

Elite Hostility Toward Journalism, News Trust, and the Mediating Role of Fear for Motivating Public Support of News Media

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This experiment extends the research on the relationship between elite hostility toward the press and public support for journalism. Using a national U.S.-based sample ($N = 235$), the project analyzes how an online “mash-up” video of hostile rhetoric and behavior attributed to multiple politicians elicited emotions of anger and fear as conditioned upon news trust. Analyses also examined the extent to which these threat-based emotions, in turn, promoted increased intentions to support the press. Results confirm that exposure to elite hostility toward the press can indirectly prompt intentions to support the press, showcasing fear as the operative negative emotion for propelling support for the press. Furthermore, this study’s modeling of elite hostility’s indirect effect on press support is shown to be strongest among those with relatively high in trust in their preferred news sources. The study findings have implications for maintaining and building public support for journalism in the contemporary media landscape.

Keywords: elite cues, press hostility, news trust, freedom of press, press advocacy, emotion

Hostility, aggression, and violence toward journalists are hardly new (Nerone, 1994). However, with frequent reports of harassment, threats, physical assaults, denied access to events, and more (e.g., Miller, 2021; Simon, 2020), evidence indicates a surge in hostility toward the news media in recent years—both in the United States and abroad (Obermaier, Hofbauer, & Reinemann, 2018; Van Dalen, 2019). In the context of low trust and faith in the news media (Brenan, 2021) and other public institutions (Zuckerman, 2021), the sum of hostility-based incidents targeting the press has prompted press advocacy organizations like Reporters Without Borders to conclude that the United States, traditionally among the leading advocates

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for freedom of the press, "is no longer a champion of press freedom at home or abroad" (Serhan, 2020, para. 11).

This article focuses on the mobilizing influence of elite antimedia discourse and behavior within the contemporary digital media environment. This research is designed to cultivate a deeper understanding of the extent to which digital media representations of elite hostility and aggression toward journalists may influence citizens' motivations to express support for the press and its freedoms. Beyond the question of whether an increased salience of hostility can stimulate an impulse to express support for the press, this project is also designed to further consider how and when mediated representations of press hostility can trigger a mobilizing impulse.

Existing research (Peifer, 2020) demonstrates how President Donald Trump's antimedia rhetoric catalyzed public support of the press. The research revealed that the greater one's anger toward a mash-up video of Trump's antimedia rhetoric, the more likely one was to subsequently express greater openness to supporting the press. As a follow-up to examining the influence of Trump's antimedia rhetoric (Peifer, 2020), this study adopts a similar experimental design. It tests the threat-based emotions of fear and anger as causal mechanisms for explaining how elite hostility can trigger action tendencies that serve as a basis for mobilizing support for the press. It also expands the focus to test the influence of exposure to more diffuse instances of press hostility emanating from political elites beyond the scope of the Trump administration. Moreover, given the common impulse to protect a threatened resource/object that one has some stake in or ego-involvement (Lazarus, 1991), this study compares the hypothesized process model of influence between those who have high versus low trust (i.e., a stake) in their most used news sources. Results ultimately confirm that exposure to a mash-up of press hostility can indirectly promote intentions to support the press, even as the operative causal mechanism highlighted in this research (i.e., fear) stands in contrast to prior research (i.e., anger; Peifer, 2020). Finally, this article concludes by considering the implications of this research for journalism advocacy efforts—work designed to spark public awareness of hostility toward journalists around the world and foster support for the press. Given the ubiquity of "outrage media" (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013) and phenomena like "outrage fatigue" (Crockett, 2017), we consider the extent to which it is ethical and advisable to strategically evoke emotions like fear and anger on a frequent basis.

Literature Review

Elite Cues and Antipathy Toward the Press

Elites have long been purveyors of knowledge and ideas that are then processed and discussed by the public (Zaller, 1992). Such "elites" include politicians, journalists, prominent activists, and even policy experts who have a meaningful influence over citizens' judgments and opinions (Zaller, 1992). This form of influence, often discussed in terms of *elite cues*, helps guide citizens' political judgments and decision making (Ladd, 2010; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Importantly, such cues plausibly bear the potential to promote antipathy toward journalists, such that individuals become primed to view news media/journalists as biased (Smith, 2010) and hostile toward the causes and groups with which one identifies. The *hostile media phenomenon* in particular showcases the malleable nature of public sentiment toward the news media. Developed by Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), the theory highlights how strong partisans from

opposing sides can contradictorily perceive the same news content as being biased against their respective in-groups (Feldman, 2014).

