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To Tell the Truth:

The Credibility of Cable News Networks

In an Era of Increasingly Partisan Political News Coverage

by

Christopher Jadick

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Angie Moreschi, whose passion for truth and justice

is an everlasting inspiration, and Professor Gary Hanson, my boss, mentor, and friend.

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ABSTRACT

The credibility of the American news media is increasingly under fire. Despite an exponential expansion of information available in the digital media era, increased political news coverage and commentary has brought growing apprehension over how much of today's news can be trusted and believed. 24-hour cable news channels are among the media most often subject to this criticism. At the same time, the media operates under First Amendment freedom of press protection, a constitutional guarantee granted with the understanding that democracy can only succeed when its citizens are well informed. In the great experiment of our republic, a freely functioning news media fills this critical role, but only to the extent that it can be trusted to portray the truth.

This research questioned the media's ability to inform the public due to the proliferation of political news and commentary. Utilizing social judgment theory, this study offered two hypotheses: that news consumers will find more credibility in *political news* when presented by media outlets they favor due to political preferences, and that they will also find more credibility in *non-political* news when presented by media they favor due to political preferences. The study examined if there is a bleed over effect on the credibility of non-political news due to political news coverage. An experiment was conducted in which two politically diverse populations, Republicans and Democrats, where asked to rate the credibility of six stories. Three of the stories were political, three non-political. While the content of those stories remained

constant for all study participants, the media brands associated with the stories alternated

between Fox News and CNN to determine if the media source alone influences perceptions of

credibility.   Results from members of both political parties provided support for each

hypothesis. Republicans assigned greater credibility to both political and non-political news

stories when presented by their network of preference, Fox News. By comparison, Democrats

demonstrated greater trust when those same stories where branded by their preferred network,

CNN.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What is the truth? That simple question is increasingly difficult to answer in the digital media era. Not only is there an unprecedented amount of information available to consumers, but today's news media is deliberately slanting its content to better appeal to various segments of consumers (Xiang & Savary, 2007).   Adding to this confusion is the more recent controversy over fake news, further eroding media credibility through news satire or complete fabrication from those with no obligation to either fact or fiction (Balmas, 2014). With the lines of believability increasingly blurred, today the credibility equated with the media's capability of reporting the truth is subject to wide-ranging individual interpretation. However, the genesis for this credibility quagmire rests in a valid and fundamental principle of our nation. The United States' founding fathers understood the importance of unfiltered and open access to information to act in part as a system of checks and balances to regulate government (Mathewson, 2009). If a country's people were going to dictate democracy's course, they needed an accurate understanding of the world and their society. This is a central tenet of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by which our modern media, regardless of its legitimacy and motivations, continues to freely operate and benefit. The truth must be exposed for democracy to succeed.

While opinion and yellow journalism have always been a part of our press, the foundation of American journalism is rooted in ethical principles for reporting that seek truth without bias. For decades, many journalists have been able to work within these standards, serving the American public as the founding fathers desired (Merrill, Gade, & Blevens, 2001).

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But the digital revolution is placing new strains on the business of mass media. Amid new profit pressures, increasing priority is placed on motives to retain and grow the audience, often at the expense of fair and non-biased reporting (Hollander, 2008). Audiences not only recognize this bias, they often seek it out, gravitating to media channels whose content best matches their own beliefs and opinions (Feldman, 2011). Moreover, they are associating this content with the brands media channels represent (Chan-Olmsted, 2011), assigning varying levels of credibility depending on how much they perceive these media outlets align with their personal political beliefs (Stroud & Lee, 2013). Trust in news sources has already been demonstrated as increasingly polarizing across media brands, such as more Republicans than Democrats attributing greater credibility to Fox News when compared to other news outlets (Pew Research Center, 2008). However, while there is an increasing body of research focused on trust and credibility as it relates to political news, much less has been studied regarding the impact that political polarization has on the media's ability to inform on the news that is incontrovertibly true: a train crash, the enactment of new law, a tornado in Nebraska, etc. Put another way, does a lack of credibility in media due to perceived bias in political news coverage and commentary extend to non-political news? As Hindman (1992) wrote, "The ideal of the First Amendment, as presented in the marketplace model, is that speech and press are protected in order to aid society in the search for the truth" (p. 48). If the press cannot be believed, can it function as our founding fathers envisioned? If not, could it be vulnerable to those who question the need for press protection under the First Amendment?   This study will seek insight by examining impressions of an information medium that is historically recent but increasingly influential on the American media landscape, the 24-hour cable news channel, by measuring and comparing audience perceptions of credibility for both political and non-political reporting.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Internal Media Conflicts: To Inform or Persuade?

The study of communication and the distinction between media that persuades as opposed to that which informs dates to ancient Greece. In persuasion, a change of viewpoints or call to action is the goal, as Perloff (2010) defined: "Persuasion is the study of attitudes and how to change them" (p. 4). While Plato would dismiss the value of persuasion, Aristotle took the more practical approach in embracing it and understanding its importance, finding that rhetoric's goal was not so much to seek out the truth but rather to convince an audience on one's line of thinking (Cooper & Nothstine, 1998). A great deal of research has justifiably been given to the persuasive capabilities of mass media with multiple studies showing significant persuasive impacts to mass media exposure (Hill, Lo, Vavreck, & Zaller, 2013). Mass media communication can persuade and Aristotle would likely concur.

In the United States, persuasion has been a part of our free press since the founding of the country. Newspapers that evolved soon after the American Revolution centered on a highly-opinionated press that aided the political process through widespread partisanship (McChesney, 2012). Editorials in which publishers take positions on public policy have a long-standing and powerful position in American media (Zarza, Tan, Chan, & Ali, 2015). Health campaigns flourished in 20th century America with communication targeted to change both attitudes and public policy (Perloff, 2010). Other studies have since demonstrated modern media's persuasive power on a myriad of issues, with housing prices (McCollough & Karani, 2014), healthcare

reform (Collins, Abelson, Pyman, & Lavis, 2006), health information (Berry, Wharf-Higgins, & Naylor, 2007) and education (Capobianco, 2009) among them.

