

Influence of Fake News Exposure on Perceived Media Bias: The Moderating Role of Party Identity

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The phenomenon of fake news encompasses fabricated news-like content, but also the circulation of fake news-related narratives, and the (mis)use of the label to denigrate legitimate media. Building on this interdependent system of meanings, this article uses two-wave U.S. survey data ($N_{w1} = 1,338$; $N_{w2} = 511$) to examine the possible influence of (self-assessed) exposure to fake news content on general perceptions of media bias. The study also tested the moderating effects of party identity and strength of partisanship on the relationship between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and media bias perceptions. The results provide (a) strong support for (self-assessed) fake news exposure as a positive predictor of general perceptions of media bias (in cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive analyses) and (b) weak support for an interaction effect between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and Republican party identification on general evaluations of media bias (not robust across models).

Keywords: fake news exposure, media bias perception, party identity, strength of partisanship, journalism, social media

Over the past few years, the term fake news has changed its meaning from political satire and humorous news content (Balmas, 2014) to “intentionally and verifiably false news” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212) that mimics professional media content (Lazer et al., 2018) and is produced for political manipulation or financial gain. More recently, scholars have suggested that the phenomenon of fake news should be regarded as multifaceted: It not only encompasses a *genre* of news-like content with low facticity, but also a *label* used by political actors and even journalists to dismiss uncomfortable news coverage and attack the media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Robertson & Mourão, 2020).

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Legitimate media may be thought of as an ally of citizens against the menace of fake news content. After all, the job of journalists and professional media is to provide their audiences with the opposite of fake news: reliable, fact checked, and balanced stories. On the contrary, the current proliferation of fake news content seems to undermine the public's general perceptions of media fairness and balance (Wenzel, 2019). As a previous study conducted in four established democracies suggests, people view fake news as a spectrum of disorders that encompasses poor journalism (e.g., inaccurate, unreliable, sensationalist news), omissions and lies spread by partisan media, and even some forms of advertising (Nielsen & Graves, 2017, pp. 2–5). A similar finding was made in another qualitative investigation about fake news in the United States, where several participants referred to the mixture of facts and opinions in "legacy media outlets ranging from Fox to *LA Times*" and false political content published in "liberal media, [such as] *TIME* and *People* magazine" (Wenzel, 2019, p. 1082).

The present study suggests that individuals' perceptions of the performance of "the" media are shaped by their experiences with fake news. We argue that people use their level of exposure to fake news (as a *genre*) as a heuristic to infer the quality and reliability of "the" media—as if the share of fake news they receive were representative of the overall media content. Circulating narratives that forge a link between fake news and news in "the" media in general (the fake news *label* used by actors such as former President Trump and even some journalists) catalyzes this process of (over)generalization. In this framework, social media may serve as a strategic venue for fake news (*genre*) and its related narratives (*label*) to circulate and interact with each other, reinforcing the fake news-media bias link.

To test this proposition, this study uses two waves of panel survey data collected in the United States, a context in which the narrative linking fake news with mainstream media (bias) is particularly prominent. We found that (self-assessed) exposure to fake news (as a *genre*) is directly associated with perceptions of bias in "the" media—in cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive tests. We also explored the possibility that this positive relationship is conditional on party identity and strength of partisanship. The results do not provide support for a moderating influence of strength of partisanship on the relationship between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and general media bias perceptions but offer some (weak) support for the interaction between Republican party identification and fake news exposure in predicting perceived media bias—a result that is not robust across models.

Fake News Exposure as a Source of Perceived Media Bias

Most people in the United States and around the world believe that the media, when reporting the news, should provide their audiences with fair and unbiased information and avoid favoring some political perspectives over others (Pew Research Center, 2018). This view of the role of the media resonates with journalists' perceptions of their social function, founded on widely shared professional values, such as "reliability and factualness of information [and] strict adherence to impartiality and neutrality" (Hanitzsch et al., 2011, pp. 286–287; see also Blanco-Herrero & Arcila-Calderón, 2019). Despite these similar views between journalists and their audiences about what is good journalism (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013), perceptions of media bias in the United States and other established democracies have increased in the past few decades, notably from the late 1990s onwards (Bennett, 2016). A recent and striking example of this

was the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in which most registered voters (60%) viewed “the” media as biased in favor of some of the candidates, with a majority (52%) perceiving a pro-Clinton slant (Gallup, 2016).

Media bias perceptions may have important consequences for the democratic functioning of societies. First, commonly accepted (and probably idealized) notions about the role of the press as a social institution assume that it should act as a watchdog for the public, holding those in power accountable (Schultz, 1998; Serrin & Serrin, 2002). If citizens do not have a balanced and unbiased source (or perceived as such) of information about public affairs, they will hardly make reasoned and informed political decisions. Second, individuals’ perceptions of media bias may affect their patterns of media use, reducing their overall news consumption (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; see also Tsfati, 2010) or guiding them to alternative sources they perceive as fairer (but are probably biased toward their own perspective, see Tsfati, 2010, Study 2; see also Barnidge et al., 2020 for a similar argument). Third, and related to the two previous points, perceived media bias may be a source of media fragmentation and political polarization (Barnidge et al., 2020; Morris, 2007), and may also be associated with political cynicism in “a cluster of attitudes [that include] government and the national media” (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999, p. 17).