Hostile sentiments toward journalism can result in meaningful consequences, such as further undermining a shared sense of reality among a diverse citizenry, contributing to the erosion of faith in societal institutions, and undermining the psychological well-being of journalists themselves (Obermaier et al., 2018). The motivating forces and causes of threats to the legitimacy and credibility of journalism are difficult to pinpoint, but surges in antimedia rhetoric and behavior over the past decade have likely helped fuel discontent. Before and after winning the presidency in 2016, Donald Trump excluded disliked news outlets from his press conferences, eagerly sparred with reporters both in person and via Twitter, and repeatedly employed the label “fake news” for unfavorable coverage and mainstream journalists/outlets. While fake news as a genre can refer to the deliberate creation of disinformation (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), the “fake news” label employed in Trump’s rhetoric toward journalists represented “the instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media” (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 98). This was central to Trump’s political strategy. As Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis (2021) explain, Trump “needed the press to be his perfect foil” while in office, so he “could explain away political failures as simply an unavoidable consequence of journalists working against him” (p. 86). However, while Trump has been a prominent contemporary voice in expressing disdain for the press (Carlson, 2018), examples of hostility beyond Trump abound (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Likewise, disdain for the press in the United States is hardly unique to the *era* of the 2016–2020 Trump presidency and his election campaigns. Political conservatives, for instance, have long criticized the U.S. journalism industry as having a liberal agenda. The notion of a “liberal bias” surfaced in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with many white Southerners perceiving that national media favored civil rights activists (Greenberg, 2008). At the national level, Richard Nixon and his vice president, Spiro Agnew, were famously hostile toward the news media. Nixon persistently and broadly attacked “the media” (Harris, 1973). Meanwhile, Agnew stated that the press was controlled by an “unelected elite” and asserted, “it is time that the networks were made more responsive to the views of the nation and more responsible to the people they serve” (Harris, 1973, para. 4).

Antipathy toward journalists is not unique to the United States. In an international UNESCO-funded study, nearly three-quarters of female journalists reported experiencing online violence (Miller, 2021). Much of this hostility stemmed from, or was at least promoted by, elites. For example, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu long embraced what Panievsky (2021) described as “populist media criticism” (p. 2142), frequently targeting individual journalists with scathing attacks. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte launched his own antimedia campaign by forcing a TV station off air, prosecuting reporters on spurious charges, and remarking, “Just because you’re a journalist you are not exempted from assassination if you’re a son of a bitch” (Griffiths, 2020, para. 2). In Russia, Vladimir Putin’s regime enacted laws in 2022 designed to punish journalists who were deemed to be spreading “false information” about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with up to 15 years in prison (Troianovski & Safronova, 2022). This hostility toward the press and reflexive criticism of mainstream media as biased has become “a defining characteristic of right-wing discourse all over the world” (Bhat & Chadha, 2020, p. 1).

Research on elite discourse on journalism has long been established (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Watts et al., 1999), but it drew renewed attention following Donald Trump's ascent to the White House in 2016—in view of evidence that Trump benefitted from his frequent attacks on the press (Carlson et al., 2021). The “frequency of attacks, the severity of the charges [Trump] made about reporters, and the ambiguity of who these enemies were” (Carlson et al., 2021, p. 119) all contributed to Trump supporters' blanket rejection of mainstream news narratives. Since journalism's credibility is meaningfully tethered to an affective connection with audiences (Kreiss, 2018), there is little doubt that passionate elite attacks on journalism contribute to devaluing the institution. In today's hyperconnected online world, communicating this hostile rhetoric is easier and faster than ever before. Coupled with the fact that citizens increasingly struggle to differentiate between legitimate and fake news (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), elite discourses have the potential to be impactful and dangerous. Scholarships outline some consequences of this hostility, including violent (often gendered or racial) threats, chilling effects on the stories journalists are willing to tell, and the delegitimization of journalism on the whole (see Miller, 2021, for a review).

Public Support for and Trust in the Press

Against the backdrop of widespread aggression toward journalists, a central underlying question of this study's inquiry is: What effects can exposure to press hostility have on members of the public? While hostile elite rhetoric toward the press surely seems to wield the potential—among some individuals, at least—to *undermine* trust in and reliance upon news media (e.g., Ladd, 2010), there is also evidence that such cues can indirectly motivate increased support for the press. For instance, media industry observers identified a brief “Trump bump” following the 2016 election, as some news outlets reported a surge of subscriptions and/or donations (Dalton, Ho, & Vernon, 2017; Rutenberg, 2016). Perhaps Trump's hostility toward the press served to remind some citizens of journalism's core aspirations and its capacity to serve as a form of accountability to power holders, motivating intentions to communicate and enact support for the press—especially in the wake of Trump's 2016 election victory.

A similar “bump” was reflected in the public's trust assessments. While trust in mass media as measured by Gallup reached a low of 32% in 2016, it has maintained a 36–45% level of trust since (Brenan, 2021). Unsurprisingly, there is a significant gap in trust along partisan lines. Consistent with the principles of “elite cues,” news media trust among Republicans decreased during Trump's presidency—from 14% in 2016 to 11% in 2021 (Brenan, 2021). Meanwhile, media trust among Democrats increased—from 51% in 2016 to 68% in 2021 (Brenan, 2021). This increase in trust highlights how elite cues from a politician (or other elite) that an individual does *not* support can have a reverse effect on citizens—what Nicholson (2012) labels a “polarizing cue.” Underscoring this dynamic in an experimental context, Peifer (2020) demonstrated that exposure to elite hostility—as attributed to Donald Trump—indirectly served as a catalyst for promoting intentions to support press freedoms.