Mass media researchers have also explored the relationship between political news and audience impact. Newspaper affiliation with political parties was commonplace in the 18th and 19th centuries (Stengel, 2008). Political endorsements by newspapers have been found to be overtly biased in their influence over voters (Chiang & Knight, 2011). Studies going back as early as the 1940 U.S. Presidential election uncovered media factors that influenced attitudes and opinions that predisposed voter choices (Lazarsfeld, Berleson, & Gaudet, 1944). Since then, researchers have explored the media's political influence on areas that include voters (Carle, 2014), issues (Dillman Carpenter, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008) and members of Congress (Clinton & Enamorado, 2014).

But while the American press has long been used as a medium of persuasion, particularly in government and politics, its founding principles are anchored in objectivity that informs the public. Our sacred guarantee of press freedom is rooted in the understanding that the media will be privately owned, work as a quasi-public service to aid American democracy, and will report truthfully (Merrill, Gade, & Blevens, 2001). The press must be critical and unbiased to investigate wrongdoing while simultaneously being objective in evaluating partisan rhetoric from those in power (Fransworth & Lichter, 2011). This is a critical tool that citizens need for information to be disseminated as part of public consideration (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). For democracy to be effective, the press must be allowed to operate freely without government regulation, so it can fill the gap between what citizens know and what they need to know (Warren, 1999). Today, that ethical foundation of journalism as defined by the Society of Professional Journalists (2014) continues to echo these intentions: "The duty of the journalist is

to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues," and that journalists must "avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived."

News organizations have publicly recognized this as they tout their objectivity and push back against claims of bias (Carrier, 2015). Regardless, research has demonstrated there is bias in news coverage, particularly in political news. Farnsworth and Lichter (2011) used data compiled by The Project for Excellence in Journalism by the Pew Research Center in conducting content analysis of presidential campaign coverage between 1988 and 2008. The project conducted a broad examination of media, including newspapers, magazines, broadcast, cable and online news sites, with the researchers concluding "there were serious problems with negativity, fairness, or accuracy in all six campaigns we studied" (p. 93). This, and similar findings, give media critics ammunition to attack the media's credibility, or "capacity for belief" (Merriam-Webster, 2017), a necessary component if the media is truly to be an aid for the citizens of the United States' democratic republic.

Cable Network News Brands

In modern era media, the rules are evolving. Far from the independent printer of Ben Franklin's era publishing a modest newspaper, today's media companies are big business, publicly-traded corporations, with growing profit motivations. As in other industries, brand image is an important factor in consumer behavior (Vebrova, Venclova, & Rojik, 2016). Brands have already been established as having powerful influences (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005). A correlation has also been demonstrated between brands and the attitudes those brands reflect (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010). Likewise, television news networks are brands that develop consumer reputations influencing loyalty, usage, and attitude (Chan-Olmstead &

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Jiyoung, 2008). News organizations have become brands that are used extensively in marketing, necessitated by an increasingly fragmented audience that is relatively finite in size (Smith & Searles, 2012). Increasingly, news viewers are associating brands and making viewing decisions based on the causes they support, and this often aligns with their political viewpoints. Lafferty (2007) found evidence to support a link between the cause of an organization, its brand, and the degree to which it is believed, writing "It is also important to understand if a company's credibility or overall image can be influenced by the fit of a CBA (corporate-brand alliance)" (p. 450). Just as consumers have come to associate what they expect from a product with the brand on the box, so too have they developed expectations for the content they will see on television based on the news network brand. News media consumers have become more empowered not only to determine what media brands they will consume, but what they will believe (Lee, 2013).

Ever more, business demands are leading to changes on television and the brands media channels have come to represent. Too often, the mere reporting of facts in a nightly newscast is not sufficient to support the revenue and profit demands of shareholders in multibillion-dollar media corporations (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Increased consumption of news via the internet is directly related to declining ratings for television news programs (Bucy, 2003). To win the number of viewers necessary to meet revenue goals within these new boundaries of audience fragmentation, electronic news outlets such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC are increasingly turning to programming that is partisan and opinion-based (Feldman, 2011). That political identity is more and more important to network brands and news viewership. Thus, today's cable news networks have evolved into politicized brands necessary to attract an audience in an era where the viewership pool is increasingly fragmented (Smith & Searles, 2012). Newscast viewers are not oblivious to slanted coverage; by contrast, they are increasingly seeking out news

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that conforms to their personal positions. Iyengar and Han (2009) found these choices are made in conjunction with a viewer's political ideology, as "results demonstrate the divide in news selection between conservatives and liberals is considerable" (p. 29). But while this benefits cable networks looking to solidify a core audience of followers, it comes at the price of alienating those who don't agree. Coinciding with this acceptance of favorable news media brands are the rejection and negative impression of brands seen as not coinciding with personal views (Iyengar & Han).

Hostile Media Effect

While media audiences are increasingly partisan toward media outlets that they believe correspond to their political values, they are concurrently critical and rejecting of mediums they see in opposition. Three decades ago, in an examination of audience reaction to press accounts on the Arab-Israeli conflict, this phenomenon was first identified as the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Regardless of positions either pro-Arab or pro-Israeli, partisans on both sides of the divide did not support what was otherwise viewed to be objective news coverage in which neither side was favored over the other (Perloff, 2015). Vallone et al. (1985) ascribed this phenomenon to biased assimilation in which information that confirms viewpoints is accepted without question, but divergent information or views are either discarded or ignored (Reid, 2012). Since then, the hostile media effect has been studied to discover its existence in other communications relationships. Studies have revealed that the greater the polarization of media the more likely an audience will reject media that it believes is in opposition (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Other findings lead to the conclusion that when message recipients on opposite sides of an issue find bias in the same news program against their

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positions, both cannot be correct. Therefore, at least some bias must originate with the message recipients (Goldman & Mutz, 2011).

