and organizations use computer and social media technologies to collect demographics such as gender, race, political party associations, and social media "likes" to manipulate elections and public referendums. One organization, for example, deployed a “personality app” that led to their collection of data on 50 million Facebook users in order to “create sophisticated psychological and political profiles...and then target [Facebook users] with political ads designed to work on their particular psychological makeup” (Cadwalladr, C. 2018). Such Internet and social media engineering reportedly was a factor in the UK’s 2016 Brexit vote, and during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Auchard, 2018; Scott, 2018).

According to Holan (2016), during the run up to 2016 U.S. presidential election, it was not difficult for those seeking to wield power through fake news to manipulate public opinion via

Facebook and other platforms. Thus, social media have become influential sources of political news and information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Social media are especially effective in the spread of fake news via their newsfeeds, friend networks, and one-click sharing (Waldrop, 2017). Fact checking websites like Snopes.com and Politifact.com have trouble keeping up with the fast-paced generation of fake news (Xiaoning et al, 2018). Dr. Ionut Suciu has argued, “The idea that the user selects the information he receives and the page he gets the news from tends to become more and more an illusion” (Suciu, 2018).

Public concern about how easy it is to manipulate social media users has led some operators of social media platforms to take steps to remove the financial incentives that contribute to the deployment of fake news (Fischer, 2017). In 2016, Brian L. Ott argued that because Twitter is ill equipped to handle complex content, it is hard to identify and eliminate its fake news (2016). Some social media giants have tried to stop the spread of fake news, but “industrial-scale creators of fake news are becoming increasingly savvy in their efforts to avoid new web platform rules, defensive AI and readers on guard for propaganda” (Fischer, 2017).

Because it’s often difficult to judge the truthfulness of news, fake news publishers unethically exploit the ways that users obtain their news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Klein & Wueller 2017). Overall, social media “seems to systematically amplify falsehood at the expense of the truth” and undermine the public’s ability to discuss and think about events in complex ways (Meyer, 2018; Kapko, 2016). Fake media and misinformation could conceivably reach a point that it alters memories and perceptions of reality (Resnick, 2018). According to Steven Frenda, a Cal State Los Angeles psychologist, studies show that the more often a lie is repeated the more likely it is to be misremembered (Resnick, 2018).

According to Meyer, "Any platform that regularly amplifies engaging or provocative content runs the risk of amplifying fake news along with it" (Meyer, 2018). Stephen Colbert condenses

this idea into the term “truthiness,” an idea he first discussed in 2005 to describe “information that feels true, regardless of its factual accuracy” (Levinger, 2018). He said in a *New York Times* interview that many of today's politicians are “acting on the things that move them emotionally the most” (Levinger, 2018).

"Emotional sharing" is a term used by some media critics to describe a contemporary news media-related phenomenon. According to Schwartz, “Media messages generally cannot convince audiences of something contrary to their existing attitudes or prejudices, but they can powerfully reinforce what people already believe” (Schwartz, 2018). Whether it is the proliferation of fake news or deep fakes, online misinformation “may ‘erode the trust necessary for democracy to function effectively’ both because ‘the marketplace of ideas will be injected with a particularly dangerous form of falsehood’ and because ‘the public may become more willing to disbelieve true but uncomfortable facts’” (Levinger, 2018).

Chapter Two reviews a selection of current literature that focuses on subtopics within the fake news conceptual framework. Chapter Three begins with the thesis’s research questions, and then proceeds to describe its methodology. Chapter Four reports on the results of the research, Chapter Five discusses the ramifications of the research findings, and Chapter Six offers concluding remarks, and discusses suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: "INNOCENT SHARING"

One epidemiologist drew parallels between the spread of fake news and the transmission of infectious diseases (Klein & Wueller, 2017). But while the metaphor behind this statement is provocative, the assumption that underlies it is too simple. The following review of literature reports on published research and commentary that pertains to the thesis's research questions on the "innocent sharing" of fake news. For clarity, an "innocent sharer" is anyone who plays no other role in the fake news communication model than to read a false news story and pass it on to a family member, friend, colleague, and/or total stranger, via word-of-mouth, e-mail, social media and/or some other form of communication. As discussed in chapter one, the sharing of fake news is easier than ever before because of the Internet and social media. But other dynamics play into such sharing, including media literacy, post-truth politics, and the recent general erosion of trust in news.

2.1 Media Literacy

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze and evaluate a certain piece of media (Lee, 2018). It's been demonstrated that flagrant lies can exercise a magnetic appeal even in the absence of any evidence to support them (Levinger, 2018). In addition, there is evidence that people tend to believe that others are more influenced by fake news than they are themselves (Ștefăniță, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018). In addition, some news consumers share fake stories because they don't look beyond its headline or captions (Burkhardt, 2017). The Pew Research Center ran a survey that found that 84% of American are confident that they can recognize fictitious news. The same survey found that 16% shared political news that they later found was made up, and 14% knowingly shared a fake news article (Mitchell, et. al, 2017). An example of this can be seen from a social experiment done by National Public Radio (NPR). The Center for

Information Technology and Society in their A Citizen's Guide to Fake News, describe NPR sharing a headline on their Facebook page entitled “Why Doesn’t America Read Anymore?” Once a user clicked on the link, they were directed to a page that explained that it was a joke. Many viewers, without reading the article, posted comments in response to the headline, that obviously showed that they had not read the article (Burston, et. al., 2018). Tony Haile, the CEO of Chartbeat, noted, “Two billion visits across the visits across the web over the course of a month and found that most people who click don’t read” (Burkhardt, 2017). More startling was his finding that 55% of visitors spent fewer than 15 seconds actively on a page (Burkhardt, 2017). Haile found no relationship between how much something is shared and the attention an average reader will give the content.