Academic attention to the issue of media bias has adopted various theoretical and empirical perspectives. The most traditional and intuitive approach is to content analyze a sample of news stories and media outlets and check for different forms and sources of media bias (see D’Alessio & Allen, 2000, for a meta-analysis). This is based on the straightforward idea that people see the media as biased because there is actual bias in the media. As informative as this approach is, media bias perceptions do not seem to be closely related to the actual presence of media bias (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Instead, individuals seem to be more influenced in their views by individual dispositions (e.g., partisanship, involvement with specific issues), the ideological composition of their interpersonal environments (e.g., exposure to discussion disagreement), and the presence of “news self-coverage” about the topic of media bias (e.g., media attention to allegations of liberal news bias; Eveland & Shah, 2003, p. 103; see also Huge & Glynn, 2010; Watts et al., 1999).

This study proposes a novel mechanism to explain the development of perceptions of general media bias from exposure to fake news. We argue that people (1) use their exposure to fake news content as a heuristic to infer the work quality of news media—as if the frequency with which they encounter fake news represents the prevalence of disinformation and poor journalism “out there.” This overgeneralization is catalyzed by (2) circulating social narratives that link fake news with news in mainstream media. The first part of the process (1) involves contact with fake news as a *genre*, while the second (2) refers to fake news as a *label*. Although these two stages may seem to be separate, they may take place virtually at the same time and in the same place: the social media arena.

Regarding the “fake news label,” populist politicians in several countries have extensively used the term to denigrate specific news outlets and “the media in general” (Egelhofer, Aaldering, Eberl, Galyga, & Lecheler, 2020, p. 1335; see also Nielsen & Graves, 2017). In the United States, the fake news mantra has been central to former President Trump’s characterization of “liberal news” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1867; see

also Forde, 2018). Until mid-2020, Donald Trump tweeted about “fake news” almost 800 times² and labeled nearly every mainstream media outlet fake news: CNN, ABC, NBC, MSNBC, CBS, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, fact checkers, and so on. Not infrequently, President Trump’s tweets associated fake news with (generalized and mainstream) media bias, thus contributing to blurring the line between both terms. Trump’s tweets accused the mainstream media of being “totally biased” and producing “fake news reports.” For example: “If I wanted to fire Robert Mueller in December as reported by the Failing New York Times I would have fired him. Just more Fake News from a biased newspaper!” (Trump, 2018b); “Just watched the totally biased and fake news reports of the so-called Russia story on NBC and ABC. Such dishonesty!” (Trump, 2017).

Further, journalism itself has contributed to the salience of fake news in the public agenda not only by reporting on the threats of the *genre* but also by using the *label* “to discredit other journalistic actors” (Egelhofer et al., 2020, p. 1134, in a study of Austrian media). The “everything-is-fake-news” narrative, we argue, will be more likely to resonate with those who are more exposed to the genre and may therefore perceive the phenomenon “out there” as more prominent and representative of “the” media (overall). In short, our theoretical argument is that those who are more exposed to fake news (*genre*) are more prone to overgeneralizing their personal exposure to fake news, and this effect is catalyzed by contextual narratives that circulate widely in the United States. Thus, we formulate our first hypothesis:

H1: (Self-assessed) fake news exposure is positively related to general media bias perceptions.

The Moderating Role of Party Identity and Strength of Partisanship

Strong political partisans may react differently to fake news and its related narratives than independents or weak partisans. Certainly, if we argue that the impact of fake news exposure on general perceptions of media bias is catalyzed by the circulating fake news-mainstream media narrative, it may also be assumed that certain groups (e.g., political partisans) are more in contact with and more reactive to this narrative. On the one hand, strong partisans seem to be more interested in and attentive to politics (Bennett & Bennett, 1989; Wolak, 2020). This means that they are more exposed to elite and media messages about fake news (as a *label*) than weak partisans are. On the other hand, they tend to engage in political discussion more often (Gil de Zúñiga, Valenzuela, & Weeks, 2016; Wolak, 2020), which may amplify these elite and media perspectives on fake news. This increased contact with elite and media narratives about fake news may exacerbate the *catalyzing* role of the fake news-mainstream media narrative, and therefore increase the influence of fake news exposure (as a *genre*) on media bias perceptions. Based on these theoretical explanations, this study formulates the second hypothesis as follows:

² The search was conducted on Trump Twitter Archive (<http://trumptwitterarchive.com/>). This online tool monitors the @realDonaldTrump account and collects all tweets from the Twitter feed in real time (including all deleted tweets posted after January 27, 2017). On July 15, 2020, a search for the words “fake news” yielded 779 results—excluding retweets and manual retweets. For “fake news media,” the archive yielded 216 tweets and 4 more for “fake news lamestream media.”

H2: Strength of partisanship moderates the relationship between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and general media bias perceptions. The association between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and perceived media bias is more pronounced among those scoring higher on strength of partisanship.

Another possibility is that the association between fake news exposure and general media bias perceptions is contingent on Republican party identification. First, it is likely that Republican and Democratic identifiers prefer congenial information and are therefore exposed to different elite and media narratives about fake news (see Iyengar & Hahn's [2009] ideas on selective exposure and the echo chamber effect). While it is true that both Democratic and Republican political leaders have spoken about fake news, their narratives have not been equivalent. Thus, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has referred to "the epidemic of malicious fake news" and "foreign propaganda" on social media (Clinton, 2016, 0:10–0:49), a discourse that is far from the fake news-mainstream media narrative and aligns with more academic consideration of the issue (Lazer et al., 2018). Similarly, a number of Democratic Party politicians have used the term to refer to alleged propaganda efforts from foreign actors in the U.S. elections (Culliford, 2019), a perspective that does not connect fake news with professional journalism or with "the" media in general. Taking a similar view about the issue, former President of the United States Barack Obama warned that we live "in an age where there's so much active misinformation and it's packaged very well and it looks the same when you see it on a Facebook page or you turn on your television" (as cited in Harris & Eddy, 2016, para. 8).

