

To Verify or to Disengage: Coping with “Fake News” and Ambiguity

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In the United States, media that is politically fragmented, distrusted, or labeled as “fake” has amplified an atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the current moment of partisan division and demographic change. This study uses a communication ecology framework to examine how audiences grapple with pervasive ambiguity as they navigate their media and communication resources. Drawing from a series of 13 focus groups looking at news and social media habits in four U.S. regions, this study explores how residents are adapting their media and communication practices within their communication ecologies. It reveals how residents cycle between verifying information and disengaging from news to relieve stress, and it explores possible pathways to resolve ambiguity.

Keywords: audience, communication ecologies, “fake news,” news avoidance, pervasive ambiguity, polarization, verification

Even before the 2016 U.S. election, media organizations and social media platforms had been exploring how to verify news given the constant churn of information circulating in the distributed media landscape. Pressure following the election and discourse around “fake news” forced even the hand of Facebook to put forward initiatives around fact-checking,² blocking ads from fake news sites,³ and transparency.⁴

While these efforts arguably have value, how they are used and perceived by their intended audience is intertwined with larger questions regarding changing news habits and how trust in media is

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² See Facebook’s statement on fact-checking initiatives: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/04/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news/>

³ <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/08/blocking-ads-from-pages-that-repeatedly-share-false-news/>

⁴ <https://www.recode.net/2017/8/25/16202992/facebook-taps-former-nyt-public-editor-transparency-effort>

assigned and assessed. For example, those who fundamentally distrust a platform are unlikely to heed said platform's verification tools. Early research suggests at best mixed and at worst negative consequences of efforts such as Facebook's disputed news tags and other debunking techniques, which may contribute to a sense of "implied truth" of untagged content (Pennycook & Rand, 2017), reinforce the tendencies of those who gravitate toward conspiracy theories (Zollo et al., 2017), or contribute to "misinformation persistence" (Chan, Jones, Jamieson, & Albarracin, 2017). While correcting political misinformation and rumors overall has proved challenging, outcomes have been more promising when platform users are corrected by someone they know—underlining the importance of social networks (Margolin, Hannak, & Weber, 2018). Understanding the dynamic relationship between potential news users and trust in an ecological context may offer insight into how future interventions or initiatives can more effectively engage with and respond to the needs and interests of potential news users.

This study explores how residents in four areas across the United States are making sense of the current moment by assembling and assessing communication resources. Drawing from a series of 13 focus groups conducted in four cities, it examines how residents perceive their news habits—not only what media is used, but how stories are shared and processed. In doing so, it reflects on how participants have adapted their practices in the context of the current, at times uncertain, political moment.

The study begins by situating this research within a communication ecologies framework, accounting for concepts of pervasive ambiguity and trust. I then examine how participants in this study are assembling and adapting communication resources in the context of the current moment of political division and allegations of fake news. I conclude with recommendations for media outlets, community stakeholders, and researchers regarding possible avenues to address deficits of trust between media and publics.

Communication Ecologies in Uncertain Times

U.S. residents navigate vast quantities of often conflicting information and misinformation about the state of their country and fellow residents. This content is often further muddled by politicians seeking to delegitimize news that varies from narratives that suit their interests, at times countering with disinformation. As residents grapple with this information landscape, they do not do so as isolated individuals directly absorbing messages. Rather, whether watching television in their homes, checking social media while waiting in line at a local café, or listening to the radio as they drive to their child's soccer game, residents process news and narratives in the context of their social and community networks.

To understand how individuals navigate this context, this study draws from communication infrastructure theory (CIT; Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matej, 2001; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006), particularly its concept of communication ecology (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2012). CIT most frequently has been used to focus on community-level "storytelling networks"—which look at how stories circulate among residents, organizations, and local media. However, CIT also looks at how these storytelling networks are situated within a larger communication environment, and how individuals navigate the resources available within this environment as they pursue various goals. In the CIT tradition, *communication ecology* refers to the network of communication resources that individuals are able to assemble within the structural constraints of their social and cultural environment. While individuals may be structurally limited in the resources they

can choose from, they have agency to assemble different networks of resources as they pursue different goals. For example, when trying to understand a newly enacted immigration policy, someone may hear something on the radio, then look up more information online, and/or talk to a colleague over lunch. This person may assemble a different pathway of resources when trying to get health information, or trying to unwind at the end of a stressful day. Meanwhile, other individuals with similar goals may assemble different resources based on where they are situated within social structures and dynamics of power. CIT researchers have mapped how different ethnic and geographic communities navigate different communication ecologies to learn about and circulate information regarding their communities (Broad et al., 2013; Wilkin, Ball-Rokeach, Matsaganis, & Cheong, 2007), or to gain knowledge about issues such as health (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2012). This communication ecology framework is particularly valuable for this study because it accounts not only for media use, but also for interpersonal and organizational communication resources and the larger environmental context in which communication takes place.