Sharing does not occur in a void. Fake news producers and publishers are targeting non-digital natives and older adults (Lee, 2018). Multiple studies have shown that holding constant for ideology, party identification, or both, older respondents were more likely to share and not be able to identify fake news headlines (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019; Benton 2018). Also, a study from the News Co/Lab at Arizona State, in collaboration with the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas found that college graduates were better able to detect the fake headline at 68% while those with less than a college degree detected the fake headline at 57% (Benton, 2018). Matthew Gentzkow, a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy research believes that these are promising findings – “if the problem is concentrated in a relatively small set of people, then thinking about the interventions that would be most effective for those people is going to take us a lot father” (Newton, 2019).

One study found that employing a warning that was developed by Facebook (to curb the influence of fake news) did not affect the rate of people believing fake news but that it “decreased people’s willingness to share fake-news headlines on social media (Pennycook,

Cannon, & Rand, 2017). Currently, there is much debate in the ways that “partisan identity, age, income, education, and dislike of the media overlap and intersect” on the fake news media literacy issues (Benton 2018). The small audiences of fake news is reflected in the research, for example the vast majority of Facebook users in one study did not share any articles from fake news domains in 2016 but over half shared at least 100 links in general (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019).

2.2 Post-Truth Politics

The phrase “post-truth” was *Oxford Dictionary’s* 2016 word of the year. Holan defines the post-truth era as a time when “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (2016). Post-truth is an outgrowth of post-modernism and its skeptical notion of objective reality (Kingsbury, 2018). Certain academics reason that the rise of fake news is an indication of a post-truth society (Holan, 2016). Researchers contend that “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” are more powerful (Kingsbury, 2018). Researchers have seen that in political campaigns, politicians will lie “hoping that people believe that it’s not a lie and it’ll swing the vote... once the lie is caught, it doesn’t matter” (Kingsbury, 2018).

In today’s post-truth environment, American politics and politicians have become deeply polarized (Kingsbury, 2018). During the 2016 Presidential election, fake news became an important topic in public discourse and common parlance (Duyn & Collier, 2018; Waldrop, 2017). Some claim it impacted the outcome of the election (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). Others claim it is difficult to “establish whether social media networks shape political opinions or vice versa” (Bail, et. al, 2018).

Holan described the 2016 presidential election as filled with “political fact abuse – promulgated by the words of two polarizing presidential candidates and their passionate supports

– [which] gave rise to a spreading of fake news with unprecedented impunity” (Holan, 2016). Millions were exposed to campaign-related “political clickbait” on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube with headlines that claimed, “Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton once sold weapons to the Islamic State, that Pope Francis had endorsed Republican candidate Donald Trump and (from the same source on the same day) that the Pope had endorsed Clinton” (Waldrop, 2017).

Although political fake news occurs on both sides of ideological aisle, the most widely shared fake news heavily favored Donald Trump (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). There are concerns that fake news was used to help Donald Trump win the election. Some claim his staff used controversial Facebook sponsored “Dark Posts” that hyper-targeted individuals, and that he did not stop Russian operatives from distributing fake news that would help get him elected (Intelligence Community Assessment [ICA], 2017; Suciu, 2018). An example of these posts is an animation focusing on Hillary Clinton with the text “Hillary thinks African Americans are Super Predators” (Suciu, 2018). One study showed that 115 pro-Trump fake stories were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories were shared a total of 7.6 million times” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Another study concerning the election suggests that Democrats were more likely to pick out the fake headline than Republicans (Benton, 2018). Given the “overwhelming pro-Trump orientation in both the supply and consumption of fake news [through social media] during that period,” scholars did not seem surprised when the conservatives they surveyed indicated they were more likely to share fake news (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). Supplementary evidence suggests that more of the fake news articles on three fact checking sites are right leaning (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news and intermedia agenda-setting studies indicate that fake news can direct the public’s attention away from more important issues (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018; Ștefăniță, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018).

President Trump popularized the term fake news; he and his administration have used it to dismiss apparently factual reports. In doing so, they denigrate the credibility of journalistic organizations and their reporters (Albright 2016; Ștefăniță, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017). The current administration is, in effect, engaging in disinformation campaigns. The President's frequent false statements have encouraged researchers to suggest that he is deliberately trying to replace the truth with his own version of it. According to Kessler, Trump is "purposely injecting false information into the national conversation" (2018).