Support for the press can come in many forms. Albeit indirectly, subscribing to and consuming news products represents one fundamental expression of support. The *New York Times* reported a record high of 7 million paid subscribers in November 2020—partially attributable to Trump's rise to power (Lee, 2020). Support for the press may also be reflected in donations to journalism-related nonprofit

organizations, such as ProPublica (Lichterman, 2016), as well as in public opinion polling. For instance, the Pew Research Center reports that support for freedom of the press (i.e., saying it is important that the media can report the news without state/government censorship) has increased in the United States from 67% in 2015 to 80% in 2019 (Wike & Schumacher, 2020).

Given evidence of hostility toward journalists being linked to increased support for the press (at least among subsets of the citizenry), an initial step in this study's plan of analysis is to investigate the question of a general, direct relationship between exposure to instances of elite hostility toward the press and willingness to support the press. Of note, this study takes a broad view of openness/intentions to "support" the press, encompassing intended *or* actual behavior, both in terms of communicative acts and financial resources.

RQ1: Can exposure to instances of elite hostility toward the press directly promote citizens' intentions to support the press in the form of (a) communicating support and (b) directing financial resources in support of journalism?

Discrete Emotions and Action Tendencies

Absent a meaningful perception of the threat posed to an individual vis-à-vis antimedia rhetoric/behavior, elite hostility toward the press may often be ignored or shrugged off by many because it does not seem relevant to that to which they feel a sense of investment in and affective connection to (Kreiss, 2018). When disdain for news media runs deep, some may actually find themselves sympathetic to sources of press hostility. Yet, given that a strong majority of the American public espouses belief in the need for freedom of the press (Wike & Schumacher, 2020), we can reasonably expect that a heightened awareness of press hostility can prompt support for the press. Importantly, research repeatedly provides evidence of how emotional states can serve as key mechanisms for behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, both within and beyond the sphere of policy and politics (Brader, 2005). Serving as a primary motivation system in human behavior (Izard, 2007), emotions represent intense, short-lived mental states elicited in reaction to an event, object, or agent in one's environment (Nabi, 2010). As a motivational system, emotions have strong behavioral implications associated with "relational action readiness . . . to establish, maintain, or disrupt a relationship with the environment" (Frijda, 1986, p. 71).

To be sure, there are other distinct ways to conceptualize the structure of emotions (e.g., Russell, 1980). However, when considered within a discrete emotion/appraisal theory framework (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), distinct emotions can be understood as involving different cognitive structures and cognitive processes and, accordingly, theorized to bear different action tendencies (Frijda, 1986). These varied cognitive structures are based on contrasting assessments (i.e., "appraisals") of the perceived harms and benefits in one's immediate environment (Lazarus, 1991). The manner in which one interprets a relationship with a given environment can be predictive of that individual's emotional reaction. For example, an appraisal of self-blame is predictive of guilt (Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Two potent discrete emotions that are especially relevant to press hostility phenomena are *anger* and *fear*. Both anger and fear have a negative valence and are elicited by the perception of threat/harm, whether impending or existing, to that which one values. Yet,

while anger and fear bear similarities, both emotions are theorized to have different cognitive structures that can elicit contrasting behavioral and attitudinal outcomes.

Anger

Elicited by aversive events presenting a threat and/or harm (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009), anger is typically cued by a sense of (relative) certainty about the source of harm/threat (Lazarus, 1991). In this regard, the negative emotion is associated with certainty in attributing responsibility—that of blaming some “other” for a violation of what “ought to be” (De Rivera, 1977). Moreover, anger is associated with an impulse to punish and/or retaliate against the source of harm, as well as impede/remove the source of harm (Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Accordingly, anger’s action tendency is one of approach, attack, and confrontation, and a willingness to accept risk in doing so (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009).

Fear

Fear is also a negative emotion elicited by aversive events involving an anticipation of threat/harm (Frijda, 1986). However, in contrast to anger, fear often lacks a clear attribution of responsibility; it involves less certainty about the source of harm/threat (Lazarus, 1991). In terms of action tendencies, the cueing of fear motivates avoidance and energy to escape from the threat. It also stimulates vigilance, such that one is motivated to break out of habitual patterns of behavior to avoid/impede a threat (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005).

Of note, Peifer (2020) found that elite hostility toward the press (as emanating from Donald Trump and his administration) elicited both anger and fear. Yet, only anger demonstrated a capacity to mobilize action in support of the press—perhaps attributable to how anger is often associated with certainty about where to place responsibility and blame. However, beyond Trump, perhaps fear can also motivate intentions to support the press when attribution of the cause of threat/harm to journalists is less directed at a singular figure. To further probe how efforts to make elite hostility toward the press more salient to citizens—potentially leading to intentions to direct resources and energy in support of journalism—we examine both anger and fear as mechanisms of elite hostility’s influence on intentions to support the press. A set of hypotheses is offered:

- H1: Elite hostility toward the press will demonstrate a capacity to elicit fear.*
- H2: Elite hostility toward the press will demonstrate a capacity to elicit anger.*
- H3: The elicitation of fear will cue greater openness to support the press in the form of (a) communicating support and (b) directing financial resources in support of journalism.*
- H4: The elicitation of anger will cue greater openness to support the press, in the form of (a) communicating support and (b) directing financial resources in support of journalism.*

Furthermore, recognizing that media effects are rarely direct and universal, we can build on the premises of H1–H4 and test an indirect effects model of influence by employing mediation analyses to probe the “how” and “why” of elite press potential to mobilize hostility by way of emotion-based responses.