Declining credibility is a critical factor because a news viewer's perception of the media, and whether bias is impacting the message, makes a difference in the degree to which a message will be accepted and believed true. Feldman (2011) conducted a series of online experiments in which participants were studied after viewing either an "opinionated" or "non-opinionated" news report. She found evidence of differing priming influence, writing "Specifically, issue partisans appear to have a 'bias against bias,' whereby they perceive less bias in opinionated news with which they are predisposed to agree than non-partisans and especially partisans on the other side of the issue" (p. 407). Gunther and Chia (2001) found evidence of hostile media perception in which a recipient's view of the news slant influenced the impression made by news reports. Moreover, these attitudes don't just impact beliefs but also influence behaviors (Perloff, 2015).

Not surprisingly, hostile media effect has also been shown to manifest itself along political lines. Self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) contends that group polarization can be attributed to conformity to a polarized norm, when the group contrasts other groups within a social context. Reid's (2012) experiments testing self-categorization found political partisanship amplified the effect. Erlich & Gramzow (2015) furthered this with experiments in which participants self-identified their group as either Republican or Democrat. They found that party affiliation can intensify group-centric bias, specifically that "group-affirmation elevated ingroup bias specifically when examining negative trait evaluations" (p. 1114). The researchers found that the greater the group identification, as either Republican or Democrat, the less likely participants would be critical of their group, the ingroup, and the more likely they would exhibit bias against the opposing party, the outgroup. This appears to parallel the media findings of

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Levendusky & Malhotra (2016) who found higher polarization resulted in greater media rejection.

Similar research has led to what is now called the "back-fire effect" (Reifler & Nyhan, 2010) in which media reports that contradict held beliefs may cause the recipient to become even more hardened in their media rejection. Reifler and Nyhan conducted experiments to determine whether false perceptions could be corrected by the media. In four experiments, subjects read mock news articles which included either a misleading claim by a politician or a claim accompanied by corrected information. They found acceptance of the corrections directly correlated to the viewer's ideological views. This work demonstrates that the more likely a recipient accepts the ideological foundation of the messenger, the more they will be to accept and deem a message credible. Reid (2012) also explored this phenomenon in which neutral messages are perceived to be biased by recipients who have firm political beliefs. He describes self-categorization as providing evidence that perception of reality is influenced by peers.

There is also evidence that the increase in partisan rhetoric by mass media news outlets is eroding the credibility that recipients have in the news that is reported (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008). Taking this concept further, Mutz (2012) found this new partisan direction of the media was wearing away its ability to prime the audience. She writes, "many scholars have speculated that individuals' exposure to ideas they do not already agree with will be increasingly limited, thus making persuasion unlikely as well. Thus, academics have already begun to note 'the waning of mass media influence in the lives of most citizens'" (p. 91). Her conclusion can be extrapolated to suggest the audience might also question reports on nonpolitical issues, should those reports not coincide with a preconceived belief. Alarmingly, others suggest eroding credibility in media leads to less trust in democratic institutions, thereby equating hostile media

perception with a decreasing ability for government to effectively function (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

Biased Assimilation

The hypodermic needle theory maintained mass media messaging had direct and immediate impact on the audience, but we have since learned a multitude of audience variables impact how messages are interpreted, understood and accepted. Psychologists have maintained that humans are essentially responding to emotional impulses in their behavior, and this stimulus response impacts the acceptance of messages (Wicks, 1996).

The assimilation-contrast model holds that message evaluation coincides with the attitude of the person receiving that message. Assimilation, or agreement, is more apparent when the receiver has a more favorable attitude, while contrast coincides with disagreeable content (Gunther, et. al., 2009). While the hostile media effect demonstrates the tendency of people to find neutral messages to be in opposition to their point of view, biased assimilation holds that strong opinions on complex issues impact understanding and can result in bias in message interpretation (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). This especially can be pronounced when the understanding of a message is in doubt. Lord, et al. (1979) studied the perception of capital punishment arguments on people in favor and opposed to the death penalty. In finding evidence of attitude polarization, the researchers concluded that "judgments about the validity, reliability, relevance, and sometimes even the meaning of proffered evidence are biased by the apparent consistency of that evidence with the perceiver's theories and expectations" (p. 2099). As cable network news brands have established political ideologies with viewers, it is plausible that they

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have these "expectations" and therefore it is reasonable to believe that cable news network brands themselves may induce bias, regardless of the news being presented.

Shanahan, McBeth, and Hathaway (2011) provide evidence in support of the assimilation-contrast model. They studied the impact of policy narratives in an experiment involving controversy at Yellowstone National Park. Baseline opinion surveys were used as a pretest, followed by a policy narrative, then a posttest, to measure prevailing opinions. The researchers found that messages which most closely aligned with pre-standing opinions "preach to the choir" (p. 373) when the messenger is similarly aligned with the beliefs of the recipient (assimilation), but also strengthen an opinion in the opposite direction when read by audiences with divergent opinions (contrast). This demonstrates that the acceptance of a message differs where there are divergent opinions.

Not only is there growing evidence that biased assimilation occurs, but competition between media brands may be contributing to and exacerbating the phenomenon. There is little question that people are exposed to a large and increasing amount of communication daily, estimated to now equal more than 15 hours daily per person (Short, 2013). In keeping with the view of psychologists that message interpretation is impacted by external stimuli, communication messages compete with and impact the influence of other messages. Tormala & Clarkson (2007) conducted multiple message experiments to determine if the attitudes of adjacent messages influenced each other, writing "It stands to reason that prior messages might create a context that affects perceptions of, and the resulting persuasiveness of, subsequent (target) messages even when those messages refer to different issues" (p. 559). These experiments manipulated source credibility, concluding that, as suspected, prior source credibility led to both contrast and assimilation. Additional experiments by Gunther (2009) on

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hostile media effect also found evidence that different groups would respond differently to variants in the source. However, the experiments did not contrast political and non-political news, leaving open the opportunity for an experiment to explore whether the same phenomenon is detected when the source credibility variable is cable channel news brands.