This study seeks to examine whether and how communication ecologies function in times of political uncertainty and polarization. In doing so, it also draws on a concept from Ball-Rokeach's (1973) earlier work, which found that individuals in a state of pervasive ambiguity—which she defined as an “information problem”—tended to cycle between information-seeking and tension relief. In such conditions, examples of which included “culture shock,” “confusing or chaotic environments, such as societies in periods of rapid social change,” and “situations of role marginality or role conflict” (p. 380), individuals were found to gravitate to others they perceived as being similar, and to attempt to resolve ambiguity by coming to a shared definition of the situation. In contrast to the common belief at the time that people responded to ambiguity or social uncertainty in ways that were “uncritical and irrational” (p. 388), people followed a logic by cycling between information gathering and tension release, all the while attempting to reach a collective definition of what was happening.

In this study, I explore the extent to which pervasive ambiguity colors the current moment and how that may influence the communication ecologies of residents. For example, a number of political scientists have characterized the contemporary U.S. political climate as one of “affective polarization” (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012)—where antipathy between left and right has more to do with a sense of opposing social identities than ideological adherence to particular policies. Nadler (2017) has argued that conservative media, in particular, has in this context amplified a sense of “social identity threat” offering itself as a resource for “self-care and moral support.”

In this context, I ask, how are residents assembling communication ecologies, and how are they, or how are they not, affected by the current moment of political division and discourse around disinformation?

Method

This study draws from 13 focus groups conducted with 58 residents between March and June 2017. The discussions took place in cities in California, Indiana, Kentucky, and New York. While questions of polarization and misinformation clearly have global relevance, the study focuses on sites within the United States, a country characterized by high levels of political polarization, and which at that time was home to

considerable discourse surrounding accusations of “fake news.” Given post-2016 discourse in the United States around regional and urban-suburban-rural divides, focus group cities were selected to include residents from a range of U.S. regions (Western, Midwestern, Southern/Midwestern, Eastern) and city sizes. Two of the areas were smaller cities (65,000 residents or less) with surrounding suburban and rural areas. In these areas, the majority who voted in the 2016 presidential election voted for Trump, whereas the other two areas were major coastal cities where the majority of voters went for Clinton.

A convenience sample of participants was recruited through a combination of online postings and snowball sampling. All applicants were then screened based on whether they reported encountering news at least occasionally and whether they had used social media. In each location, eligible participants were selected to roughly reflect the demographics of the surrounding population in terms of race, age, and gender. In total, the sample included half women and half men; ages ranged from 19 to 67, with an average age of 39. People of color were overrepresented compared with national averages⁵ (45% people of color, 55% non-Hispanic White), but participants were majority people of color in the two larger majority-minority cities, and majority White in the two smaller majority-White cities. At each location, groups were segmented by age (ranges of 18–29, 30–49, and 50 and older) to enable some common ground in terms of likely exposure to various platforms and to allow the “group to establish confidence more quickly” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 92). However, given that the focus of the study was subject matter around attitudes toward news and polarization, areas “within which one expects strong disagreements to exist” (p. 92), groups were not segmented by political identity. Most groups included participants with a mixture of political views.

All group discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes and were moderated by the author and one of two cofacilitators, researchers from the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. Semistructured discussions were divided into two card-based focusing exercises (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). The first centered on participants’ perceptions of their information diets.⁶ Participants were presented with a series of cards representing a different communication resource (e.g., newspapers, Facebook, word of mouth). They discussed how and why they used the various sources and platforms and their order of importance. The moderator encouraged participants to discuss their choices and habits, but avoided direct prompts about trust, disinformation, or verification, to allow participants to discuss their practices using their own terms. The second exercise presented participants with a series of statements about their news practices and invited them to place them on a continuum from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* (e.g., “It can be difficult to tell what has come from a reliable source and what hasn’t.”). This section ensured that participants directly addressed issues around trust that may or may not have emerged unprompted in the first section.

The study employed focus groups because of their proven value in revealing participants’ “perceptions of the news and sources available to them and the means by which they go about trying to

⁵ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI125216?#viewtop>

⁶ Participants were given the 2012 and 2016 U.S. presidential elections as reference points to give them a shared information goal. While differences between these two times are not the focus of this study, they were used by another piece of analysis focused on platform-based news habits: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/focus-groups-news-media-diet.php

meet their news and information needs" (McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017, p. 105). As McCollough and colleagues (2017) argue, the method adds value by documenting interactions among participants: "In the process of discussing and reacting to other participants' ideas, a richer and more deeply refined set of findings may emerge than would be possible through individual discussion alone" (p.105). While focus groups do not attempt to make generalizations about a population (Bloor et al., 2001), the method allows participants to reflect on how they understand and make meaning of communication resources within their news ecosystems.