H5: Fear will function as a mobilizing link between exposure to elite hostility toward the press and motivations to express (a) communication- (b) and financial-based support for the press.

H6: Anger will function as a mobilizing link between exposure to elite hostility toward the press and motivations to express (a) communication- (b) and financial-based support for the press.

News Media Trust as a Boundary Condition

Given this study’s concerted focus on individuals’ emotion-based responses to hostility toward the press and future-oriented behavioral intentions to support the press, *news media trust* represents a final illuminating factor to consider—examining *when* press hostility is most likely to have a mobilizing impact on individuals. In an overview offered by Strömbäck et al. (2020), news media trust refers to “the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the news media (the trustees) where citizens . . . in situations of uncertainty expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses” (p. 4). This summation (Strömbäck et al., 2020) features several notable elements of news trust that bear strong relevance to this study’s focus: Trust is *relational* in nature; it involves *future-oriented expectations*; it involves *uncertainty/vulnerability*; and, accordingly, it is associated with a level of *risk* resulting from the need to place trust in a trustee.

A focus on how news trust interacts with the key element of this research effort proves warranted when considering that one’s relational/affective bonds with news media and one’s future-oriented expectations of news media actors are likely relevant to emotional responses to elite press hostility and one’s willingness to actively support the press in the future. If a given person feels positively invested in certain news media entities and feels a degree of relational trust that their news media sources will perform in a manner that meets their (positive) expectations, it is plausible that perceived threats to news media will evoke threat-based emotions and, subsequently, prompt action to mitigate such threats to news media.

Of note, Peifer (2020) similarly considered perceptions of news media importance (PNMI) as a moderating factor relative to press hostility, evoking emotion and support for the press. It is important to recognize, however, that PNMI broadly represents a perception of news media’s material value and utility to oneself; it does not fully capture one’s *expectations* of what news media can/will do and the relational bonds between citizens and certain news media entities. Thus, a focus on the moderating role of news media trust provides a useful lens for examining the conditions in which the mobilizing impact of press hostility is most robust.

H7: This study’s proposed model of indirect influence on support for the press will significantly differ between those high versus low in news media trust, such that this study’s predicted effects will be stronger among those high in trust of news they consume.

H8: Elite press hostility is more likely to elicit (a) fear and (b) anger among those high in news media trust, compared with those relatively low in trust of news they consume.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted via an online experiment employing an opt-in sample supplied by the Qualtrics survey company ($N = 235$). The age range of the study participants was 18–80 ($M = 54.01$, $SD = 16.58$). The sample was 57% female ($n = 133$) with a diversity of household incomes (51% < \$50K, 24% ≥ \$75K). The vast majority of the sample identified as White (91%), 6% identified as Black, about 4% identified as Asian, and nearly 2% reported being Hispanic or Latino. In terms of education, about 39% held a four-year degree or beyond. For party affiliation, 32% identified as Republican and 34% as Democrat; 34% of the sample declared themselves Independent. Political ideology averaged around the midpoint of a 7-point scale, with “very conservative” coded high ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.81$).

Procedures and Stimuli

Employing a posttest-only design with a control group, the study procedures were approved in February 2019 by an institutional review board (IRB protocol # 1902363191), and the study data were collected in late March 2019.² Upon obtaining informed consent through the online questionnaire, those who agreed to participate were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. All participants first answered a battery of pretest questions, including questions about news media consumption and news trust. The experimental exposure condition featured a mash-up of news clips. The “mash-up” video design—that is, digital media content in which a creator “recombines two or more preexisting videos and/or audio sources into a new, derivative work” (Edwards & Tryon, 2009, p. 1)—followed the procedures outlined in Peifer (2020). The mash-up video featured the hostile rhetoric and behavior of multiple politicians (with no reference to Donald Trump) in both domestic and international contexts. For instance, the mash-up included news footage referencing Texas Governor Greg Abbot joking about shooting journalists and mention of Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte issuing a warning to journalists that they are not exempt from assassination. The video was 212 seconds long.³ Meanwhile, a no-media exposure control condition served to provide a baseline comparison. This approach was adopted to compare media hostility exposure to the absence of stimulating media content. It served to clarify the extent to which the survey-taking experience itself may have been a source of emotional responses, especially relative to the survey’s questions about politics, the trustworthiness of the news media, etc.

If randomly assigned to watch the press hostility mash-up, participants were subsequently asked to identify the topic of the last segment of the video. Participants in *both* conditions were then instructed to

² See Part A of the supplemental materials for an overview of the power analyses conducted for this study, which can be retrieved at: <https://www.jasontpeifer.com/onlinesupplemental>

³ See Parts C and D of the online supplemental materials for manipulation check details and a transcript of the mash-up video.

indicate the extent to which they experienced various emotions “over the last few minutes.” No specific object was referenced in the questions about emotions because of the control condition not having a referent; subjects in the control condition skipped exposure to this mash-up video and the attention check questions pertaining to it. All participants subsequently answered a battery of questions related to their behavioral intentions in support of the press.