There is reason to suspect the politicization of cable news brands will lead to similar findings, as biased assimilation has been demonstrated to exist in political communication. Munro, et. al., (2002) evaluated perceptions of viewers from the first presidential debate between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole in 1996, finding that attitudes prior to the debate predicted how arguments would be rated after the debate was over. Arguments that agreed with pre-debate attitudes were more likely held favorable as opposed to arguments against. Researchers found the candidates' messages were not evaluated logically, but instead "prior attitudes bias the manner in which we evaluate the arguments." (p. 24). Politically-oriented biased assimilation was also demonstrated in experiments conducted by Greitemeyer et al. (2009). In these trials, the messages by political candidates served as the independent variable while political affiliation was the dependent variable. Arguments were more favorably received when labeled with political brands that coincided with participants' political preferences, with less bias detected when there was no party label attached.

Social Judgment Theory

Attitudes and motivations have long been studied by psychologists, sociologists and academics seeking to better understand human behavior. How do such attitudes originate and what influences people to act as they do? As early as the 1920s, surveys were conducted to demonstrate that different attitudes existed among various demographics but without any

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significant research to understand the motivations that shaped those attitudes (Hoveland &

Sherif, 1980). Later in the century, the development of social judgment theory (SJT) offered

perspectives in this pursuit. In the 1950s, Brunswik first proposed probabilistic functionalism, a

psychological concept which proposes that a person's perception is influenced by environmental

cues (Coleman, 2008). Brunswik maintained that the world was filled with uncertainty so the

simple act of survival required the mind to make evaluations or become probabilistic.

Therefore, external variables could play significant roles in the individual actions that resulted

from the processing of ideas and information (Brunswik, Stewart, & Hammond, 2001). From

this foundation, Sherif, Sherif & Hovland (1980) introduced SJT, a theory which claims

subconscious evaluations are made in comparison with existing attitudes whenever information

is acquired. New ideas are evaluated and placed along a continuum of attitudes which influence

how much an idea is to be favored and information is to be believed. SJT maintains the

performance of a judge, or communication recipient, is subjective to the relationships between

available cues and the consistency of the individual using those cues (Hall & Oppenheimer,

2015). These social judgments are determined by a combined impact of both observable and

inferred influences (Khan, Dang, & Mack, 2014). Using SJT, Bitekine (2011) found that social

and cognitive processes play a critical role in determining "legitimacy, reputation, and status" (p.

172), providing more reason to study the impact those processes play in the way we disseminate

the news and determine its validity.

Reid (2012) found SJT can impact the perception of information, which is the currency of

media. "Social judgment theory predicts that as partisanship increases, the higher the likelihood

that information will fall into a latitude of rejection" (p. 396). Numerous studies have examined

and found evidence of both hostile media effect and social judgment theory, including Choi, Park

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and Chang (2011), and Richardson, Huddy and Morgan (2008). SJT has also been applied to determine how individuals assess capability and character as that relates to organizational reputation (Mushina, Block, & Mannor, 2012). Rindova, et al. (2005) maintain the prominence of an organization can influence its relationship with constituents. "Prominence refers to the degree to which external audiences are aware of an organization and consider it to be relevant and salient" (Mushina, Block, & Mannor, p. 472). As news networks are organizations, SJT provides reason to further explore the impact of network reputation on salience and credibility, which are directly related to perception of the truth.

Social judgment theory has also been applied in political contexts. Cornwall, et al. (2015) found that viewpoints on a presidential candidate's warmth and competence varied in accordance with candidate preference and whether they were Democrat or Republican. "Members of both parties emphasize whichever social perception favors their presidential candidate of choice in a specific election when making their judgments" (p. 1065). Moreover, through the U. S. democratic process, people aren't simply observers of the political news they watch; they are enfranchised and therefore involved (Park, Levine, & Westerman, 2007).

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY RATIONALE

Despite the controversy raging around the media, the majority of the American public (55%) find the most positive thing the press does is report the news objectively and/or provide a public service (Ericsen & Gottfried, 2016). This means the mission of the free press to accurately relay information remains a core tenet in the American republic. As part of this service, cable television plays a significant and influential role. Heavy television viewers average 72 minutes of home viewing per day watching cable news channels, far outdistancing the influence of broadcast network news at 32 minutes and local TV news at 22 minutes daily (Drake, 2013). However, research has also demonstrated an increasing partisanship in cable news coverage, recognition by viewers of this partisanship, and changes in viewing decisions based on the political alignment of the audience and the perception of the cable network's allegiance as represented by its brand. These perceptions of bias coincide with declining levels of trust and credibility (Feldman, 2011 and Morris, 2007) and have increased public cynicism as it relates to press objectivity (Crawford, 2005). The deliberate slant in news content to appeal to viewer preference corresponds with declining credibility of electronic news media, as Bucy (2003) notes when he writes "coverage-related factors have called the credibility of network news into question" (p. 248). While not necessarily a causal relationship, it provides additional reason for news viewers to question the substance of information they receive from outlets they already distrust due to political bias.