Academics have found evidence that political ideology is important when it comes to the spread of political fake news and that specifically "people prefer news that allows their political in-group to fulfill certain social goals" (Pereira & Van Bavel, 2018). Partisanship is defined as a set of beliefs and feelings that culminate in a sense of "psychological attachment" to a political party. (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Anyone with a strong sense of belonging to their political party is "motivated to protect and advance the party's status and electoral dominance as a way to maintain their party's positive distinctiveness" (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Online news sources that consistently publish political extremist and sensationalist fake news are most likely to be shared by extreme hard right conservative social media pages (Narayanan et al. 2018). Individuals are more likely to share false information that validates their political leanings. Pew Research has identified that fewer American's hold a mix of conservative and liberal views than in 2004. They expressly found that "ideologically consistent Americans generally believe the other side – not their own – should do the giving [give political ground on issues]. Those in the middle, by contrast, think both sides should give ground" (Suh, 2014). Furthermore, in an article published in the *Washington Post*, Stanford and University of Pennsylvania professors contend that the media make people think they are more polarized than reality – specifically "when people think about where "Democrats" and "Republicans" stand, they will tend to place

Democrats too far to the left, and Republicans too far to the right, which psychologists term “false polarization” (Malhotra, 2014). This false polarization reflects an increase in dislike for the opposing political party and a likely increase in promoting one’s party more favorably through sharing false information online.

Partisanship remains a dominant force on political behavior. Partisanship is defined as a set of beliefs and feelings that culminate in an almost psychological attachment to a political party (Huddy & Bankert 2017). As a result of this, “if certain news outlets are seen as partisan, they may serve as source cues for partisanship that influence whether individuals trust or engage with their content” (Duyn & Collier, 2018). In the case of cable news, scholars are finding that viewers “are more likely to perceive bias in programs and content that do not align with their own partisan perspective” (Coe et. al, 2008). Concern about selective information exposure and political polarization has increased in the age of social media and its ability to supercharge our human instinct for self-segregation (Bail, et. al, 2018; Waldrop, 2017). There is evidence that with new media (the internet and social media), partisans increasingly rely on the “the perceived partisanship of the media source when evaluating claims” (Bolsen, Druckman & Cook, 2014; Duyn & Collier, 2018). People strongly attached to their political parties will downgrade the quality of arguments that challenge their views and seek out information that confirms their views (Huddy & Bankert 2017).

Additional studies observed asymmetrical polarization in roll call voting. One study looked at whether disrupting selective exposure to partisan information would lead Twitter users to change their political attitudes, the scientists exposed Democrats to Republican views and exposed Republicans to Democrat views. It showed that Democrats exhibit little or no increase in liberal voting positions while Republicans exhibited substantially more conservative views (Bail, et. al, 2018). This study can’t be generalized for all populations, but it does indicate that

even when the public is exposed to opposing ideas, they don't see reason but cling harder to their views. A person's political attitudes – liberal vs. conservative –massively impacts on what someone will believe or reject as the truth and the news (Burston, et. al., 2018). For example, “Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe that President Obama was born outside the United States and Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe that President Bush was complicit in the 9/11 attacks” (Cassino and Jenkins 2013; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This can be simmered down to selective exposure and conformation bias: people prefer to consume news that bolsters what they already believe and their tendency to only see evidence that supports their existing opinions and ignoring everything else (Waldrop, 2017). This suggests that “politicians who continually repeat false statements will be successful, at least to some extent, in convincing people that those statements are in fact true” (Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2017).

2.3 Trust in News Media

Fake news has created skepticism in the general public towards legitimate news media sources. Some politicians, including President Donald Trump, have used the term “Fake News” to cast doubt on legitimate news sources that do not support their standpoints (Hambrick, 2018). The election of President Trump in 2016 saw a rise in anti-press rhetoric (Jones & Sun, 2017). A study by Gallup and the Knight foundation finds that “Americans have a negative view of the media and believe coverage is more biased than ever.” They report that only 27% of Americans are “very confident” that they can tell when a news source is reporting factual news and that 66% of Americans say most news media do not do a good job of separating fact from opinion (Knight Foundation). Research by Simmons Research, a consumer intelligence group found in a survey that thirteen percent of Americas found no news source trustworthy and seem to think all news is fake news (Milliman & Eckhardt, 2018). This lack of trust in media accuracy raises questions of

whether individual persons share false information because they do not have trust and confidence in the news media

In general, trust in the media has been steadily declining in the United States since 1976 (Duyn & Collier, 2018). There is an argument that the “uncritical acceptance of social media platforms such as Twitter as the principal source of news and information concerning public affairs” and “mainstream media’s treatment of Twitter itself as news” contributed to Donald Trump’s win (Ott, 2016). This can be seen in the public’s response since the election. Americans had the lowest-ever levels of trust in the media in 2016. Only 32% reported having a “great deal/fair amount” of trust in the mass media (Swift 2016; Duyn & Collier, 2018). The media represent the "trustee" and the public represents the "trustees." Some researchers are positing that the public has become “skeptical of legitimate news producers, to the extent that they become hard to distinguish from fake news producers” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This could be attributed to ability of social networks to transform any citizen into a journalist (Suciu, 2018). A study that exposed participants to elite discourse about fake news (like from the traditional media) may lower individuals’ trust in media and lead them to identify real news with less accuracy (Duyn & Collier, 2018). *Newsweek* reported in May of 2017 that two thirds of Americans think that the mainstream media publishes fake news (Belhadjali, Whaley, & Abbasi, 2017). One example is a single resident of Ferguson, Missouri, lacked confidence in the mass media to cover the protests and decided to broadcast them himself. He was able to reach a live audience comparable to that of CNN (Suciu, 2018). A decline in media trust and inability to distinguish truth is an unsettling implication for the future position of traditional media in the democratic process.