Measures

Anger and Fear

Following exposure to the mash-up video, respondents read the prompt: “Thinking about the emotions you’ve been feeling over the last few minutes, to what extent would you say you felt ____.” The discrete emotion of *anger* was measured via the following descriptors: angry, annoyed, irritated, and aggravated (see Dillard & Shen, 2007); the 4-item anger measure ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 2.03$) was reliable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .96$). Fear was measured via three items—“afraid,” “fearful,” and “scared”—and was also found to be reliable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.96$, $M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.74$).

Support for the Press

The support measures were based on survey items employed in previous research (Peifer, 2020). Following exposure to this study’s stimuli (or no exposure), subjects read the following question about *communication-based* behavioral intentions in support of the press: “If given the opportunity, how likely would you be to take each of the following actions in the near future?” The specific actions probed by the question stem included “Sign a petition in support of press freedoms and protections,” “Share a social media post (for example, Facebook or Twitter) in support of press freedoms and protections,” “Write or call a political leader to voice support for press freedoms and protections,” and “Discuss the importance of protecting press freedoms in a conversation with a friend or family member.” Participants also answered four *financial-related* questions, preceded by the wording: “If you had the necessary resources, how likely would you be to take each of the following actions in the near future?” Question prompts included, “Donate to a nonprofit organization to support quality investigative journalism,” “Sign up for a paid subscription to a national news outlet (whether in print or online),” “Sign up for a paid subscription to a local news outlet (whether in print or online),” and “Donate to a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting press freedoms both in the United States and around the world.” Response options ranged from “not at all likely” (1) to “extremely likely” (7). Subjects could alternatively indicate “already doing” for these four financial-related questions. Those who indicated “already doing” were coded as 7 for the respective survey item. See Part B of the online supplemental appendix for details on an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) conducted to assess the basis for treating these eight items as reflecting two separate factors: *communication-based support* responses (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$; $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.86$) and *financial-based support* items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$; $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.83$).

Trust in Own News Sources

This study's trust measure reflects one's personal investment in, and expectations of, preferred news sources. Of note, this approach helps to avoid a measure of trust that is conflated with political partisanship/ideology—given the clear ideological polarization relative to general news trust (Brenan, 2021). Compared with people who might claim that they do not trust *any* news sources, it would seem likely that trusting a few preferred news media sources (even if one has suspicions about the trustworthiness of mainstream media) is linked to some degree of support for journalism work. By focusing on trust in one's preferred news sources, this research is better able to gauge one's involvement and affective connection to select forms of news—something that could be missed if we were to measure only general (mainstream) news trust. Accordingly, before the experimental treatment and measurement of the dependent variables, participants were asked, "Which newspapers, television or radio programs, or news websites do you most frequently get your news?" Subjects were instructed to name up to three specific sources of national news. (This prompt was adapted from Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). After listing one's most frequently used news sources, the next questionnaire item presented this prompt: "Thinking about where you most frequently get your news (for example, you named _____), please rate your agreement with the following statements." Adapted from Kohring and Matthes's (2007) trust in news scale, participants then responded to four statements: "The frequency with which the major issues of the day are covered by these news outlets is adequate"; "These news outlets focus on the important facts concerning the major issues of the day"; "The commentary offered by these news outlets concerning the major issues of the day consist of well-reasoned conclusions"; and "These news outlets report information that would be verifiable if examined." We deemed this composite media trust measure (*mean* = 5.24, *median* = 5.25, *SD* = 1.27) reliable (Cronbach's α = 0.93). To compare this study's modeling (see H6 and H7) between those high and low in media trust, we constructed a dichotomous trust variable based on a mean split. Individuals who reported trust greater than 5.24 (n = 140; 60% of sample) were coded as "1" (representing high trust); those with a trust rating below 5.24 (n = 95; 40% of sample) were coded as "0."

Analytical Procedures

Part E of the online supplemental appendix reports the Pearson correlations between various variables relevant to the study model. Independent samples *t* tests were first used to address basic group differences pertaining to the study's research question (RQ). For all other analyses, we employed structural equation modeling (SEM)—a technique that offers a combination of factor analysis and path analysis, with the capacity to examine multiple dependent variables in one model. Those who viewed a media hostility mash-up (n = 95) were coded as 1, and the control condition participants (n = 140) were coded as 0. Anger, fear, communication-based support, and financial-based support were all modeled as latent constructs, as described in the measures section (also see Figure 1). Two items in the financial-based support measure were covaried because of their conceptual similarities (i.e., "Sign up for a paid subscription to a national news outlet" and "Sign up for a paid subscription to a local news outlet"). Furthermore, fear and anger were covaried in recognition of their close alignment as negative, threat-based emotions.

Findings

The study's sole RQ (a,b) asks whether exposure to elite hostility toward the press generally demonstrates a capacity to promote intentions to support the press. To address this basic inquiry, two independent samples *t* tests were conducted, testing differences in (a) communication- and (b) financial-based support of the press between those who were exposed to press hostility mash-up and those who were not. With regard to communication-based support intentions, the analyses revealed no difference between the press hostility mash-up exposure group ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.92$) and the no-exposure group ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.81$), $t(233) = 0.70$, $p = 0.49$. There was also no difference in financial-based support intentions between the exposure group ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.88$) and the no-exposure group ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.81$), $t(233) = -0.24$, $p = 0.81$. In short, the data did not demonstrate a *direct* relationship between hostility and press support.