This "audience-centered" (Costera Meijer, 2016) qualitative method allows the study to complement what is known from large-scale quantitative measures such as surveys and from studies that observe media use habits or "repertoires" (Taneja, Webster, & Malthouse, 2012). Researchers have found self-reported data on how much and what media people use tend to be skewed because of socially desirability and overreporting (Prior, 2009). For this reason, this study does not focus on claims of how much or how often participants engage with particular sources. Instead, these focus groups offer an opportunity to gain textured data on how participants make meaning from and assign trust to various sources—and how they present and defend their practices and interpretations among peers. As Palmer (2019) points out, "Public opinion surveys leave little doubt that people do not trust media, but they also leave many of the most interesting and pressing questions unanswered" (p. 2). Although findings from this study may not be extended to the United States as a whole, let alone other countries, they serve to surface and explore key themes and areas for further study.

Transcripts of focus group discussions were thematically coded and analyzed (Kvale, 1996) using the NVivo coding platform. The three researchers coded transcripts independently before discussing and comparing. After coding, themes were reviewed and analyzed across transcripts, drawing quotes from coded sections for illustration.

"Fake" News and Fractured Trust

Before examining participants' communication ecologies, I begin by describing the discourse they use to express doubt in media outlets. I then look at the implications of mistrust and how it contributes to a "confusing or chaotic environment" that could be experienced as pervasive ambiguity.

Given the prevalence of discourse around "fake news" and "alternative facts" following the 2016 election, it perhaps was not surprising that the topic of fake news was raised without prompting by participants in every focus group. However, participants deployed this term to advance multiple meanings. As Wardle (2017) has outlined,⁷ numerous types of misinformation and disinformation circulate in news ecosystems globally. In this study, participants spoke of several of these types, including "imposter content" ("when genuine sources are impersonated"), "fabricated content" ("new content that is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm"), and "false context" ("when genuine content is shared with false contextual information").

⁷ See First Draft's typology of fake news: <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79>

In at least eight of the 13 groups, examples of encountering fake news were shared that were relatively apolitical and often involved celebrities. The multiple false deaths of Betty White came up in nearly every city. In the Indiana group, participants shared their reactions to a story about Justin Timberlake stopping in their small city because of car troubles and encountering helpful locals. While these stories were framed as relatively harmless, they contributed to a larger narrative of doubt and not being able to trust news encountered, particularly on social media.

Apart from celebrity-related fake news, numerous references centered on the sharing of political content. In Kentucky, Eric,⁸ who self-identified as leaning left, shared the example of what he saw as a classic fake news story about an old Donald Trump interview where Trump allegedly called Republicans "stupid": "That was definitely a fake news that kept being recycled especially in like liberal media." Eric referenced *TIME* and *People* magazine as "liberal media" in this instance, and he underlined the role of social media: "Like I saw it on my Twitter at least 20 times a day, and I was like, 'Guys, like this doesn't, this is not true at all.'"⁹ Meanwhile in New York, Javed referenced seeing the same story on Facebook: "Liberal friends of mine were like jumping on this going, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' But that's fake too."¹⁰

Participants' reflections on the spread of misinformation almost always referred to the actions of others. They seemed to demonstrate a "third-person effect" (Davison, 1983) in which they claimed to verify the information they shared, while others, who were often labeled as older or lacking education, did not. This included circulation of misinformation and disinformation attributed to confirmation bias, or biased information processing (Taber & Lodge, 2006): "They're just like, 'This is what I agree with, and so this has to be true. Or at least I'm going to repost it, and then maybe more people would think it.'"¹¹ This 22-year old in Kentucky said he was cautious when looking at online sources to note when news came from particular sites known for "making their opinions into facts."

This latter point about the blurring of opinions and facts, and facts becoming unmoored at the hands of opinion, bled beyond the platforms of social media and fell outside Wardle's (2017) typology of misinformation and disinformation. As one California participant said regarding legacy media outlets ranging from Fox to the *LA Times*, "It's hard to tell if it's their opinion or news. . . . Even facts are opinions."¹² For some participants, fake news had more to do with the absence or presence of partisan content. Several who identified as conservative put forward ideas of fake news that echoed President Trump's referencing of the "fake news media." When asked what he meant by "fake news," Bob, a 67-year-old in Indiana, answered,

⁸ Names of all study participants have been changed.

⁹ "Eric." Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. Kentucky, April 11, 2017.

¹⁰ "Javed." Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. New York, March 23, 2017.

¹¹ Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. Kentucky, April 11, 2017.

¹² Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. California, March 28, 2017.

Well, the stories that you're hearing, that the other outlets aren't providing. And when they hush up things, when you only see them playing certain things. You take Benghazi, you take a lot of these other things that were going on, and you only see two or three media outlets making people aware of it. And then you've got Fox News over here, and they're letting you know what is going on.¹³

For Bob, fake news was more about an absence: "Things that should have been put out there that weren't put out there." These stories, he argued, were needed to form an opinion. And outlets, apart from Fox, which he believed gave "both sides," were withholding key information.