Second, and related to the first, it seems probable that Republican and Democratic partisans react differently to the same narratives based on their perceptions of their consistency with their political views (see Strickland, Taber, & Lodge, 2011). For example, a comment from President Trump about the bias in the "fake news media" will have a different effect on a Republican than on a Democratic partisan, while an opinion from Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden on the issue will probably resonate better with Democratic identifiers. It is, therefore, possible that partisans of each party differ in their interpretation of the flow of fake news they are exposed to because of the distinct influence of the social narratives on fake news—which catalyze the effect postulated in the first hypothesis. This study, therefore, advances the third and final hypothesis as follows:

H3: Party identity moderates the relationship between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and general media bias perceptions. The relationship between (self-assessed) fake news exposure and perceived media bias is more pronounced among those with a higher identification with the Republican party.

Methods

Sample

This study uses data from a larger project exploring attitudinal and behavioral effects of emerging patterns of media use. The project was collaboratively developed by a team of researchers drawn from the Universities of Vienna (Austria) and La Laguna (Spain). As part of this research program, we collected three

waves of panel data in the United States between June 2019 and February 2020.³ The international market research firm Ipsos was contracted to provide survey respondents from an opt-in online panel and administer the questionnaire. The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics online platform. The analyses in this study are based on the responses from the first (W^1) and second (W^2) waves of the survey collected in June and October 2019, respectively. For W^1 , Ipsos contacted 3,000 individuals whose demographic characteristics resembled those of the U.S. Census estimates in terms of age, gender, education, and income (see Gil de Zúñiga, González-González, & Goyanes, in press, for more demographic details of the sample). We obtained valid responses from 1,338 of these individuals. The same respondents were contacted for W^2 , and 511 of them correctly completed the questionnaire.

Measures: Variables of Interest

Fake News Exposure (Self-Assessed)

Even though most people are probably unable to identify *all* the fake news stories to which they are exposed, this measure assumes that they are generally (and retrospectively) aware of the *overall* frequency of their exposure to them. Thus, people may sometimes fall prey to fake news, but they also have subsequent opportunities to become aware of the deception—for example, via exposure to fact-checking messages, warning labels on social media; see Mena (2020) and Mosseri (2016). Building on previous definitions of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018), we presented respondents with the following statements: “Lately people are talking a lot about fake news. Generally, fake news is understood as fabricated or false news information (with the objective of misleading the reader or making profit). How often, if at all, do you think you see” (from 1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) “fabricated information that mimics news media content and could mislead readers,” “articles that originate from satirical websites but were transformed by others and put in a misleading context,” and “stories containing deliberately misleading elements making the reader believe it is correct” (averaged three-item scale, W^1 Cronbach’s alpha = .88; $M = 6.04$; $SD = 2.33$).

Party Identity and Strength of Partisanship

The same item was used to capture respondents’ party identity and strength of partisanship: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?” (where 0 = *strong Democrat*, 5 = *independent*, and 10 = *strong Republican*). The scale values, without any transformation, capture respondents’ party identities, where higher scores indicate stronger identification with the Republican party ($M = 5.04$; $SD = 3.00$). The item was also folded into a six-point scale to measure participants’ strength of partisanship—regardless of their party identification. The scale measuring strength of partisanship ranged from 0 (no party identification) to 5 (strong party identification, either with the Democratic or the Republican party) ($M = 2.30$; $SD = 1.91$).

³ Given the large number of controls in our analyses and the prolonged time interval between waves (about four months), we expected to find relatively small associations. For this reason, we needed a large sample and subsample size. Accordingly, we restricted our analyses to the first two waves of the project, which are less subject to attrition issues and are therefore larger and more demographically diverse.

General Media Bias Perception

To capture this perception, this study adapted three items from Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga (2017) and asked participants about their degree of agreement (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 10 = *strongly agree*) with the following statements: "News companies choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience," "media is biased to influence viewers' perception," and "the owner of a media company influences the content that is produced" (averaged three-item measure, W^1 Cronbach's alpha = .87; $M = 7.00$; $SD = 2.27$; W^2 Cronbach's alpha = .90; $M = 7.03$; $SD = 2.37$).