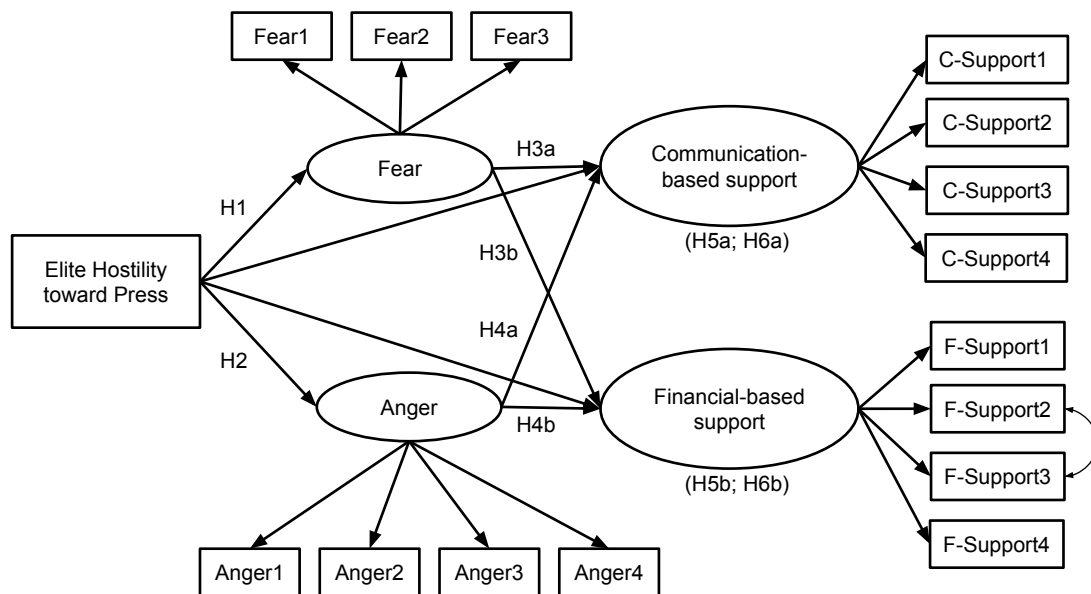


Figure 1. Conceptual model of H1–H6.

Note. Hypotheses shown in parentheses indicate tests of indirect effects via the respective emotions.

The study's hypotheses were tested with SEM via MPlus (version 8) software using maximum likelihood estimation. Based on the modeling depicted in Figure 1, the model achieved an acceptable degree of fit: $\chi^2(235) = 133.55$, $df = 94$, $p = 0.005$, root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) = 0.04 (90% confidence interval (CI): 0.024, 0.058), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.99, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.03. The first two hypotheses (H1 and H2) predicted that exposure to elite press hostility would exhibit a capacity to elicit anger and fear. These predictions found significant support. As illustrated in Figure 2, exposure to press hostility (compared with the no-media exposure condition) significantly elicited anger ($b = 1.86$, $SE = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, exposure to press hostility also elicited fear ($b = 1.16$, $SE = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$).

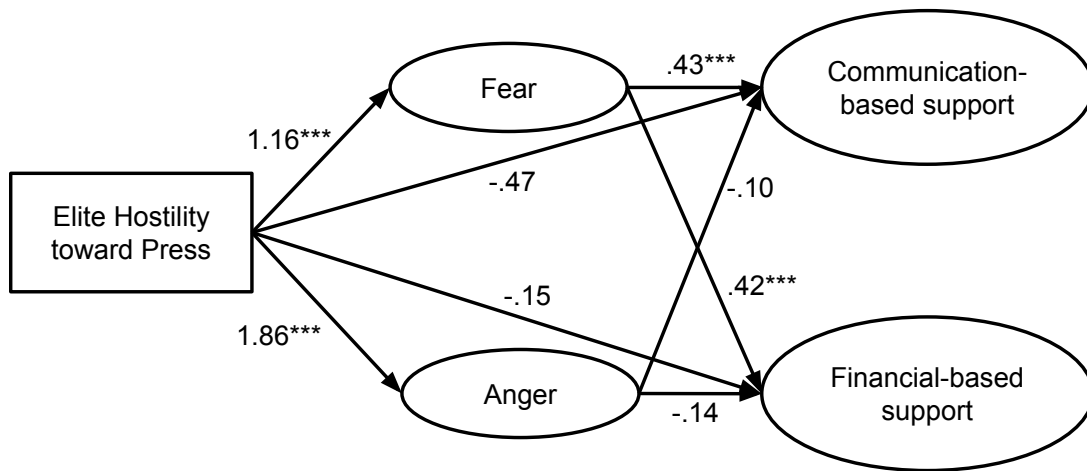


Figure 2. Model Results.

Note. Fear, anger, and the two press support measures were analyzed as the latent constructs depicted in Figure 1. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

With regard to H3 and H4's predictions that anger and fear would prompt greater openness to support the press, the analyses indicated that increased anger was not predictive of communication-based press support ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.38$). Similarly, anger did not predict financial resource-based support ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.23$). In contrast, fear was predictive of communication-based press support ($b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$) and of financial-based willingness to support the press ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$).