Sometimes the same people referenced multiple and contradictory meanings of fake news. In Bob's Indiana group, people spoke of both this absence of partisan information and fabricated content as fake news. When asked to clarify the definition, Martha said it was less about celebrity news than politics: "I think more of it in the line of facts. That the facts aren't correct, that they're giving us not the right facts."¹⁴ Others in the same group, like Elizabeth, took issue with the idea that simply not covering something was fake news:

Omission or not having the full story is not to me, fake news. Fake news is when somebody intentionally skews it or tries to make other people react to something whether it's a story about Trump or a story about some trans going into somebody's bathroom. I mean, I don't care. But they do that not to, not to give us information, but to stir emotions—to cause people to be angry. And so it's malicious. So, I think, to me, fake news is malice.¹⁵

Several participants noted that the concept of fake news had been weaponized on social media to undermine facts that did not fit someone's worldview:

I would post like the fact, like this is an actual, like there's evidence, there's proof. They would still say that was my opinion, and that I was wrong. . . . So it was constantly, I feel like everyone just saying everything was fake news that they disagreed with.¹⁶

Despite variations in definition, for many groups, the concept of fake news was put forward to raise questions not only about the credibility of news found on social media, but also regarding legacy brands. For Brian, a 42-year-old who identified as a Democrat in Indiana, fake news and alternative facts were making it difficult to determine whom to trust:

¹³ "Bob." Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

¹⁴ "Martha." Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

¹⁵ "Elizabeth." Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

¹⁶ "Eric." Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. Kentucky, April 11, 2017.

I have to put my faith in some organization to at least, I can't question everything that's, I mean, I could, but I'd be a nutcase. Like, I have to put credibility in let's say, CBS News and C-SPAN. Those are my credible news sources, but you know, I'm hearing that they're not credible.¹⁷

Jason responded to Brian, agreeing that discourse around fake news was pushing him to ask big questions about the possibility of trusting any media. He said that while in the past, he had thought "you had to hang your hat on something," he now was feeling closer to the rather more destabilizing idea that "there's no such thing as truth." For Jason, there was a fine line between feeling ambivalent about outlets but continuing to rely on them, and essentially giving up on the legitimacy of any outlet. He, like several others, felt himself sliding into a space of generalized mistrust. Not everyone came to the conclusion of trusting no media, as will be discussed further in the following section. However, for many participants from all cities, there was a sense of confusion and uncertainty surrounding the news environment, contributing to what could be characterized as pervasive ambiguity. Given this uncertainty and distrust, the sections that follow examine how participants adapted their communication ecologies. Later, I explore how participants sought to alleviate the stress of ambiguity, but first I examine how they navigated information-seeking.

Communication Ecologies and Verification

During focus groups, participants were literally invited to put communication resources they used on the table. As an indicator of the crowded communication environment, we often ran out of space on the tables as we arranged paper representations of communications resources used. There were some predictable patterns that took some resources off the table, such as few residents subscribing to print newspapers. However, overall, participants indicated that they drew at least occasionally from a large array of resources—even if a good portion of their encounters with news were incidental (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018) rather than intentional (e.g., go to Facebook for the puppies, stay for the politics). Critically, discussions revealed how participants saw themselves navigating communication ecologies to respond to uncertainty. The practices participants described illustrate how they saw themselves adapting their communication ecologies to pursue the goal of information-seeking, one half of the common cyclical response to pervasive ambiguity (Ball-Rokeach, 1973).

In discussing how they used resources for communication goals such as finding out about presidential elections, participants in every group raised without prompting how they engaged in a process of fact-checking or verification. Participants reported assembling a combination of interpersonal sources, social media platforms, and legacy media—online and offline—to attempt to seek information to clarify the situation at hand. Alicia, a 24-year-old in Kentucky, explained the pathway she generally followed to verify information after hearing about something via word of mouth: "Someone would bring a topic up, and I would be like, I wonder if that's true or not, and then go further and look it up somewhere, maybe a search engine or watch it on TV."¹⁸ Another participant in the group explained that he used YouTube to fact-check stories he encountered on social platforms: "If something goes viral, I'm like, what's the actual background

¹⁷ "Brian." Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

¹⁸ "Alicia." Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. Kentucky, April 11, 2017.

of this video that's going around, like the cops beating somebody up." He discussed with the group how he would find a video on YouTube to watch a longer section of it to try and get more context. Different people put greater credibility in different platforms. Janelle in California explained her process:

Janelle: If someone tells me something is going on, I go to Twitter because if it's really going on, everybody is going to be talking about it on Twitter.

Moderator: Okay. Interesting.

Janelle: If I don't see it on Twitter, I don't go to Google because sometimes I feel like people just put things in Google that's just. . .

Kendrick: You mean fake news? Fake news?