Measures: Control Variables

To minimize potential confounding effects, all models in this study controlled for a number of demographic characteristics, political antecedents, and media-related variables that could influence respondents' general media bias perceptions (see Barnidge et al., 2020; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Lee, 2005). *Political knowledge* was measured as an additive index of eight items that assessed respondents' knowledge of current political issues and the institutional functioning of their country's political system. *Political interest* was captured by an averaged scale of two items that asked about respondents' level of interest in (item 1) and attention to (item 2) "information about what's going on in politics and public affairs." The measure of *political trust* included the respondents' ratings of their "feelings of trust" (from 1 = *not at all* to 10 = *completely*) toward "the government" (specific support) and "the political system in the U.S.A." (diffuse support; see Hetherington, 1998, for details on the twofold nature of political trust). Media trust and media bias perceptions are related but are nonetheless different constructs. Trust is "a rather stable personality trait," while bias perceptions are more dynamic and reactive to external events: "Recipients [may] recognize (actual or perceived) quality problems in the news (e.g., bias, lack of accuracy), but still generally trust them [and] take risks based on information from the news" (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2018, p. 40). For this reason, all models controlled for *trust in professional news*, which was measured by two averaged items that asked about the degree of trust in news that comes "from mainstream media" and "that is fact checked." Similarly, *trust in social media news* was captured by averaging the following three items: "How much do you generally trust news . . . you find on social media sites?" "you find on Facebook?" and "you find on Twitter?" *Political homophily online* was measured using respondents' level of agreement (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 10 = *strongly agree*) with three assertions about their tendency to consume online content "that is aligned with [their] viewpoints," to avoid exposure to content "that is not aligned with [their] views," and to connect "with people like [themselves] and look for opinions [they] agree with." Finally, the models also controlled for basic demographic variables measured in W^1 such as *age* (7.14% between 18 and 22 years old; 25.17% between 23 and 35; 39.67% between 36 and 55; 28.02% older than 55), *gender* (53.19% female), *education* (measured from 1 = *less than high school* to 8 = *doctoral degree*; $M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.92$), *income* (annual household income where 1 = *no income to \$14,999* and 7 = *\$200,000 or more*; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.47$), and *ethnicity or race* (75.19% White or Caucasian).

Statistical Analyses

To account for the temporal order of the theorized associations between self-assessed fake news exposure and media bias perception, we estimated cross-sectional, time-lagged (four months), and autoregressive ordinary least squares analyses. This methodological approach provides a reference against

which past and future studies can be compared. In the cross-sectional models, W^1 independent variables predict W^1 general media bias perception. The lagged models assess the influence of W^1 predictors on W^2 media bias perception but do not include the initial levels (W^1) of media bias perception. Finally, the first-order autoregressive models take full advantage of the longitudinal data and consider (a) the time lag between the claimed cause (W^1 self-assessed fake news exposure) and its effect (W^2 media bias perception), and (b) the value of media bias perception at W^1 , which is included in the regression as another predictor. We expect to find empirical validation of our hypotheses in cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive models. However, we will give more weight to the autoregressive tests because they add the time sequence of the hypothesized causes and effects. We also expect that the proportion of explained variance will increase in models that include the W^1 measure of the dependent variable as a predictor (autoregressive tests).

OLS regression models were conducted using SPSS version 25. Confidence intervals and p -values are based on the Huber–White robust method and were computed with the aid of the HCREG macro for SPSS (Hayes & Cai, 2007). Moderation effects were performed with the assistance of version 3.5 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013).

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that self-assessed fake news exposure had a direct, positive influence on media bias perceptions. The present analyses provide strong empirical support for this prediction across all three models. First, W^1 self-assessed fake news exposure is cross-sectionally associated with W^1 media bias perception, with a beta value (β) of .295 ($p < .001$) in the first model and .319 ($p < .001$) in the second (Table 2; see also Table 1). This positive relationship holds even after controlling for party identity (in Model 1) and strength of partisanship (in Model 2), along with a set of demographic, political, and media-related variables. Second, W^1 self-assessed fake news exposure is also associated with W^2 general media bias perception in the lagged regression models—which do not account for the influence of W^1 levels of media bias perception. As shown in Table 2, the beta value (β) for this lagged and positive relationship is .254 ($p < .001$) in Model 3 and .279 ($p < .001$) in Model 4 (see also Table 1). Finally, and making a more rigorous test of the causal order of the effect, the autoregressive regression models confirm the positive relationship between W^1 self-assessed fake news exposure and W^2 media bias perception, even after considering W^1 levels of perceived media bias: β (Model 5) = .122 ($p < .05$); β (Model 6) = .128 ($p < .01$; Table 3). Note that (a) W^1 levels of the dependent variable (autoregressive terms) explain most of the variance in media bias perception (30.8% in models 5 and 6), which reduces the amount of variance accounted for by the rest of the predictors and increases the stringency of our analyses, and (b) the statistical significance of the beta values is based on Huber–White robust standard errors.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 state that strength of partisanship and party identity (measured by Republican identification) moderate the influence of self-assessed fake news exposure on media bias perceptions. Regression-based interaction analyses provide only weak support for the interaction between self-assessed fake news exposure and Republican ID (H3), but no support for the role of strength of partisanship as a moderator (H2). Table 4 summarizes all interaction effects involving self-assessed fake news exposure, Republican ID, and strength of partisanship. Bold numbers on the left of Table 4 (1 to 6) indicate equivalence

with the corresponding models in Tables 2 and 3, with the only difference being that the models in Table 4 include an additional interaction term (indicated in the left column).