A survey of 4,854 people in three cities found that when asked about what comes to mind when they say the word “news,” nearly 62% responded with negatives like “fake” or

“untrustworthy” (Benton, 2018). If the public perceives that the media is hostile to their belief it will also lower their levels of trust. Scholars have found that “when individuals are skeptical of news coverage of their ideological position, they seek out alternatives to traditional media (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005; Duyn & Collier, 2018). Consistent research on media trust is finding that use of the nonmainstream media is correlated with distrust in the media (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Duyn & Collier, 2018). This is evident by the erosion of the line between fact and opinion for older Americans especially conservatives (Madrigal, 2018). Specifically, among conservatives, “previous research notes strong association between ideology and perceived source credibility or bias and evaluations of news media” (Duyn & Collier, 2018). Almost all of Democrats polled during the early days of Trump’s presidency said that the news media criticism keeps leaders in line, while only about half of Republicans felt the same (Barther & Mitchell, 2017; Belhadjali, Whaley, & Abbasi, 2017). When people evaluate material from a source that they disagree with, they will judge such source to be more biased and credible than if they thought the source agreed with their views (Duyn & Collier, 2018). Similarly, a Harvard-Harris poll revealed that 53% of Democrats, 80% of Republicans, and 60% of Independent voters believe that journalists publish stories that are not true (Belhadjali, Whaley, & Abbasi, 2017). This could be because the current president is a Republican. It might also be a reflection of the far-right media that has grown to serve an ever-larger number of older Americans “with the same undifferentiated mix of fact and opinion that talk radio pioneered” (Madrigal, 2018). Succinctly, the current research supports the hypothesis that if someone hates the media and lacks confidence in news, they will turn to alternatives offered by social media (Suciu, 2018), where they will be more easily fooled by a fake headline and confuse news and opinion (Benton 2018). Yochai Benkler, co-director of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at

Harvard University said that if everyone is entitled to their own facts, then there can no longer be reasoned disagreements and productive compromise (Waldrop, 2017).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This thesis addresses research questions relating to the role(s) individuals may be playing in the spread of fake news within today's political, technological, and post-truth environment. This researcher has developed a quantitative exploratory methodology to discern if there is an association between respondents' political ideological stances, trust in news media, and likelihood to share fake news headlines on social media.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a relationship between Americans' political ideologies and likelihood

to share fake news stories online? As explored in the literature review – researchers

have noted ideological differences in individuals' likelihood to share false information

online, as well as the types of political information they are likely to share. This

researcher seeks to determine if there is a positive correlation between questionnaire

respondents' political ideological positions and how likely they are to share false

information. The current premise is that respondents who indicate they are politically

conservative will be more likely to share fake news in comparison to respondents who are

more liberal.

RQ2: Does a person's positive or negative perception of the trustworthiness of the

news media appear to impact their likelihood to share fake news stories online? As

explored in the literature review, Americans have less trust in news media than they once

had, and conditions such as politics and today's media technologies have played roles in

this trend. This researcher seeks to determine if there is an association between one's

trust in the news media and how likely he/she are to share false headlines. The current

premise is that respondents most distrustful of news media are more likely to share fake news than those who are more trustful of news media.

3.2 Procedures

The research conducted for the thesis involved use of an online survey that included demographic questions as well as questions related to respondents' political ideological positions, trust in news media, and whether they would be inclined to share news headlines with others. The researcher asked individuals to read the headlines and to indicate whether they believe the various headlines are based on true information; if they believe that others would think that the headline represents the truth, and if they would share the headline with others via social media. Half of the headlines were true, and half were false. The question was designed to investigate whether personal beliefs and/or trust in the news played roles in their statements about whether they would share the headlines.

All participants were over 18 years of age and were informed that any risks associated with the survey were minimal. They were asked to sign a permission form and they were informed that the survey was designed in accordance with federal institutional review board requirements, and that their identities would remain anonymous in any published results.

The questionnaire started with a list of news headlines, six true and six false 12 headlines. The true and false headlines were not grouped together, but in random order. Following this, respondents were asked to answer questions about their political ideological leanings and about how much they trust news media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. In addition, they were asked to answer questions about their online news sharing habits, the social media sites they used to network, and if they could recall sharing one or more fake news stories online. Finally, they were asked demographic questions concerning their age, gender, ethnicity, and education. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

3.3 Variables

Political Ideology

Participants were asked to think about how they would describe their political ideological leanings and select the label that best resembles their position: very liberal, liberal leaning moderate, moderate, conservative leaning moderate, or very conservative. Surveys related to political ideologies often use the three positions of liberal, moderate, and conservative. The five were used here instead to allow for more nuanced responses, especially from those who feel strongly about their political positions.

Perception of the Trustfulness of News Media

Participants were asked to read this statement: *“In general, I have trust in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV, Radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly.”*

In response, they stated their level of agreement/disagreement by selecting one of the following possible answers: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree or Strongly Disagree. The five choices, rather than “Agree” or “Disagree,” allowed for more specific responses concerning whether they trust the news media. gave the researcher respondents

Sharing News Headlines

Participants were shown 12 headlines – six true and six false. The six false headlines were written by the researcher, while the true ones were found online. The headlines were focused on the following news topics: Abortion, Guns, and Global Warming. One fictitious news headline was created for each category with the intention of mimicking fake news that might catch the attention of liberal-leaning respondents, and a second fictitious news headline was created for each category with the intention of mimicking fake news that would likely be of

interest to a conservative demographic. The researcher believed it wise to make up the fake news headlines used in the research because it was possible that if real fake headlines were used, respondents might remember them from when they were first published.