Janelle: Yeah, sometimes. So what I do is, even if I go to Google . . . I'm still not okay until I go back to the TV and see because I feel like if it's really something going on, it's going to be back again on 6 p.m. news. So I go back to the TV.¹⁹

Whereas Janelle expressed doubt about content found through Google, participants in several groups shared examples of using Google to verify information from other communication resources—highlighting the potential agenda-setting power of search engine algorithms. Several explained how they used search engines to verify articles they believed to be "clickbait" or particularly biased: "Sometimes I'll like, read through it, and be like, I wonder if this could be true, if there's any factual evidence of this at all, and then I'll Google it and try to find a credible source for it."²⁰

At the same time that participants disparaged fellow social media users for circulating fake news, they also expressed a reliance on their peers to verify information. For example, a participant explained how he believed that the most upvoted Reddit stories tended to be more credible. This is consistent with the findings of researchers of audience attention who have found that popularity is often equated with quality, and "slight leads accumulate advantage, sometimes with the speed of a contagion" (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, p. 52). Another participant explained that he liked message boards because of their ability to weed out misinformation: "There's so many people that can discredit something really fast if it turns out to be fake."²¹ At the same time, a number of participants suggested that they were selective regarding which interpersonal sources they trusted to share or verify information: "Someone who you trust, you're going to put more weight with that person for whatever, for their history."²² Assessments of credibility were often intertwined with politics, as one participant noted. Regarding when her friends with different political beliefs shared information, she said, "If I get news from them, I'm going to try to look it up three different places at least."²³

Despite concerns that participants raised about trusting media publishers, many did discuss using a combination of legacy outlets to fact-check stories. Although most said they no longer put complete trust

¹⁹ Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. California, March 28, 2017.

²⁰ "Eric." Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. Kentucky, April 11, 2017.

²¹ "Chris." Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Kentucky, April 12, 2017.

²² "Jason." Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

²³ "Sally." Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. Kentucky, April 10, 2017.

in any one outlet (there were exceptions, of course, among participants on both sides of the political spectrum who said they continued to rely exclusively on outlets such as Fox News or *The New York Times*), this did not mean they did not report watching, reading, or listening to said outlet. Rather, for some, a lack of trust meant going to multiple outlets and interpreting each through various grain-of-salt filters. This resonates with Tsfati and Cappella's (2005) argument that "news gratifies diverse needs even when trust is abrogated" (p. 252). They contend that audience members who have a high level of "need for cognition" are more likely to seek out varied perspectives, including from media they do not trust.

Brian, a 42-year-old in Indiana, explained that when he wanted to get more information about something he had heard, he would tend to directly visit the websites or television channels of "one of the big three ABC, or like CBS, or CNN." In the same group, Todd said he would do a kind of cross-check: "I'll check Yahoo. I'll check Fox News. I'll check CNN. I guess at that point I kind of do a combo, say is this kind of the same thing from all three?"²⁴ Several participants referenced seeking out news sources associated with the "other" political side—generally through direct visits to legacy brands such as Fox or CNN. A few spoke of following politicians or campaigns they disagreed with on Twitter or Facebook, or being subscribed to email lists. However, several also spoke of feeling exhausted by this process. Todd, who shared his seemingly time-consuming cross-checking routine, explained, "At the end of the day, it's like, well, got to go on with your daily life." He conceded that sometimes he'd throw up his hands and give up on fact-checking (this sentiment of frustration and fatigue is discussed in more detail in the section regarding disengagement that follows).

Participants also talked about fact-checking sites such as Politifact, or more commonly, the relatively long-running Snopes. An older conservative-identifying participant from Indiana shared how his interactions with Snopes would generally start after he had posted something a friend or family member took issue with. He said they would tell him, "Hey, where'd you get that fairy story from, you know. Snopes says it's fake." However, he said he now had reason to doubt the veracity of Snopes. This sentiment was echoed in Kentucky by another right-leaning participant who expressed uncertainty about Snopes:

Margaret: Now, Snopes, that's not reliable, right? So my brother would say, "I checked this out on Snopes." But then I found out Snopes lies, so. . .

Moderator: How did you find that out?

Margaret: There was an article about Snopes, maybe it's not true.

Moderator: Where was the article?

Margaret: It was on Facebook.

Tom: Fake news, it's a vicious circle.

Moderator: Interesting.

Margaret: It was a particular thing that Snopes had said that was not true.

Moderator: Do you remember what it was?

Margaret: Something about the president I'm sure. So I don't even trust Snopes anymore.²⁵

²⁴ "Todd." Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

²⁵ Focus group discussion with 50–65 year-old residents. Kentucky, April 10, 2017.

For those whose distrust of news was more about omission than fabricated stories, a sense that mainstream media and platforms were censored and skewed, verification was mostly limited to referencing a small number of right-leaning outlets/platforms, reinforced by word of mouth. One participant explained how his distrust of mainstream outlets sometimes led to looking to sources such as the aggregation platform 4chan.²⁶ This participant admitted that 4chan included dubious racist and sexist content. But he said what he saw as the censoring of Reddit (following accusations that Reddit harbored racist/sexist content) had left him feeling that 4chan was his only option to find news:

So there'll be an Islamic bombing someplace in Europe. Won't show up on Reddit—at least not until it gets like if it's a big, big story. . . . They are forcing me to go to 4chan to look at articles about Islamic bombing in places because they're filtering . . . they're filtering it out. It's news!²⁷