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Among Variables in the Study.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	–															
2. Gender (Female)	.04	–														
3. Education	.10 ^a	–.03	–													
4. Income	.04	–.10 ^a	.47 ^c	–												
5. Race (White)	.31 ^c	.12 ^b	.07	.14 ^b	–											
6. Political Knowledge	.15 ^c	–.17 ^c	.31 ^c	.28 ^c	.10 ^a	–										
7. Political Interest	.17 ^c	–.19 ^c	.23 ^c	.18 ^c	.01	.48 ^c	–									
8. Political Trust	–.18 ^c	–.06	.04	.05	–.13 ^b	–.02	.14 ^b	–								
9. Trust in Professional News	–.06	.09	.11 ^a	.06	–.08	.07	.29 ^c	.36 ^c	–							
10. Trust in Social Media News	–.39 ^c	.07	–.09	–.07	–.25 ^c	–.26 ^c	.01	.36 ^c	.37 ^c	–						
11. Political Homophily Online	–.20 ^c	.03	.07	.05	–.14 ^b	–.08	.08	.20 ^c	.20 ^c	.37 ^c	–					
12. Party ID (Republican)	.07	–.02	–.05	.02	.20 ^c	–.03	–.04	–.03	–.35 ^c	–.04	–.02	–				
13. Strength of Partisanship	.08	.09	.03	.04	.07	.14 ^b	.25 ^c	.02	.01	–.03	.13 ^b	–.01	–			
14. Fake News Exposure (S-A)	–.01	–.07	.05	.11 ^a	.04	.09	.20 ^c	–.01	–.06	.08	.15 ^c	.24 ^c	.17 ^c	–		
15. Media Bias Perception W ¹	.18 ^c	–.07	.07	.10 ^a	.08	.19 ^c	.28 ^c	–.11 ^a	.07	–.09	.07	.20 ^c	.19 ^c	.36 ^c	–	
16. Media Bias Perception W ²	.13 ^b	–.05	.13 ^b	.08	.01	.14 ^b	.24 ^c	–.05	.01	–.01	.08	.17 ^c	.14 ^b	.32 ^c	.54 ^c	–

Note. Cell entries are zero-order pairwise correlation coefficients. Variables are measured in the first wave (W¹) unless otherwise specified. S-A: Self-assessed. Superscript a = $p < .05$, Superscript b = $p < .01$, Superscript c = $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 2. Cross-Sectional (W^1-W^1) and Lagged (W^1-W^2) Regression Models Predicting Media Bias Perception.

	General Media Bias Perception			
	Model 1 Wave 1	Model 2 Wave 1	Model 3 Wave 2	Model 4 Wave 2
<i>Block 1: Demographics W^1</i>				
Age	.098 ^b	.105 ^c	.117 ^a	.122 ^a
Gender (Female)	.005	-.001	-.007	-.009
Education	-.011	-.015	.068	.065
Income	.074 ^a	.079 ^b	-.004	-.005
Race (White)	-.028	-.011	-.090	-.067
ΔR^2	5.7%	5.7%	4.1%	4.1%
<i>Block 2: Political Antecedents W^1</i>				
Political Knowledge	.076 ^a	.072 ^a	.024	.020
Political Interest	.164 ^c	.161 ^c	.147 ^a	.147 ^a
Political Trust	-.139 ^c	-.124 ^c	-.086	-.069
ΔR^2	8.1%	8.1%	3.6%	3.6%
<i>Block 3 Media Variables W^1</i>				
Professional News Trust	.108 ^b	.065 ^a	.014	-.041
Social Media News Trust	-.031	-.016	-.003	.012
Political Homophily Online	.054	.043	.047	.044
ΔR^2	1.1%	1.1%	1.5%	1.5%
<i>Block 4: Variables of Interest W^1</i>				
Party ID (Republican)	.128 ^c	-	.136 ^b	-
Strength of Partisanship	-	.033	-	.014
Fake News Exposure (S-A)	.295 ^c	.319 ^c	.254 ^c	.279 ^c
ΔR^2	10.5%	9.2%	8.4%	7.0%
Total R^2	25.3%	24.0%	17.6%	16.2%

Note. Sample size: First and second columns $n = 1,171$; third and fourth columns $n = 430$. Standardized regression coefficients were reported. Significance tests were computed using the Huber-White robust method (HCO, see Hayes & Cai, 2007). We also checked the effect estimates of models 1-4 without including control variables, and the statistical significance of self-assessed fake news exposure remained in all models. S-A: Self-assessed. Superscript a = $p < .05$, Superscript b = $p < .01$, Superscript c = $p < .001$ (two-tailed). $W^1 =$ Wave 1.

Table 3. Autoregressive (W^1-W^2) Regression Models Predicting Media Bias Perception.

	General Media Bias Perception W^2	
	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Block 1: Autoregressive Control W^1</i>		
Media Bias Perception	.480 ^c	.490 ^c
ΔR^2	30.8%	30.8%
<i>Block 2: Demographics W^1</i>		
Age	.066	.066
Gender (Female)	.001	.004
Education	.077 ^a	.076 ^a
Income	-.003	-.004
Race (White)	-.069	-.061
ΔR^2	1.3%	1.3%
<i>Block 3: Political Antecedents W^1</i>		
Political Knowledge	.010	.010
Political Interest	.058	.064
Political Trust	-.003	.004
ΔR^2	0.2%	0.2%
<i>Block 4: Media-Related Variables W^1</i>		
Professional News Trust	-.076	-.095
Social Media News Trust	.042	.045
Political Homophily Online	.021	.024
ΔR^2	1.3%	1.3%
<i>Block 5: Variables of Interest W^1</i>		
Party ID (Republican)	.039	-
Strength of Partisanship	-	-.024
Fake News Exposure (Self-Assessed)	.122 ^a	.128 ^b
ΔR^2	1.4%	1.3%
Total R^2	34.9%	34.9%

Note. Sample size = 430. Standardized regression coefficients were reported. Significance tests were computed using the Huber-White robust method (HCO, see Hayes & Cai, 2007). We also checked the effect estimates of models 5 and 6 without including control variables, and the statistical significance of self-assessed fake news exposure remained in both models. S-A: Self-assessed. Superscript a = $p < .05$, Superscript b = $p < .01$, Superscript c = $p < .001$ (two-tailed). W^1 = Wave 1. W^2 = Wave 2.