The hypotheses (H5a,b) that anger and fear will independently serve as mediating links between elite hostility and motivations to support the press found partial support—namely, in terms of fear. Based on a 95% bootstrap CI with 10,000 bootstrap samples (with significant effects indicated by confidence intervals that do not include zero), tests of indirect effects showcase fear's capacity to mediate between exposure to press hostility and press support. Press hostility exposure exhibited an indirect influence (labeled ab), via fear, on both communication-based support ($ab = 0.50$, 95% CI = [0.219, 0.915]) and financial-based support ($ab = 0.49$, 95% CI = [0.193, 0.888]). However, no indirect effects were exhibited relative to anger, both in terms of communication-based support ($ab = -0.18$, 95% CI = [-0.612, 0.227]) and financial-based support ($ab = -0.27$, 95% CI = [-0.746, 0.162]).

Finally, the study analyses tested for differences in the study's model of influence (H7) according to being high or low in news media trust (i.e., trust in news sources that one uses most frequently). MPlus software was used to conduct a multiple-group path analysis, with mean-split news media trust as the grouping variable. Those identified as high in trust ($n = 140$) were coded as "1," and those identified as low in trust ($n = 95$) were coded as "0." With the exception of the dummy-coded high/low media trust incorporated into the analytical model, the model and all its paths remained identical to the original model described above.

First, an unconstrained model was tested that treated those high and low in trust as two separate groups. The fit statistics for this unconstrained, two-group model were as follows: $\chi^2 = 298.14$, $df = 210$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.060 (90% CI: 0.043, 0.075), CFI = 0.974, and SRMR = 0.054. Next, a model with a full set of equality constraints was tested, treating all path estimates between the two groups as equal. The fit statistics for this constrained model (treating the sample as a single group) were as follows: $\chi^2 = 316.787$, $df = 219$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.062 (90% CI: 0.046, 0.076), CFI = 0.971, and SRMR = 0.072. A χ^2 difference test comparing the two models was significant ($\Delta \chi^2 (df = 9) = 18.647$, $p = 0.03$), proving that the two-group (i.e., high versus low-trust groups) model fits the data better than a model treating those high and low in trust as the same. Given the significant difference in the overall model, there is a basis for further assessing the potential differences in *specific* path estimates between the two groups (H8). Accordingly, we narrowed our analytical focus to whether press hostility's effects on (a) anger and (b) fear differ according to the nature of one's trust in preferred news media.

To evaluate whether there were statistically significant differences in the emotions elicited between the high/low-trust groups, a single-equality constraint was placed on the path between press hostility exposure and the elicitation of anger. This constraint rendered a single degree of freedom difference from the original, unconstrained two-group model (detailed just above). The chi-square estimate and fit statistics of the single-constraint (elite hostility exposure-to-anger path) model were as follows: $\chi^2 = 305.453$, $df = 211$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.062 (90% CI: 0.046, 0.076), CFI = 0.972, and SRMR = 0.067. A χ^2 difference test comparing the two models was significant ($\Delta \chi^2 (df = 1) = 7.313$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, to examine differences in the elite hostility effect on fear, a single constraint was placed on the elite hostility-to-fear path in the model. The chi-square estimate and fit statistics of this single-constraint model were $\chi^2 = 305.197$, $df = 211$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.062 (90% CI: 0.046, 0.076), CFI = 0.972, and SRMR = 0.066. A χ^2 difference test comparing the two models was significant relative to fear as well ($\Delta \chi^2 (df = 1) = 7.057$, $p < 0.001$). In sum, these single-equality constraint comparisons provide significant evidence that the high versus low-trust cleavage has meaningful implications *when* elite hostility toward the press elicits audience fear and anger. The data confirm that anger and fear are most likely to be elicited by exposure to elite hostility when one is relatively high in trust in their most frequently used news sources (see Part F of the online supplemental appendix figures depicting the path estimates of these models).

Discussion

Taking stock of the key study findings, the results indicate that exposure to press hostility indirectly promotes intentions to support the press through communication-based support intentions and financial resource-related support. However, this process of influence should not be cast as a universal effect. The analyses here indicate that those who are relatively high in news trust are most likely to have emotional reactions to exposure to elite hostility. Importantly, the increased likelihood of supporting the press was mediated only by the elicitation of fear. That is, only fear demonstrated an activating effect, serving as a bridge between exposure to hostility and intention to support the press. Exposure to elite hostility toward the press did not *directly* relate to support intentions.

These findings parallel—yet also stand in contrast to—Peifer's (2020) research highlighting anger's key role in mobilizing support intentions. This study's findings beg the question of why anger did not also

motivate support intentions in this experiment. In our view, this discrepancy underscores the importance of understanding how people perceive a source of threat and the degree of certainty about assigning responsibility for a perceived threat (Lazarus, 1991). Compared with prior research testing the influence of Trump's antimedia rhetoric and political activity (in which the source of any perceived threat was relatively clear), the sources of harm featured in this study were more diffused, ranging from state representatives and governors within the United States to leaders abroad. Without a singular political figure to which to attribute responsibility for the perceived threat—rendering lower certainty—fear seems to be the more operative negative emotion.