The survey's other six headlines – the ones that are real – were identified through a news search. The researcher found one news headline from Fox News, which is generally considered a politically conservative news site, and MSNBC, which is generally considered to be a liberal news site, for each of the categories. The researcher recognizes that even the most neutral news sources contain liberal or conservative bias. Moreover, most fake news is slanted in a political direction. Fox News and MSNBC were chosen for the true headlines because of the documented respective conservative and liberal leaning of their platforms. The selection of liberal and conservative leaning headlines was done consciously. The full list of headlines can be found in Appendix A.

3.4 Participants

Participants were recruited online through the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform and were paid \$1 for completing the Qualtrics survey. Amazon's Mechanical Turk is a common tool for recruiting participants for social science research. It has an integrated participant payment system, a large diverse participant pool, and streamlined data collection. It is a consistent and reliable resource for recruiting participants for the social sciences (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Supplementary participants were sought via Facebook, and in several university communication classes for extra credit.

Participants ($N = 785$) were 18 to 82 years in age ($M = 34.32$, $SD = 12.25$).¹² More respondents completed the survey via Google ($n = 425$) than via Amazon Mechanical Turk ($n =$

¹ This was a convenient sample.

² Four responses were excluded either due to an unclear or no response to a key variable such as their political viewpoints or trust in the news.

360). As this is an exploratory study into fake news sharing, the literature review did not allow for sufficient information on constructing a specific sample size goal.³ The majority of respondents are white ($n = 582$).⁴ Others were Latino ($n = 53$), Asian ($n = 50$), and African American ($n = 21$).⁵ Other categories included multi-ethnic/racial ($n = 32$), Other ($n = 13$), and those that opted not to answer the question ($n = 29$).⁶ More of the participants were female ($n = 473$), than male ($n = 309$). A few selected “other” or chose not to disclose their genders ($n = 3$). The majority of the survey’s respondents have completed a bachelor’s degree ($n = 318$), or coursework beyond that ($n = 170$). A total of 76 indicated they have not attended college.

Participants were asked to share their political ideologies.⁷ Across five categories the participants identified as very liberal ($n = 166$), liberal leaning moderate ($n = 226$), moderate ($n = 222$), conservative leaning moderate ($n = 120$), and very conservative ($n = 51$).

Participants also indicated on a Likert scale their trust in the news media’s truthfulness. Their answers included the following: Strongly Agree ($n = 45$), Somewhat Agree ($n = 250$), Neutral ($n = 164$), Somewhat Disagree ($n = 223$), and Strongly Disagree ($n = 103$).

³ However, an earlier class project performed by this researcher noted meaningful findings with a much smaller sample size ($n = 152$). Because of this and financial restrictions, the current sample size was determined.

⁴ Participants were given a blank to fill in. Responses coded as white: included: white, Anglo, Caucasian, Aryan, among others.

⁵ Responses coded as Latino included but not limited to: American Mexican, Hispanic, Latino. Responses coded as Asian included but not limited to: East Asian, Asian, South Asian, Japanese-American. Responses coded as Black included African-America and black.

⁶ Responses coded as multi-racial/ethnic included but not limited to: mixed, biracial, two or more race, Asian/Caucasian, among others. Responses coded as other encompassed participants who included responses such as American, best, yes, and unclear responses like one “Indian” and “Hindu.”

⁷ Ideology was not treated as a demographic for this survey.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researcher gathered survey results and began an analysis using SPSS Statistics. The researcher coded the data and ran Frequencies, Descriptive, and performed Chi-Square Tests looking for significant associations to assess whether political ideology is associated with fake news sharing, and whether trust in the media is associated with fake news sharing.

The variable of political ideology was not recoded, whereas the variable of perception of trust in the mass media was recoded to make the results section easier to understand.⁸ The questions following the headlines were designed to investigate whether people share fake news headlines they know to be false in the hopes that others will believe them, or if they are unknowingly sharing information that they think is true. Sharing fake headline was recoded into whether a participant shared at least one of the six fake news headlines. In order to demystify the fake news problem, it's not what fake news a person is sharing but rather if they are sharing any at all.

⁸ As a reminder, participants shown the statement “*In general, I have trust in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV, Radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly.*” Then asked to indicate their agreement on a Likert scale. The variable was recoded as follows: strongly agree to strongly trust, somewhat agree to somewhat trust, neutral to neutral, somewhat disagree to somewhat distrust, and strongly disagree to strongly distrust.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

4.1 Research Question 1

RQ1: Is there a relationship between Americans' political ideologies and likelihood to share fake news stories online?