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Amid the considerations news viewers make in determining what they will and will not accept rest the brands of the news organizations. As demonstrated earlier, viewers are increasingly equating these brands with political ideologies which they will trust or distrust by varying degrees.   Heuristic processing provides news viewers the means to use brands in those determinations. They are a way to circumvent direct systematic and in-depth processing of a message via shortcuts represented by heuristics other than the face-value substance of the message itself (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Similarly, the elaboration likelihood model, or ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), maintains that source factors impact perceptions of acceptance and rejection, serving as shortcuts to those determinations when there is low elaboration of likelihood. At the core of each theory is that a systematic, central route, approach to message evaluation serves as a "high-end" (p. 668) method for message assessment and judgment, while at the other end of the spectrum rests a low-end, peripheral route, in which shortcuts or heuristics are used to more quickly pass judgment. When the peripheral route is taken by news viewers, it is plausible that cable news brands serve as a low-level mechanism for message assessment and credibility validation as those same means are already being used by viewers to determine which channels they will watch and prefer. When systematic processing is circumvented, a preferred and trusted cable news brand may provide the cognitive cue to more readily believe whatever is presented on that channel, and result in higher levels of credibility, regardless of whether the story is political or non-political in nature. Concurrently, rejection of the cable news brand could result in contrast, equating to a greater likelihood of story rejection and less credibility.

So, what happens when we take politics out of the cable news equation? Are cognitive cues associated with the cable brands' varying political ideologies overriding otherwise systematic processing of information presented as news? If so, do cable news channels still have

sufficient credibility to inform the public and act as trusted disseminators of what is happening in the world, or is there a bleed over effect from political news bias that erodes the medium's capability to report non-political news? Let's consider a hypothetical story example, the announcement by a major-medical organization on the development of a new vaccine with the potential to save many lives. Would such a non-political story be judged on face value and considered factual or will the believability of the story be influenced by perceived political bias as represented by the messenger of that report, the cable news network, especially if there was a preconceived audience bias due to political polarization between network and viewer? The answer to that question has serious implications when we further consider whether cable news channels are either bona fide extensions of the press and protected from regulation as required by the First Amendment or rather businesses using the currency of free speech for profit. If they are the latter, cable news networks could be subject to commerce regulations commonly applied to many other U.S. businesses with profit motives such as banking, the auto industry, and oil companies. Critics have already proposed the possibility. Per Chang (2000), "Entrepreneurial decisions to sell the market-driven message do not warrant protection under the First Amendment from the perspective of republican democracy" (p. 549).   Such critics contend that when a commercial interest creates "message-as-product" (Chang, p. 549) in building business relationships with consumers it is not upholding the values and principles of the First Amendment but rather creating a property interest that is more aptly protected, and potentially regulated, under the stipulations of the Fifth Amendment. This interpretation should cause serious alarm for purveyors of press freedom, especially given that the nation's newly elected president, Donald Trump, has waged a very public and vocal war against the media. Trump has vowed to change libel laws that could significantly weaken First Amendment press protection

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(Jacobs, 2016). There is already reason to believe the influence cable news networks have on audience trust extends beyond political issues. Content analysis on science, religion, and education stories reported on Fox News by Cassino (2016) found non-political issues such as these become partisan when they are reported within a context of so much political news and commentary. He concludes "the coverage on Fox is leading individuals to link existing political views with new issue areas," and that this results in "politicizing issues that might otherwise be outside the realm of partisan politics" (p. 150).   Further reason to distrust the media as purveyors of the truth in non-political news will only provide more ammunition for press critics and proponents of government regulation on media. Greater understanding of the impact that partisan political news and commentary are having on the news media's ability to keep U.S. citizens well-informed is increasingly necessary.

CHAPTER FOUR: HYPOTHESES

The modern digital media era has increasingly empowered news viewers to choose the news messages that they will consume, and they have demonstrated a tendency to make those choices along ideological lines of opinions and beliefs.   Similarly, are news audiences also choosing what they believe to be true based on the ideological brands news networks have established in their quest to increase viewership? Based on previous research, there is reason to suspect a bleed over effect from the credibility, or lack thereof, that cable news network brands represent because of their political ideologies. It is offered that the level of credibility attributed to news reports, regardless of whether those reports are political in nature, will coincide with the viewer's predisposition toward the cable network brand. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: News viewers will give higher credibility ratings to <u>*political*</u> *news stories when those stories are presented by networks that align with their political ideology, and lower credibility to the same stories when presented by networks that do not align with their political preferences.*

H2: News viewers will give higher credibility ratings to <u>*non-political*</u> *news stories when those stories are presented by networks that align with their political ideology, and lower credibility to the same stories when presented by networks that do not align with their political preferences.*

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CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the design and procedures of an online, manipulated experiment, including the participant pool, online survey instrument, and manipulation of variables. Participants with measurable degrees of varying political ideology were asked to read both political and non-political stories in which media branding was alternatively presented, in effort to measure if media brand alone impacted perceptions of credibility.

Design

The experiment design was 2x2x2 mixed factorial. Independent variables of News Network, Political Ideology, and News Type were manipulated against the dependent variable of Credibility. Factor 1: News Network (a between subjects factor with two levels: FOX News vs. CNN). Factor 2: Political Ideology (a between subjects factor with two levels: Republicans vs. Democrats). Factor 3: News Type (a within subjects factor with two levels: political and non-political).

This design will test credibility on the research hypotheses:

1. The interaction effect of Network and Political Ideology on the credibility of political news (H1);

2. The interaction effect of Network and Political Ideology on the credibility of non-political news (H2).

Participants

In any experiment, the make-up of the participant pool is critical. In today's digital era, broadcast and cable outlets are considered old media. The average age of network news viewers is older than the population in general. Surveys find the average age of a Fox News viewer is more than 68, while CNN viewers average 62.5 years old (Gold, 2014). Increasingly, younger generations of news consumers do not get news from traditional outlets, as compared to older generations. Experiment participants who are most often identified as traditionalists born prior to 1945, and baby boomers, born between 1946-1964 (Wiedner, 2015) best represent typical cable television news viewers.

In addition, evaluation of the hypotheses required that participants possess measurable political ideologies. To meet both these needs, study participants were recruited from Republican and Democrat clubs across Florida. Email invitations were sent to club leaders with a request that the survey be distributed to club members. Between April 22 and May 7, 2017, the survey was taken by 125 participants, 63 of whom identified as Democrat with 62 others identifying as Republican. Additionally, more than a third of survey participants who answered the generation question were born prior to 1946 (ages 71 and above), and a total of 87.6 percent were born prior to 1965 (ages 51 and above), providing a base of participants that more accurately matches the average age of the nationwide cable news audience (Table 1).