A number of participants also weighed in on fact-checking and verification initiatives they saw coming out of platforms themselves, and Facebook in particular. While only some participants expressed an awareness of these, those who did seemed largely unimpressed. One participant in Kentucky recalled Facebook efforts to filter inappropriate comments and images as “a huge fail” that ended up blocking innocent content. When asked as a follow-up whether platforms like Facebook or Twitter could be doing more to stop the spread of false content, a participant in New York shared a grim view of her fellow social media users: “The platforms can't stop stupid.”²⁸ More critically, given the current climate of political polarization, some participants suggested that technological fixes by social platforms were unlikely to be trusted as objective or fair. As a participant who associated tech platforms with the left explained, “There's nothing Facebook can do at this point to make me think that they're impartial or balanced.”²⁹

For most participants, the idea of fact-checking or verification was something they said they felt compelled to do themselves, rather than relying on a single platform or tech tool. Whether searching on 4chan or Snopes, or using a web of social platforms and legacy media to triangulate, most participants had some system to seek understanding of and orientation toward information. While they arranged their communication ecologies to pursue these information-seeking goals, some of the same residents at other times sought a different goal, the other half of the cyclical response to pervasive ambiguity—relieving stress. This meant that many of the same people would shift from cross-checking information to checking out.

Communication Ecologies and Disengagement

According to the Reuters Institute's 2017 Digital News Report, some 38% of U.S. respondents actively tried to avoid the news sometimes or often. When exploring the reasons for avoidance, researchers found a partisan divide—a majority of respondents on the left said they did so because it negatively impacted

²⁶<http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/05/whos-your-4chan-correspondent-and-other-questions-storyful-thinks-newsrooms-should-be-asking-after-the-french-election/comment-page-1/>

²⁷ “Steve.” Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Kentucky, April 12, 2017.

²⁸ “Lakshmi.” Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. New York, June 8, 2017.

²⁹ “Steve.” Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Kentucky, April 12, 2017.

their mood, whereas most respondents who identified with the right said they avoided news because they could not rely on it to be true (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017). Among one UK community of infrequent news users, interview respondents explained that they felt an ambivalence about the purpose of news, but stayed away because they associated it with either celebrity gossip or depressing information that felt disconnected from their experiences (Toff & Nielsen, 2017). Participants in our focus groups, from multiple political perspectives, also referenced sentiments of distrust, negativity, and stress as reasons for stepping away from news—and essentially rearranging their communication ecologies to meet this goal.

In the context of pervasive ambiguity, distrust of and weariness with the effort required to verify news led to fatigue and frustration. Steve, who identified as right-leaning, explained how this had shifted his goals and his communication ecology: “I still read stuff occasionally but not like I used to. I’ll just go play video games. I don’t even care about news anymore.”³⁰ For Steve, a sense of distrust had led to shifting from information-seeking to a goal of tension relief, illustrating the cyclical response to pervasive ambiguity in environments of uncertainty or social change.

Others who expressed left-leaning identifications similarly reported tuning out from news. But as illustrated by this discussion among a group of participants 18–29 years old in California, the rationale was less about distrust than about avoiding negativity:

Wenlin: Sitting here and listening to everyone talking about news and how they follow news. I avoid news as much as I could.

Moderator: In every form? Is it that you don’t like reading it? You’d rather watch it?

Wenlin: I just hate it. I read it when I have to but just to keep updated with what’s going on in the world but I just hate how negative news is. . .

Marcus: I have a very similar take, but my perspective is since there’s so much coverage on Trump and what he’s saying and I really don’t like him I just sort of remove negativity from my life . . . that’s how I live. So I see Trump as negativity.³¹

Marcus went on to explain how he would change the channel whenever news about Trump was on television, YouTube, or Snapchat.

Other participants, from left and right, emphasized that their frustrations were amplified by the ubiquity and constant access to news. Participants in one of the Kentucky discussions shared this lament:

Sally: I think, there are times where I think that my sense of well-being and satisfaction with my life is directly proportional to the amount of news that I consume, and the more news I consume is like, oh, this world is just falling apart. I just don’t need to know it all,

³⁰ “Steve.” Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Kentucky, April 12, 2017.

³¹ Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. California, March 30, 2017.

you know, there's enough to concentrate on in the community that needs the attention rather than focusing on everything, you know.³²

Tom: Yeah, just a constant barrage if you let it. It's right there in your pocket.³³

News via mobile devices was referenced as a source of stress in numerous discussions. A participant in New York explained that she had turned the mobile alert notifications off in her news apps because she found them overwhelming and was afraid of becoming "desensitized to the news."³⁴ Instead, she manually checked the news app herself. In this way, she could adjust how she interfaced with her device to have greater control over the resources in her communication ecology.

Others noted frustration that resources they had previously turned to in pursuit of the goal of play—to find entertainment, humor, or lighthearted social exchange—now had become dominated by politics. Several participants noted that social media platforms had become increasingly politicized. A 24-year-old woman in Kentucky admitted she had originally joined Twitter to follow LeBron James, but now even her efforts to follow celebrities had become infused with political content. Jason, a 44-year-old man in Indiana, explained that he had previously relied on Twitter for humor. He said he mostly followed comedians:

But now all that levity has been replaced by gravity. So it's just like, ah. You know, I came to you for a lift, and now all I get are these bring me downs all day. So I've kind of, I'm finding myself using it less.³⁵

For Jason, the communication resource no longer helped him meet his goal of tension release, and as a result, he used it less frequently. He explained that he had already left Facebook for similar reasons.