Considered alongside prior research, a key insight to highlight here is that the negative emotions evoked by perceived threats to journalism have potency. If seeking to promote public support for the press, this study offers notable insight into the utility of identifying ways to tap into the affective dimensions of citizens' connections to journalism. Though future research is needed to further refine an understanding of these dynamics, this study showcases how highlighting instances of physical danger and threat—especially emanating from a wide range of sources—is likely to activate the mobilizing power of fear. In contrast, blustering and threatening rhetoric from a polarizing figure attacking the motives and legitimacy of journalists may be more likely to elicit anger and irritation. This research underscores the importance of understanding the nature of and action tendencies associated with discrete emotions. We perceive that such an understanding enhances the capacity of advocates to leverage support for the press.

This work also underscores the importance of journalism advocates knowing their audiences and targeting their messaging. We should not expect that spotlighting instances of elite hostility will do much to persuade those preconditioned to have low regard for members of the press. As noted in the earlier sections of this article, hostile elite rhetoric does bear the potential to undermine support for journalism—particularly among individuals with a conservative political orientation and/or low news trust. This raises the fair question of whether it is worth trying to build support for journalism among those already inclined to trust news media, given that showcasing hostile elite rhetoric may also erode support among those who generally distrust news media. To be sure, persuading low-trust citizens to place faith in and support the press is a challenge with no simple answers. However, we posit that there is value in attitude reinforcement (see Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010), even if only among those already inclined to trust and support news media. Put another way, there's a reason that preachers "preach to the faithful"; people often benefit from being reminded of what they value. In view of this study's findings, the significant benefit of building and maintaining a foundation of trust and support arguably outweighs the potential negative impact of giving a platform to elite hostility toward journalists.

The strengths of this study include examining responses to elite hostility toward the press outside the scope of President Trump. While Trump has been a prominent and salient example of elite hostility, he has proven to be a particularly polarizing political figure, which can complicate the understanding of genuine public support for the press. Furthermore, this study expands a scholarly understanding of antimedia rhetoric's influence by building directly on prior research and differentiating between anger and fear (rather than conflating the two negative emotions). This distinction proves to be meaningful. It also proves illuminating to examine the moderating role of news trust relative to trust assessments about news sources with which one actually engages—not trust in a nebulous notion of "the media" that one believes *other*

people use (Daniller et al., 2017). This more specific conception of trust helps clarify an understanding of when fear and anger related to press freedoms may be evoked.

In terms of limitations, it is important to recognize that this study's measures of fear and anger do not include reference to a specific object of the anger/fear. Given our expectation that many of the political elites featured in the experimental condition (including Greg Forte, Devin Nunes, Miloš Zeman, Viktor Orbán, and Rodrigo Duterte) would likely be unfamiliar to many of the study participants—especially those in the no-media exposure control condition—we adopted measures of emotions that didn't specify the potential source of anger/fear. While this means that some of the anger and fear elicited during participation in this study *could* have been directed at journalists or news media organizations, the manipulation check question (see the supplemental material, Part C) provides evidence that this was not a significant source of anger. It should also be acknowledged that this study's operationalization of news trust (i.e., questioning trust in one's own preferred sources of news) does not precisely align with the referent of the study's dependent variable questions, which focused on supporting "the press" in a general sense. In addition, we note that the high versus low median split with this study's news media trust variable is an arbitrary and simplified delineation. Dichotomizing a continuous variable in this manner sacrifices nuance. In light of the affordances of SEM, which can model latent variables and multiple dependent variables, this trade-off was adopted in an effort not to overcomplicate the model and findings.

Future work in this domain of research would greatly benefit from measures of fear/anger and support for the press at different time points, as a means to better gauge the long-term nature of the effects showcased here. Furthermore, in terms of the experimental stimuli used in this study, the mash-up of elite hostility in the context of the United States *and* an international stage makes it more difficult to pinpoint what type of elite hostility is most conducive to fostering support for the press. Is press hostility outside the borders of one's country perceived as distant and less relevant to one's experiences with journalism, thereby rendering weaker emotional and behavioral responses? Pinpointing this distinction with press hostility effects is beyond the focus of this study but is surely worth further probing.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, this study raises questions about the ethics of leveraging anger and fear toward the goal of supporting journalism. Within a political media environment where outrage, fear mongering, and incivility abound (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), to what extent is it prudent to encourage more anger and fear in public discourse related to news and public affairs? Certainly, fear and anger can be healthy and warranted responses in the face of a threat. Indeed, we posit that alarm is an appropriate response to hostility toward journalists. Yet, even if only from a pragmatic standpoint, it is worth considering the sustainability of these emotional dynamics amid a sea of emotionally driven media content and "outrage fatigue" (Crockett, 2017, p. 769). How effective is short-lived fear and anger if one lacks a deep and meaningful appreciation of journalism's ideals in the first place? Does stirring up short-term emotions like fear and anger on a frequent basis run the risk of citizens growing numb, in the long-term, to the reality of hostility toward and harassment of journalists? While the complexities of addressing antipathy toward the press defy simple solutions, it is important to continue grappling with such questions. Overall, though, research on the influence of hostility toward the press does suggest that different types of threats can elicit

fear and/or anger on behalf of journalists, and these emotions can contribute to mobilizing citizens in support of the press. Though hostility toward the press need not be actively pursued, this research further confirms that it does afford a degree of utility for rallying support.

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