Table 4. Interaction Effects Tests of Fake News Exposure (S-A) and Republican Identification/Strength of Partisanship (W^1) on Media Bias Perception (W^{1-2}).

Interaction Effects	Point Estimate	HC 95% Conf. Interval
1. W^1 Fake News Exposure (S-A) \times W^1 Republican Identification \rightarrow W^1 Media Bias Perception (<i>cross-sectional</i>)	.0001	-.0164 to .0166
2. W^1 Fake News Exposure (S-A) \times W^1 Strength of Partisanship \rightarrow W^1 Media Bias Perception (<i>cross-sectional</i>)	.0046	-.0219 to .0311
3. W^1 Fake News Exposure (S-A) \times W^1 Republican Identification \rightarrow W^2 Media Bias Perception (<i>lagged</i>)	.0291	-.0043 to .0624
4. W^1 Fake News Exposure (S-A) \times W^1 Strength of Partisanship \rightarrow W^2 Media Bias Perception (<i>lagged</i>)	.0029	-.0511 to .0569
5. W^1 Fake News Exposure (S-A) \times W^1 Republican Identification \rightarrow W^2 Media Bias Perception (<i>autoregressive</i>)	.0295 ^a	.0015 to .0575
6. W^1 Fake News Exposure (S-A) \times W^1 Strength of Partisanship \rightarrow W^2 Media Bias Perception (<i>autoregressive</i>)	-.0061	-.0531 to .0408

Notes. Confidence intervals were computed using the Huber–White robust method (HC0; see Hayes & Cai, 2007). Estimates are unstandardized coefficients. Self-assessed fake news exposure and the moderator were mean centered before analyses. The effects of demographics (age, gender, education, race, and income), political antecedents (political knowledge, political interest, and political trust), and media-related variables (professional news trust, social media news trust, and political homophily online) were included as control variables in all models. Models 5 and 6 also account for W^1 levels of media bias perception (autoregressive control). We also checked the effect estimates of models 1 to 6 without including control variables, and the statistical significance (or nonsignificance) of the interaction terms remained unchanged, with the single exception of model 3. Without controls, the interaction in model 3 becomes significant (point estimate = .0375; HC 95% CI = .0049 to .0700). Sample size: models 1 and 2, $n = 1,170$; models 3 to 6, $n = 430$. S-A: Self-assessed. Superscript a = $p < .05$ (two-tailed). $W^1 =$ Wave 1. $W^2 =$ Wave 2.

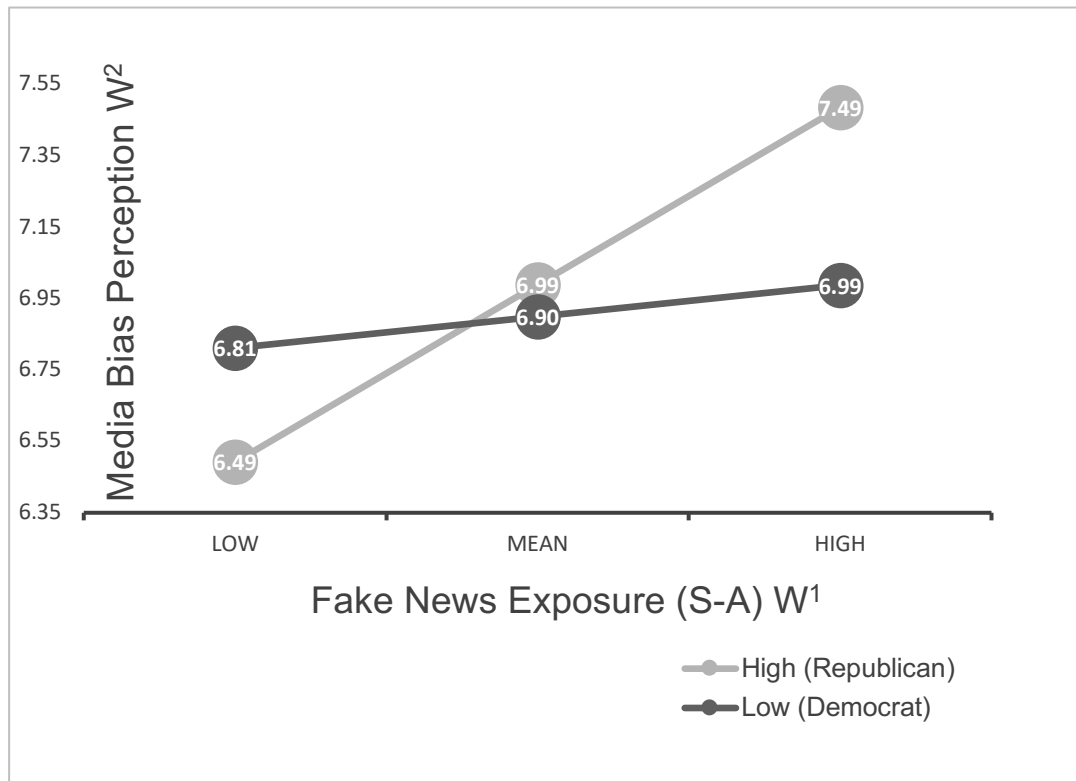


Figure 1. Interaction between self-assessed fake news exposure and Republican identification (Wave 1) on media bias perception (Wave 2).