Because of how participants' communication ecologies wove in interpersonal sources, avoiding news on social media, for some, was framed as a way to avoid the stress of interpersonal conflict. Many spoke of self-censoring their posts, or even avoiding social media entirely:

Barbara: My daughter and a lot of her younger friends ended up being off all social media because they were fighting with their friends.

Bob: De-friending.

Barbara: Yeah, I mean, it got to the point where they were . . . off Facebook. They were off Twitter. They were off Instagram because they were arguing, and their friendship was on the line.³⁶

³² Here Sally references a logic of prioritizing based on proximity, as explored in Eliasoph's (1998) work on political apathy.

³³ Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. Kentucky, April 10, 2017.

³⁴ "Leslie." Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. New York, June 8, 2017.

³⁵ "Jason." Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

³⁶ Focus group discussion with residents 50–65 years old. Indiana, May 4, 2017.

More commonly, participants spoke of remaining on social platforms, but muting or “unfollowing” people they saw to be posting offensive content or fake news. One Kentucky participant spoke of unfollowing his own father.³⁷ Others spoke of unfriending on Facebook leading to schisms with friends and family in real life—from uncomfortable confrontations with acquaintances at the Walmart, to brothers and sisters refusing to see each other on holidays. A participant from New York, who observed a lot of conflict regarding how members of his social network reacted to news about Black Lives Matter, said of Facebook, “As much as it connects you to friends and family, it also separates you in a lot of different ways.”³⁸

For some, disengagement from social platforms was also about a sense of self-preservation. For example, Ali, a member of a community that had been targeted by partisan rhetoric, explained how Facebook had been an important source of news during the election, but by the end, he had to step away:

It was kind of exhausting. I also didn’t particularly like being Muslim and having that come up so much during this election, it was like it was a Muslim problem. It was just shitty content 24/7 to be reading reviews about your religious identity. So immediately after the election I kind of unplugged the world news and have slowly, incrementally gone back on just because I don’t think I can do this for the next four years.³⁹

Ali’s experience with pervasive ambiguity in the context of Islamophobic rhetoric echoed the conditions of “role marginality or role conflict” Ball-Rokeach referenced (1973, p. 380). Facing this, his response was to adapt his communication ecology to alleviate stress.

Participants from varied geographies, backgrounds, and political perspectives shared a variety of logics for why they chose to disengage from news—most commonly, distrusting media, feeling overwhelmed by negativity, or needing to seek self-care as a member of a vulnerable group. Regardless of their rationale, these participants were reordering their communication ecologies. Whether avoiding Facebook or switching from cable news to comedy shows, participants sought the larger goal of reducing tension. Many of these were the same participants who at other points had pursued information-seeking goals—demonstrating how the current moment of concern over fake news and polarization can be seen as a case of coping with pervasive ambiguity.

Conclusion

The experiences of many participants suggest that they indeed may be adapting how they use resources in their communication ecologies in ways that allow them to cope with a climate of pervasive ambiguity. Most participants shared examples of how they arranged communication resources for either information-seeking goals (assembling a variety of interpersonal and mediated sources for verification) or goals of stress relief (often by avoiding sources or seeking sources of entertainment or humor)—frequently cycling back and forth between the two. Some participants reported remaining fairly static, restricting their

³⁷ “Eric.” Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. Kentucky, April 11, 2017.

³⁸ “Carlos.” Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. New York, June 8, 2017.

³⁹ “Ali.” Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. New York, June 8, 2017.

communication ecologies to both interpersonal relationships and news media that accorded with their own beliefs (whether that meant restricting themselves to MSNBC or Fox News). Arguably this was yet another tactic for stress relief, as these like-minded people and outlets affirmed their political and social identity, a tactic of “self-care” in an era of affective polarization (Nadler, 2017).

In this context, what would it look like to resolve ambiguity? Ball-Rokeach (1973) suggested that collectively defining a situation can reduce stress and allow the affected to engage in “meaningful social action.” But for ambiguity to be resolved, “the effectiveness of the definition will depend upon its accuracy and the extent to which others in the same environment act upon the same definition” (p. 380).

Filter bubbles may conceptually allow participants to surround themselves with others more likely to share and act on their definition of the situation. However, for many, the extent to which these polarized bubbles are genuinely insulated seems unclear, based on both studies that show politicized publics sharing many of the same outlets (Nelson & Webster, 2017) and the reflections of participants in this study who mentioned occasionally seeking out news from the “other side” and having interpersonal connections across boundaries. For many, then, the accessibility of competing partisan rhetoric, and possibly their own “need for cognition” (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005), has complicated the possibility of coming to collective (if bounded and polarized) definitions of the situation. At the same time, accessing competing rhetoric from different sources is not the same as having a shared public sphere.