Chi-Square tests confirmed a statistically significant result between some of the fake headlines and political ideology across five categories, including very liberal (n = 166), liberal leaning moderate (n = 226), moderate (n = 222), conservative leaning moderate (n = 120), and very conservative (n = 51). Moderates were less likely to share all three of the false conservative leaning headlines. Meanwhile, those who indicated they are very conservative indicated more likelihood to share all three of the false conservative leaning headlines.⁹ Those who were very conservative were also more likely to share the fake liberal leaning abortion headline.¹⁰

In further exploring the relationship between political ideologies and likelihood to share fake news, Chi-square tests for association were conducted between political ideology and sharing at least one of the false headlines. For example, there was a moderate association between ideology and sharing at least one of the false abortion headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 785 = 30.192, p = <.001$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .196. Respondents who self-identified as very liberal

⁹ There was a relationship between political ideology and sharing the false conservative headline related to global warming, $\chi^2(4, N = 785 = 41.095, p = <.001$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .229. There was a moderate association between very conservative participants and sharing the headline, meanwhile politically moderate participants were less likely to share. There was also a moderate association between political ideology and sharing the false conservative headline related to guns, $\chi^2(4, N = 784 = 16.400, p = <.003$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .145. Moderate liberals were less likely to share the headline and the very conservative were more likely to share the headline. There was a moderate association between political ideology and the conservative headline relating to abortion, $\chi^2(4, N = 785 = 39.541, p = <.001$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .224. Very liberal and moderate liberal participants were less likely to share the headline. While very conservative participants were more likely to share the headline.

¹⁰ There was a moderate association between ideology and sharing the false news liberal headline relating to abortion, $\chi^2(4, N = 785 = 15.206, p = <.004$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .139. Very conservative participants were more likely to share the headline.

were less likely to share the false abortion headlines, and very conservatives were more likely to share at least one of the false abortion headlines.

A pattern of very conservative sharing prompted the researcher to run more tests, which resulted in results indicating a statistically significant moderate association between ideology and sharing at least one of the false conservative leaning headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 47.864, p = <.001$. Cramer's $V(\phi)$ was $= .247$. Moderate liberals were less likely to share at least one of the three fake conservative leaning headlines. Very conservatives were more likely to share at least one of the fake headlines. The test involving the question regarding the sharing of at least one of the false news headlines and political ideology resulted in a statistically significant moderate association, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 12.292, p = <.015$. Cramer's $V(\phi)$ was $= .125$. Very conservatives were more likely to share at least one of the false news headlines.

4.2 Research Question 2

RQ2: Does a person's positive or negative perception of the trust in the news mass media affect their likelihood to share fake news stories online?

Chi-Square tests confirmed a statistically significant result between all of the fake headlines and trust in the mass media to report the truth across the five categories the participants reported on, including: Strongly Agreed ($n = 45$), Somewhat Agreed ($n = 250$), Neutral ($n = 164$), Somewhat Disagreed ($n = 223$), and Strongly Disagreed ($n = 103$). In the case of every headline, the more trust in the news media, the more likely respondents were to share a fake news headline. This was true for both the individual fake conservative-leaning headlines and for fake liberal leaning headlines. Among both conservatives and liberals, those who had the most trust in the news media indicated they were most likely to share a fake news headline. The more trust respondents had in news media (Regarding all headlines, those who indicated they are "more likely to have trust in the mass media" were likely" they were to share a fake news

headline. This was true for both the individual fake “conservative-leaning” headlines¹¹ and fake “liberal-leaning“ headlines. Generally, there was a statistically significant relationship between those who indicated they feel strongly about trusting the media and those being more likely to share a fake news headline. This relationship could be a result of participants viewing the survey itself as a form of media.

In further exploring the relationship between trust in the mass media to report the truth and likelihood to share fake news, Chi-square tests for association were conducted between trust in the mass media to report the truth and sharing at least one of a group of false headlines. The pattern of those more trusting of the media and being more likely to share was constant. The pattern held against sharing at least one of the false global warming headlines,¹² sharing at least one of the false gun headlines,¹³ and sharing at least one of the abortion headlines.¹⁴ The pattern was also true regardless of the conservative or liberal leaning of the headlines.¹⁵ Additionally there was a moderate association between news trust and sharing at least one of the false

¹¹ There was a moderate association between media trust and sharing false liberal global warming headline, $\chi^2(4, N = 785) = 43.430, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .235. Those that somewhat and strongly trust the mass media were more likely to share the headline; while those that somewhat and strongly distrust the media were less likely to share the headline. There was a moderate association between media trust and sharing false liberal guns headline, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 39.035, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .223. Those somewhat and strongly trust the media were more likely to share the headline and those that somewhat distrust the media were less likely to share it. There was a moderate association between media trust and sharing false liberal Abortion headline, $\chi^2(4, N = 785) = 44.874, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .239. Those somewhat and strongly trust were more likely to share the headline; while those neutral on the media and those that somewhat disagree were less likely to share it.

¹² There was a moderate association between news trust and sharing at least one of the false global warming headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 785) = 35.891, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .214. Those that strongly and somewhat agreed were more likely to share the headline, and those that somewhat disagreed were less likely to share.

¹³ There was a moderate association between news trust and sharing at least one of the false guns headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 39.551, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .225. Those that strongly and somewhat agreed were more likely to share the headline, and those that strongly and somewhat distrust the media were less likely to share.

¹⁴ There was a moderate association between news trust and sharing at least one of the false abortion headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 37.924, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .220. Those that strongly and somewhat agreed were more likely to share the headline, and those that were neutral, and somewhat disagreed were less likely to share.