Nearly 89% of study participants were Caucasian, with 6% Hispanic. 54% were female and 45% male (Table 2). The gender breakdown more accurately matches the gender breakdown in elections, as female voters made up 53% of voters in the 2012 elections (VoteRunLead.org, 2017) (Table 3).

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Table 1: *Participants by Age Generation*:

PARTICIPANTS BY GENERATION		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Born Before 1946	36	27.7	34.3	**34.3**
	Born 1946-1964	56	43.1	53.3	**87.6**
	Born 1965-1976	7	5.4	6.7	94.3
	Born 1977-1995	5	3.8	4.8	99.0
	Born 1996 and After	1	.8	1.0	100.0
	Total	105	80.8	100.0	
Missing	System	25	19.2		
Total		130	100.0		

Table 2: *Participants by Race*

PARTICIPANTS BY RACE		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Caucasian	93	71.5	88.6	88.6
	African American	1	.8	1.0	89.5
	Hispanic	6	4.6	5.7	95.2
	Asian	1	.8	1.0	96.2
	Native American	1	.8	1.0	97.1
	Other	3	2.3	2.9	100.0
	Total	105	80.8	100.0	
Missing	System	25	19.2		
Total		130	100.0		

Table 3: *Participants by Gender*

PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Male	47	36.2	**44.8**	44.8
	Female	57	43.8	**54.3**	99.0
	Other	1	.8	1.0	100.0
	Total	105	80.8	100.0	
Missing	System	25	19.2		
Total		130	100.0		

To measure distinct political ideologies, separate but identical surveys were distributed to Republicans and Democrats (Table 4). Within each group, participants viewed all six stories branded as either Fox or CNN. Within the six stories, three were categorized as political stories, and three others categorized as non-political stories. To minimize survey bias, the stories were presented in a random order throughout the survey period.

Table 4: *Survey Distribution*:

Survey 1: REPUBLICANS	Group #1 (26 surveys)	Group #2 (36 surveys)
Network	**FOX**	**CNN**
Political Stories (3)	Abortion Casino Immigration	Abortion Casino Immigration
Non-Political Stories (3)	Hercules Milk Tree	Hercules Milk Tree

Survey 2: DEMOCRATS	Group #1 (29 surveys)	Group #2 (34 surveys)
Network	**FOX**	**CNN**
Political Stories (3)	Abortion Casino Immigration	Abortion Casino Immigration
Non-Political Stories (3)	Hercules Milk Tree	Hercules Milk Tree

The survey alternatively provided participants with either the Fox or CNN block of stories, for equal distribution. The difference in completed surveys per block is attributed to those who dropped out before completion. Among both Republicans and Democrats, more participants dropped out of the Fox survey than those assessing the CNN stories.

Procedure

To test both hypotheses, a set of six short news stories was assembled with content derived from the publicly posted Associated Press online service at www.hosted.ap.org. While the content was edited and adjusted to make each story fit within a three to five paragraph parameter, the facts were not fabricated. Each story represented news as factually reported by the Associated Press, under the reasonable assumption that it was true. In addition, care was taken to select stories that only contained factual material (i.e. who, what, when, where, why) and did not include comment or opinion that could also influence perceptions of credibility.

Three stories were chosen as political, three others deemed non-political. A story was determined to be political if it met Merriam-Webster's (2017) dictionary definition: of or relating to government, a government, or the conduct of government. The three political stories were labeled: 1) Abortion (Alabama legislature considers right to life legislation); 2) Casino (gaming industry urges gambling disorders be covered in any Affordable Health Care Act reform); and 3) Immigration (U.S. judge grants political asylum to a man from Singapore, despite objections from President Trump's administration). Stories that qualified as non-political were: 1) Hercules (Roman era artifact discovered in Europe returned to Turkey); 2) Milk (dairy industry says almond and soy products should not be labeled as milk); and 3) Tree (falling trees kill three women in California).

While all stories were factually based, they were deliberately chosen as obscure, off-the-front-page stories, with which participants may not have been familiar. This was to induce a modicum of doubt necessary for participants to look for cues beyond the story content itself in making their credibility judgments. For example, a story that is overtly true and known to have happened such as "Donald Trump was sworn in as President of the United States this past

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January" would not be used because it is well-accepted truth, regardless of whether the participant was happy about it or not. When the facts are obvious, it is expected such a story is likely to be highly credible notwithstanding network brand or the study participant's political preference. Similarly, an overtly false story, such as one stating that Hillary Clinton was sworn in as president, was also not used since that is obviously false. Care was taken to test news stories that fell in the middle, with information that the study participant likely would have little prior knowledge of whether it is factual or not. In the end, the testing of the hypotheses did not depend on the actual truth of the stories being assessed. That is because this experiment was not determining the *amount* of credibility but rather the *difference* in perceived credibility as measured between participants of varying ideologies and preferences when the exact same content is consumed under alternate source brands.

After the six stories were assembled, each was placed within web templates of FoxNews.com and CNN.com, creating a total test sample of 12 stories. This slight deception was necessary to ensure the exact same word-for-word stories could be tested with network branding being the only variable. To distinguish a story as deriving from Fox, the FoxNews.com web template included the same header, side bar, advertising, logos, etc. as are actually used on FoxNews.com. The content of these web elements was also varied, to give participants the impression the story was actually taken from the FoxNews.com web site. In addition, Foxnews.com uses a distinctive header with the word "Politics" prominently displayed above political news stories. This header was also used in the experiment for political stories, with the generic banner used for non-political news. The exact same was done for the six stories tested with the CNN brand, including the use of CNN's distinctive "politics" banner for the three stories in the political news set.