Fact-checking efforts, which could define stories as disputed or implicitly valid, are also unlikely to succeed in reducing ambiguity. As noted in the introduction, recent studies (Chan et al., 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2017; Zollo et al., 2017) have cast doubt on the efficacy of initiatives to date, and focus group participants have expressed skepticism. Platforms, publishers, and organizations seeking to develop more effective verification tools and strategies may do well to consider how publics have long had their own verification practices—even before the fake news debacle. Furthermore, participants reported wanting and developing strategies that could verify both fictitious news stories and the muddier, more politicized sense of “fake news”—for example, an omission of narratives from the dominant news agenda.

Perhaps one of the only points of convergence across party lines was a shared sense that news media contained an excess of opinion. Whether participants were complaining about the cast of pundits on Fox looking like the Brady bunch, or CNN being a place to watch guests “behaving badly,” a number of participants suggested that a saturation of opinion had added to uncertainty: “It’s not always obvious that it’s an opinion piece and sometimes it blurs. You get a blurred line between people just sharing their opinion and trying to get factual, objective things.”⁴⁰ When considering what they would like to see as an alternative, participants tended to either discuss a desire for news that attempted to remove opinion, or suggest that outlets adopt radical transparency and put forth disclaimers about their political perspectives.

Media platforms looking to rebuild trust with their publics, which would likely help to mitigate pervasive ambiguity, would do well to do more than build verification tools. This is not to say that publics have mastered fact-checking. When sharing their verification strategies, participants frequently revealed

⁴⁰ “Dev.” Focus group discussion with residents 18–29 years old. New York, March 23, 2017.

gaps that often came from their lack of understanding of platform algorithms and overestimating how much they could control their access to communication resources. So long as platforms have minimal algorithmic transparency, participants will have limited control over how they assemble communication resources as they pursue their goal of seeking information. Although it may be an unlikely ask, platforms that wish to sustain long-term relationships built on trust may benefit from more transparent processes. A number of participants suggested that they now used social media less because of concerns over how much data they were collecting and how they were, in one participant's words, "controlling what I'm seeing."⁴¹ With or without this cooperation, actors working on media literacy or "news fluency"⁴² may do well to include algorithmic literacy in their repertoires.

For media publishers, rebuilding trust means addressing fundamental relationships with the public in need of repair. This includes a range of substantive issues—from confronting and coming to terms with partisan bias, to examining the toll of exclusively negative coverage, to assessing the perceptions of participants who say journalists are distant and that coverage does not reflect their lived experiences. While media outlets must also grapple with partisan actors with an interest in promoting distrust, there are steps to building trust that lie within their control. A full exploration of restorative steps is beyond the scope of this article, but discussions in multiple regions in the United States revealed these challenges as pervasive themes.

Perhaps the most hopeful front for reducing ambiguity and defining situations is to be found at the local level. While participants had wildly varied attitudes toward national media sources, at the local level, participants from across ideological lines often reported using the same local news sources—be they newspapers or neighborhood Facebook pages. If these participants can access a shared local "storytelling network," there is a greater possibility of coming to a shared definition of community issues, which CIT researchers have found increases the potential for social action and civic participation. Additional research would be needed.⁴³

The findings of this study offer texture to phenomena around trust and news avoidance observed by quantitative studies. While the findings cannot be used to generalize about a broad U.S. population—let alone the numerous countries, from Britain to Brazil, that are grappling with polarization and misinformation⁴⁴—they offer context and point to issues and themes in need of additional exploration in the United States and internationally. For example, it would be ideal to triangulate focus group data with additional methodologies such as story diaries,⁴⁵ content analysis of media sources mentioned, and observation of media practices.

⁴¹ Focus group discussion with residents 30–49 years old. New York, June 8, 2017.

⁴² For a discussion of the value of "news fluency" over "news literacy," see <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/white-papers/organic-news-fluency/>

⁴³ For more on one local intervention in one of the study sites see, Wenzel (2018a).

⁴⁴ For details on initiatives addressing information disorder globally, see <https://firstdraftnews.org>.

⁴⁵ In another study, participants who kept a story diary after focus groups reflected on gaps in their initial self-perceptions (Wenzel, 2018b).

Notably, this study contributed to scholarship examining questions around the polarized news environment and fake news by offering an ecological analysis. Drawing from the framework of communication ecologies, this analysis accounts not only for the relationship between audiences and media, but also for the larger community context in which a member of the public is situated and actively negotiates her or his communication resources. In addition, it revisits the concept of pervasive ambiguity and examines how it can affect communication ecologies, applying the concept to a new context by looking at the current politically polarized news environment.

Going forward, the pathway to building relationships of trust between publics and media is messy, complicated by political actors with an interest in undermining it, and unlikely to be solved by technical quick fixes. However, it is critical to understand the sources of this messiness—as residents cycle between gathering and processing information to seeking escape through entertainment, comedy, or the succor of partisan isolationism. If publics are to move from a stunting state of ambiguity and fragmentation to a shared recognition of issues required for meaningful collective action, understanding how people configure and reconfigure their communication ecologies offers at least a slim hope of creating a map.

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