¹⁵ There was a moderate association between news trust and sharing at least one of the false conservative headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 26.970, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .185. Those that strongly and somewhat agreed were more likely to share the headline, and those that somewhat distrust the media were less likely to share. There was a moderate association between news trust and sharing at least one of the false liberal headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 45.653, p < .001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .241. Those that strongly and somewhat agreed were more likely to share the headline, and those that strongly and somewhat disagreed were less likely to share.

headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784 = 31.301, p = <.001$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .200. Those that strongly and somewhat agreed were more likely to share the headline, and those that strongly and somewhat disagreed were less likely to share and of the false headlines.

4.3 Other Findings

Political Ideology and Trust in the News

After examining the data from the online survey using frequencies and the Chi-Square analysis, this researcher determined there is also a strong statistically significant relationship between political ideology and trusting the news media to report the whole truth accurately and fairly, $\chi^2(16, N = 785 = 92.421, p = <.001$. Cramer's V (ϕ) was = .343. The very liberal were more likely to agree that they strongly trust the news to report the truth. Moderates were more likely to be neutral. The moderately conservative respondents indicated they were more likely to “strongly” and “somewhat disagree” that they trust the news to report the truth. The “very conservative” indicated they were more likely to “strongly disagree” that they trust the news to report the truth.

Belief vs. Sharing

Looking outside the variables of news trust and political ideology, the researcher noted an unexpected outcome in participants' beliefs and their perceptions of others' beliefs. Through running frequencies and descriptives in SPSS, in the case of all 12 headlines, participants indicated that others would believe the headline more than they themselves believed it. On average there was a 24% difference between whether respondents said they believed headlines, and if they thought other people would believe them. The False Global Warming Conservative headline had a 40% difference between believed and others believed. The True Guns Liberal headline had a 36% difference between believed and others believed.

TABLE 1

HEADLINE PARTICIPANT BELIEF VS. SHARING

False Headlines	Believed	Others Believed	Shared
False Global Warming Conservative	24%	64%	10%
False Global Warming Liberal	37%	60%	17%
False Guns Conservative	28%	62%	12%
False Guns Liberal	56%	71%	25%
False Abortion Conservative	43%	69%	13%
False Abortion Liberal	33%	61%	9%

True Headlines	Believed	Others Believed	Shared
True Global Warming Conservative	28%	52%	12%
True Global Warming Liberal	55%	76%	14%
True Guns Conservative	66%	81%	15%
True Guns Liberal	19%	55%	10%
True Abortion Conservative	57%	76%	15%
True Abortion Liberal	59%	68%	15%

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

5.1 Analysis

Using the SPSS software and chi-square tests for association, the researcher found preliminary evidence to support that there is a relationship between a person's self-identified beliefs (political ideology and trust in the news) and likelihood to share fake headlines.

Research Question 1

Research indicated there is a relationship between political ideology and likelihood to share fake news stories online. The survey confirmed the premise that the politically conservative were more likely to share fake news. However, this exploratory survey result suggests that future similar studies should add nuance through use of qualitative methods, such as interviewing. Only those that identified as "very conservative" were more likely to share four out of the six fake headlines. Those that were "conservative leaning moderates" were not. This is an important distinction that is not found in the current scholarly literature on fake news and conservatives.

Similarly, results suggest a statistically significant association between being a moderate and being less likely to share the three conservative leaning fake headlines. As this thesis studied nominal variables, it cannot be said why this relationship exists, only that it does. One explanation could be that there was a blurring of the definitions of the ideological labels. This study only asked for people to self-identify their ideology. Future studies might include definitions of those ideological labels to prevent participants from self-censoring. Another explanation could be in the general rhetoric and previous exposure to large amounts of conservative fake news online. Despite the best efforts of this researcher, the very conservative

participants may have some prior experience believing one of the ideals expressed in the conservative leaning fake headlines.

Research Question 2

There is a relationship between trust in the news media to tell the truth and likelihood to share fake news stories online. However, the premise that respondents who indicate they are distrustful of news media will be more likely to share fake news when compared to those who say they are more trustful of news is wrong. Those indicating they strongly trust the news, or are somewhat trusting of the news, indicated they are were more likely to share the fake headlines. Conversely, those who somewhat distrusted or strongly distrusted the mass media were less likely to share the fake headlines.

As stated with the previous research question, the nominal variables in this exploratory study cannot determine why this relationship exists, only that it does. The researcher can speculate at the explanations behind the results. It could be that media literacy is not higher in those that believe the media tells the truth, but rather in those who believe the opposite. Additionally, a differing explanation could be that the set-up of the question created an unintended effect. Perhaps those with higher media literacy were more likely to think consciously about their agreement that the mass media reports the news fully, accurately, and fairly. Future studies might find a better way to quantify the level of trust in the news.

5.2 Additional Findings

A thought-provoking additional finding is that there is a statistically significant relationship between political ideology and trusting the mass media. Specially, that the very liberal were more likely to strongly trust the news, while the very conservative were more likely to strongly distrust the news. Although it's a limited finding, it's concerning. This could provide some initial support that conservatives in America do not trust the media to tell the truth and

liberals do. Equally, it could provide some initial support for the idea that fake news is damaging journalistic credibility among conservatives.

Another noteworthy finding is that almost all participants indicated that others would believe a headline that they themselves did not. This might indicate a potential “Third Person Effect” when it comes to the reporting of one’s own sharing (or not) of fake news. The Third Person Effect predicts that research respondents will not say that do or believe certain things, but in contrast will claim that others in fact do or say such things. These findings may indicate that respondents did not want to come across as gullible.