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The experiment was conducted online via the survey interface Qualtrics. Each study participant was asked to assess all six stories under one brand or the other, either Fox or CNN, but not both. After each story, participants were asked to rate it for truth, accuracy, and trustworthiness using 7-point bipolar semantic differential scales (Table 5).

Table 5: Measures of Credibility

How true do you think the story is?
NOT TRUE ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ TRUE
How accurate do you think the story is?
NOT ACCURATE ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ACCURATE
How trustworthy do you think the story is?
NOT TRUSTWORTHY __ __ __ __ __ __ __ TRUSTWORTHY

These scores were then combined into a measure of each story's perceived credibility. Cronbach's Alpha provides a means to test the internal consistency of the three terms (Table 6). A reliability coefficient of 0.7 is acceptable and 0.8 or higher indicates good reliability (Zaiontz, 2017). All six stories exceed 0.9.

Table 6: Cronbach's Alpha Test for Credibility Measurement

SCALE INTERNAL CONSISTENCY: PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY		
Story	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Abortion	.938	3
Casino	.966	3
Immigration	.975	3
Hercules	.962	3
Milk	.967	3
Tree	.948	3

Posttest Political Ideology Measures

Posttest political ideology was measured, with 51 Republicans and 54 Democrats answering this question.   Due to the recruitment method, it could be assumed that those asked to take the Republican survey would identify as Republican, and likewise for Democrats. However, this posttest confirms the ideologies of the respective participants, and to what degree. Once again, using 7-point bipolar semantic differential scales, participants were asked to rate political ideology via party (Republican vs. Democrat), conservative vs. liberal, right-wing vs. left-wing (Table 7). Cronbach's alpha confirmed consistency of these three measures.

Table 7: Political Ideology Measures and Internal Consistency

Generally speaking, I consider my own political ideology to be:
LIBERAL _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ CONSERVATIVE
DEMOCRAT _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ REPUBLICAN
LEFT-WING _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ RIGHT-WING

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY		
News Source	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Ideology	.957	3

Subsequently, t-test analyzation of the two populations revealed a statistically significant ideological difference in the two sample sets of Republicans and Democrats:

Table 8: *T-test of Political Ideology*

T-TEST GROUPINGS					
	PARTY	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Liberal-Conservative	Democrats	54	.74	1.136	.155
	Republicans	51	5.33	.864	.121
Left Wing-Right Wing	Democrats	54	1.13	1.304	.177
	Republicans	51	4.65	1.110	.155
Democrat-Republican	Democrats	54	.31	.609	.083
	Republicans	51	5.55	.702	.098
Political Ideology	Democrats	54	.7284	.85432	.11626
	Republicans	51	5.1765	.70978	.09939

Levene's test was applied to determine if the variances are equal, or homogeneity of variance (Table 9). Each of the tests demonstrates significant homogeneity <= .05.

Table 9: *Levene's Independent Samples Test for Equality of Means.*

	LEVENE'S TEST		T-TEST FOR EQUALITY OF MEANS					95% Confidence Interval of Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Liberal-Conservative	3.469	.065	-23.218	103	.000	-4.593	.198	-4.985	-4.200
Left Wing-Right Wing	.304	.582	-14.842	103	.000	-3.517	.237	-3.987	-3.047
Democrat-Republican	2.067	.154	-40.886	103	.000	-5.234	.128	-5.488	-4.980
Political Ideology	2.427	.122	-28.928	103	.000	-4.44808	.15376	-4.753	-4.143

CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS

To test the hypotheses, a series of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed to test the main and interaction effects of the independent variables (political ideology and news network) on the dependent variable (perceived credibility), controlling for the effects of three dummy-coded demographic variables (gender, age and race).

In each story, Republicans gave higher credibility to stories when branded by Fox News, their network of preference, than when those same stories were branded CNN. Conversely, Democrats gave higher credibility ratings to stories when branded by CNN, their network of preference, than when those same stories were branded Fox News. This held true for all six stories in the experiment. Analysis was also conducted on combined credibility of the stories within their group: political (abortion, casino, immigration) and non-political (Hercules, milk, tree).

To further demonstrate the differences in credibility perception, cumulative responses where converted into percentages on a scale of 0-100 to illustrate the amount of difference in each measurement, with 0 = no credibility and 100 = complete credibility. The Credibility Percentage (CP) allows us to easily recognize the ratio and relationship between Republicans and Democrats as they review and rate the same stories under alternate brands.

$$CP = \frac{\mu}{6} \times 100$$

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Story #1: Abortion

Content of story tested:

> There's no sign of U.S. abortion law changing anytime soon, but Alabama wants to be ready if it ever does.
>
> A proposal in the Republican-controlled Legislature would declare Alabama a "right to life" state by amending the state constitution. The House of Representatives will vote on the bill Thursday, and if it passes the Legislature and is signed by the Republican governor, the constitutional amendment would go before voters in 2018.
>
> Opponents believe Republicans are just trying to put a largely symbolic anti-abortion referendum on the ballot the same year lawmakers are up for re-election. But there is optimism among conservatives that Roe v. Wade, the 1973 law establishing a women's right to an abortion, could be overturned now that President Donald Trump is in power.

Abortion is the first of three stories in the political news set. Descriptive statistics on the abortion story illustrate the credibility differences between both parties and brand (Table 10). The mean credibility score of Republicans who judged the Fox-branded story was 4.23, nearly double the mean credibility of 2.29 by other Republicans who saw the same story branded as CNN. The opposite was discovered with Democrats, where the mean credibility of the CNN version was 5.04 compared to Fox News at 3.59. These inverse relationships are illustrated in Figure 1. Between subjects testing (Table 11) confirms no significant carryover effect from gender, race, or age on the dependent variable of credibility.