Note. Republican identification was directly derived from responses to the item: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?" (where 0 = strong Democrat, 5 = independent, and 10 = strong Republican). The values for the moderator are one *SD* below and above the mean. The R^2 increase due to interaction is statistically significant: $F(1, 414) = 4.29$, $p = .039$. Interaction is estimated from autoregressive model 5 in Table 4. Self-assessed fake news exposure and the moderator were mean centered before analyses. S-A: Self-assessed.

No significant interaction was found between self-assessed fake news exposure and strength of partisanship in explaining media bias perception either in cross-sectional (Table 4, test 2), lagged (test 4), or autoregressive analyses (test 6). In contrast, the most stringent test (autoregressive model, test 5) suggests that the effects of self-assessed fake news exposure on media bias perception are contingent on party identification (unstandardized point estimate = .0295, 95% CI = .0015 to .0575). This moderating effect was, however, not reproduced in the less stringent cross-sectional (test 1, point estimate = .0001, 95% CI = -.0164 to .0166) and lagged (test 3, point estimate = .0291, 95% CI = -.0043 to .0624) analyses. The effect is, therefore, not robust across models.

Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the interaction between self-assessed fake news exposure and Republican ID in explaining media bias perception (based on the autoregressive model, test 5). Among respondents with a lower Republican ID (Democrats scoring one *SD* below the sample mean),

self-assessed fake news perceptions had no significant effect on the way they perceived media bias [$\theta_{(X \rightarrow Y)|M=-3.09} = 0.039$, $t(414) = 0.554$, $p = .580$]. However, among respondents with a higher Republican ID (Republicans scoring one *SD* above the sample mean), self-assessed fake news exposure significantly increased media bias perceptions [$\theta_{(X \rightarrow Y)|M=3.09} = 0.220$, $t(414) = 3.406$, $p < .001$].

Discussion and Conclusions

This investigation used two waves of online surveys to examine the relationship between fake news exposure and general media bias perceptions in the United States. Overall, the findings suggest that an individual's self-assessed exposure to fake news is directly and positively related to perceived general media bias. This relationship was robust and consistent in all statistical models: cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive. The effect remained significant after controlling for demographics, political antecedents, and media variables.

This finding relates to Nielsen and Graves' (2017) qualitative and quantitative study, in which online users did not see a clear, absolute distinction between fake news and real news. Instead, in the eyes of their participants, the "spectrum" of fake news includes "poor journalism (often from established media organizations), [. . .] propaganda from political actors they don't trust [. . .], and] various forms of advertising and sponsored content [. . .]" (Nielsen & Graves, 2017, p. 4). While professional journalistic values about fact checking and adherence to impartiality may in fact help counter the negative effects of fake news, people seem to associate their individual exposure to fake news (as a genre) with a general problem of media bias. We interpret this finding as the consequence of people's reliance on their level of exposure to fake news (as a *genre*) as a heuristic to assess the quality and reliability of "the" media. We think this effect cannot be explained without considering the catalyzing role of the fake news-mainstream media (bias) narrative, which circulates widely in the national context under study.

It was also hypothesized that strength of partisanship would moderate the relationship between self-assessed fake news exposure and general media bias perceptions. Compared with weak partisans or independents, strong partisans are more interested in and attentive to politics (Bennett & Bennett, 1989; Wolak, 2020), and they seem to engage in political discussions more frequently (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016; Wolak, 2020). For these reasons, we expected that strong partisans who were highly exposed to fake news would be more exposed and reactive to the catalyzing role of the fake news-media bias narrative and would therefore perceive the media as more biased. However, the results did not provide empirical support for this hypothesis, either in the cross-sectional, lagged, or autoregressive models. One reason for this lack of interaction between self-assessed fake news exposure and strength of partisanship on perceived media bias may be that the proposed moderator does not reflect the direction of partisanship (Republican or Democrat). For example, strong Democrats and strong Republicans were both assigned a value of 5. It may well be that the effect of fake news exposure on perceptions of media bias is different for these two groups—a possibility that was explored in the following hypothesis.

The interaction effects models provided only partial support for the moderating role of party identity in the relationship between self-assessed fake news exposure and media bias perception. In the autoregressive model, which controls for baseline (W^1) levels of media bias perceptions, the effects of self-

assessed fake news exposure on perceived media bias depended on party identification. For respondents scoring high on Republican identification, self-assessed fake news exposure was positively associated with perceptions of media bias. However, among respondents scoring low on Republican identification (Democrats), self-assessed fake news exposure did not affect the perceived magnitude of general media bias. This interaction effect was not robust across models: It could not be reproduced in the less stringent cross-sectional and lagged analyses. Further research is needed to confirm this interaction effect in other samples and with alternative study designs.