Regarding political ideology and sharing in general, the same patterns of associations are visible when expanding the scope of the research to include participants sharing the headlines regardless if they are true or false. There was a statistically significant moderate association between ideology and sharing at least one of the headlines, $\chi^2(4, N = 784) = 19.420, p = <.001$. Cramer’s $V(\phi)$ was = .157. Moderates were less likely to share any of the headlines. Very liberals and very conservatives were more likely to share at least one of the headlines. Perhaps, the outcome of this thesis is not in that there is an association between political ideology and sharing false information or otherwise, but that the presence of firmly held strong beliefs is associated with sharing.

CONCLUSION

Americans visit social media sites at least once a day, and growing numbers of people list social mediums as a primary source of their news (Bail, et.al., 2018). Studies suggest there have been more than 38 sharers of online fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Anyone can create it, and the Internet has made spreading it easier, faster, and more lucrative. Despite today's proliferation of concerns about fake news, it continues to spread through online channels through Facebook, Twitter, and Google and other platforms (Suciu, 2018). Previous research linked political and free press beliefs and fake news sharing. This thesis looked more specifically at finding associations that might explain the motivations of "innocent sharers" (people who share fake news without malicious intent).

As an exploratory study, this thesis demonstrates clear trends that suggest that not only is political ideology associated with false information sharing, but that the association applies in all sharing (true or false) of headlines. Moreover, the results also suggest that there is an association between trusting the media to tell the truth and sharing. A question that emerged from the study that could be explored in future surveys is whether people would be more likely to share a fake news headline if it were shared by someone that they trust.

This thesis also did not address whether the relative anonymity of social media provides news consumers opportunities to share false information without fact checking it. The findings do suggest that belief (political or otherwise) is associated with sharing. This points to how people understand news messages. Furthermore, those who fully trust the media are the most susceptible to sharing false information. Although the fake news crisis has made many in the general public trust journalists less, this thesis supports that the people who support the news are in some ways making the fake news problem harder to solve. There is good reason to believe that scholars should not be pushing media literacy on those who don't trust the media, but rather on

those who do. This thesis might serve as a tentative foundation of key associations with fake news sharing. Future research could investigate if other key belief systems are associated with fake news sharing. Adapting and expanding this study through a survey requesting more than categorical data would offer further insights into how to address society's fake news problem.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Headlines

1. Former NASA Scientist Admits There is No Proof of Manmade Global Warming.
(False – Conservative – Global Warming)
2. Niagara Falls to Dry Out in Next 150 Years Warn Climate Scientists
(False – Liberal – Global Warming)
3. Therapists to Profit from Secretly Lobbying for Gun Owners Yearly Mental Health Checks
(Conservative – False – Guns)
4. Regular Mental Health Checks Would Have Prevented Twelve Mass Shootings This Year
(Liberal – False – Guns)
5. Federal Government Plans to Challenge New York Abortion Law that Allows Infanticide
(False – Conservative – Abortion)
6. Ivanka Trump Publicly Announces Support for Pro-Choice Movement
(False – Liberal – Abortion)
7. Climate change could damage men's ability to procreate, study says
(Factual – Fox News – Global Warming)
8. Trump Poised to Challenge Idea That Climate Crisis Is A Security Threat
(Factual – MSNBC – Global Warming)
9. Left-Wing Politicians Protest Guns...While Being Protected by Armed Body Guards
(Factual – Fox News – Guns)
10. Trump Signed Law to Help Mentally Ill Get Guns
(Factual – MSNBC – Guns)
11. Trump Administration to Ban Abortion Referrals by Tax Payer Funded Family Planning Clinics
(Factual – Fox News – Abortion)
12. Anti-abortion Rep Reportedly Asked Mistress to Get an Abortion
(Factual – MSNBC – Abortion)

APPENDIX B

Headline Questions

- 1) Do you believe the headline represents an article that is true? (Yes / No / Unsure)
- 2) Do you think other people will believe the headline represents an article that is true?
(Yes / No / Unsure)
- 3) Based on the headline, would you share this article on your social media?
(Yes / No / Unsure)

Demographic Questions

- 1) How often do you share things on social media? (Always, Sometimes, Occasionally, Rarely, Never)
- 2) In general, I have trust in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV, Radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly. (Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)
- 3) What is your age? Text Box
- 4) What gender do you identify with? (Male, Female, Other)
- 5) Please indicate your race/Ethnicity? Text Box
- 6) What is your highest level of education? (Did not complete high school, High school / GED, Some College, Bachelor's degree, Coursework beyond a bachelor's degree)
- 7) What best describes your political ideology? (Very Liberal, Moderate leaning Liberal, Moderate, Moderate leaning Conservative, Very Conservative)
- 8) In thinking about the political beliefs of people that you do not agree with, do you believe that those people's political beliefs are extreme? (Yes / No / Unsure)
- 9) Are your political beliefs mostly defined by the political party that you identify with?
(Yes / No / Unsure)
- 10) Can you remember ever sharing a false news story? (Yes / No / Unsure),
- 11) If yes/no, why did you share the headline? Textbox
- 12) Please select all social media sites that you have created a profile on (please select all that apply) Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Pinterest, Other _____