The autoregressive model suggests that Democrats and Republicans react differently to fake news, presumably because they respond to elite and media narratives about fake news—the proposed catalyzer of the effect—differently. This makes theoretical sense because Democratic and Republican elites (and some opinionated media outlets as well) frame fake news issues differently. For former President Donald Trump, almost all professional news media outlets should be labeled fake news because of their “purposely false and inaccurate reporting” (Trump, 2018a). More specifically, President Trump has associated fake news with alleged bias in mainstream media, such as the *New York Times*: “Just more Fake News from a biased newspaper!” (Trump, 2018b). In contrast, Democratic elites have mainly referred to fake news in the context of “foreign propaganda” on social media, especially about the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Clinton, 2016; see also Culliford, 2019). The framing of the fake news issue on the Democratic side, therefore, seems more akin to that of media and communication scholars, which is far from the “everything-is-fake-news” narrative. In this regard, fake news and media bias are not part of the same phenomenon but are two distinctively different things. Because Democratic identifiers are probably more exposed to this latter narrative via selective exposure and are also more likely to rely on partisan cues to evaluate the fake news issue, they do not interpret an increased flow of fake news (as a *genre*) as a general problem of media bias.

These findings may have important implications for journalists and news organizations. In the current media environment, professional journalism should act as a counterbalance to fake news. Journalists have the ethical responsibility of fact checking their news stories and providing their audiences with accurate and balanced reports. Professional news media outlets, at least in democracies, should be perceived as reference sources against which to compare the accuracy and veracity of news and news-like content disseminated via social media. In this respect, informed participation is one of the key pillars of democratic citizenship. However, if those who are highly exposed to fake news also believe that “the” media (in general, including professional news outlets) are highly biased, they will lack the information necessary to make informed decisions. As one participant in Nielsen and Graves’ (2017) qualitative study of fake news explained when asked about the meaning of fake news: “News that don’t have a factual basis? Coloured, leaning, biased [. . .]. But then again, is any media organization truly objective? It is a question of scale really” (p. 3).

While the current study may shed some light on the consequences of exposure to fake news, it is not without limitations. First, the main independent variable (self-assessed fake news exposure) was designed to capture *actual* exposure to fake news, but it assumes that respondents can identify fake stories when they are exposed to them—which is clearly not always the case. Our theoretical standpoint is that, beyond perception, actual exposure to fake news (genre) matters and that people are more likely to perceive that they are exposed to fake news when they are actually exposed to fake news. Indeed, previous studies

have suggested that people are aware of the *overall* prevalence of fake news in their information environments. For example, Paskin (2018) surveyed college students and found that they could discern between real and fake news stories more than 51% of the time, reaching values as high as 77.3% under certain conditions. Similarly, Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu (2019) provided a sample of adults exposed to a mix of real and fake news stories and found that they were able to correctly identify the nature of more than 63% of the items presented. While some of these figures may not seem very high, we are not interested in the correct identification of specific stories but in people's perception of their *overall* frequency of exposure to them. Most people may sometimes fall prey to fake news, but they may subsequently be exposed to fact-checking messages, frequent warning labels on social media, notifications from friends or colleagues, and so on (see Mena, 2020; Mosseri, 2016).

That said, there would have been other ways to measure exposure to fake news, each with its own shortcomings. One alternative procedure would have been to present respondents with fake news circulating online and ask them whether they had previously encountered it online (see a similar approach, used to measure fake news *credibility*, in Diehl & Lee, 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Another method is to combine survey data with online traffic data from respondents (see, for example, Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020). In the present study, we have only a proxy measure of our key independent variable; therefore, we cannot compare perceived versus actual fake news exposure. We cannot categorically state that perceived and actual fake news exposure are highly correlated. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article properly put it, it may be that the two measures capture different phenomena and that "self-perceived" exposure is a better predictor of "perceived" media bias than actual exposure. Future research should help clarify this issue.

A second limitation concerns the empirical validation of the causal mechanism that translates exposure to fake news into perceived media bias. While our analyses demonstrate that self-assessed exposure to fake news is associated with perceived media bias, our theoretical considerations also imply that this effect depends on the availability of certain narratives (e.g., the fake news-mainstream media bias association). Thus, those who are frequently exposed to fake news (*genre*) but are not in contact with the fake news-media bias narrative (for example, because they live in a country with different narratives) may not report high levels of perceived media bias. Future cross-cultural research should evaluate this proposed mechanism by observing the dependence of this association on the circulating narrative about fake news. However, this approach may not be easy to implement, given the generalized use of the "fake news label" with a similar meaning across countries (Egelhofer et al., 2020; Erlanger, 2017).

Finally, our main dependent variable assesses perceived bias in "the" media in general but does not discriminate between self-selected media (for example, liberal- or conservative-leaning media) and other media. More specific levels of analysis of media bias perceptions are pertinent to the current fragmented media environment and have already provided fruitful insights. For example, Barnidge and colleagues (2020) found that selective exposure is associated with an increased perception that the media system (in general) is biased, but with reduced levels of perceived bias about self-selected media—that is, the media they watch, read, or listen to. The dependent variable in the present study relates closely to what Barnidge and colleagues (2020) label perceived bias in the media system in general. In any case, we believe

that examining media bias perceptions at more general or specific levels of analysis is both compatible and necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of the problem.

Despite these limitations, the present study provides new insights into the negative consequences of exposure to fake news and its connection with general media bias perceptions. While professional news media and fact checkers may well provide powerful tools to minimize the effects of intentionally deployed false news, negative perceptions of “the” media in general may undermine this potentially protective role of professional journalism. This should be considered by media organizations, journalists, media practitioners, and politicians in democratic societies. A well-functioning democracy depends on citizens’ informed participation, which requires reliable (and perceived as such) sources of information.

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