Table 10: *Descriptive Statistics: Abortion*

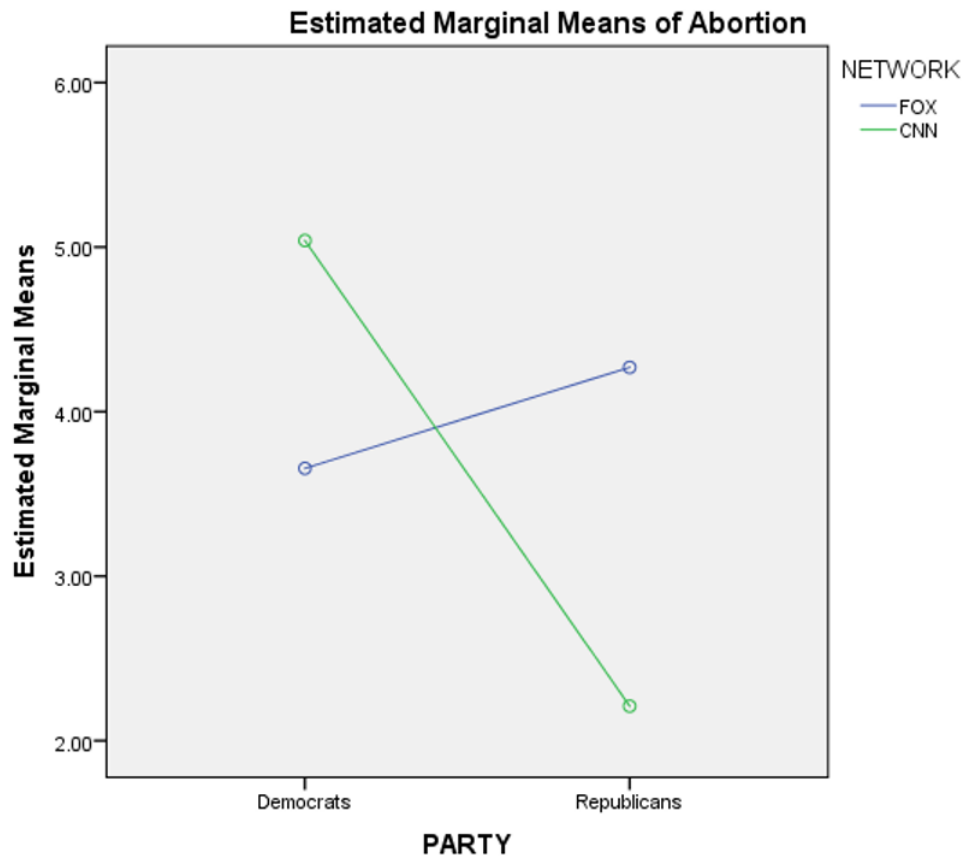| DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS				
Dependent Variable: Abortion				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	3.5926	1.69296	27
	CNN	5.0400	1.18369	25
	Total	4.2885	1.62902	52
Republicans	FOX	4.2361	1.63736	24
	CNN	2.2099	1.88369	27
	Total	3.1634	2.03019	51
Total	FOX	3.8954	1.68192	51
	CNN	3.5705	2.12295	52
	Total	3.7314	1.91489	103

Figure 1: *Estimated Marginal Means Abortion Story*

Table 11: *Between Subjects Testing: Abortion*

	TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS					
Dependent Variable: Abortion						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	120.122[a]	6	20.020	7.570	.000	.321
Intercept	60.299	1	60.299	22.800	.000	.192
Gender	2.466	1	2.466	.933	.337	.010
Age	1.608	1	1.608	.608	.437	.006
Race	3.371	1	3.371	1.275	.262	.013
PARTY	22.184	1	22.184	8.388	.005	.080
NETWORK	2.738	1	2.738	1.035	.311	.011
PARTY * NETWORK	76.960	1	76.960	29.100	.000	.233
Error	253.891	96	2.645			
Total	1808.111	103				
Corrected Total	374.013	102				
a. R Squared = .321 (Adjusted R Squared = .279)						

When the descriptive results are converted into percentages, the proportion of difference in credibility ratings is also apparent (Table 12). Among Republicans, the abortion story was nearly twice as credible when branded Fox News, while Democrats found the CNN branded story to be more trustworthy.

Table 12: *Abortion Story Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: ABORTION	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	**70**	**60**
CNN	**37**	**84**

Story #2: Casino

Content of story tested:

> The casino industry is asking Congress to retain gambling disorders as a serious public health matter in any changes it makes to President Obama's signature health care law.
>
> (Fox or CNN) news has obtained a copy of a letter that industry representatives sent to congressional leaders, urging them to recognize gambling disorders as an issue that merits inclusion in any replacement to the Affordable Care Act. The letter came a day after House Republicans released their long-awaited plan to unravel the law.
>
> The Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, established 10 categories of essential health benefits, which include mental health and substance use disorder services. The American Psychiatric Association's in 2013 updated its key reference book for mental health professionals, replacing as an addiction what was previously called pathological gambling as an impulse-control disorder. Problem gambling now takes its place among substance-related and addictive disorders.

Results from the second of three political stories are similar to abortion. Once again, Republicans gave a higher credibility mean score to the Fox-branded version (3.55) compared to other Republicans who judged the CNN version (2.39) as documented in Table 13. Democrats did the opposite, rating the CNN version higher in credibility (3.6) compared to Fox (2.58). These inverse relationships are illustrated in Figure 2. Between subjects testing (Table 14) confirms no significant carryover effect from gender, race, or age on the dependent variable of credibility.

Table 13: *Descriptive Statistics: Casino*

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS				
Dependent Variable: Casino				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	2.5802	2.01616	27
	CNN	3.6000	2.07721	25
	Total	3.0705	2.08985	52
Republicans	FOX	3.5556	1.96015	24
	CNN	2.3951	1.83517	27
	Total	2.9412	1.96492	51
Total	FOX	3.0392	2.03049	51
	CNN	2.9744	2.02903	52
	Total	3.0065	2.02004	103

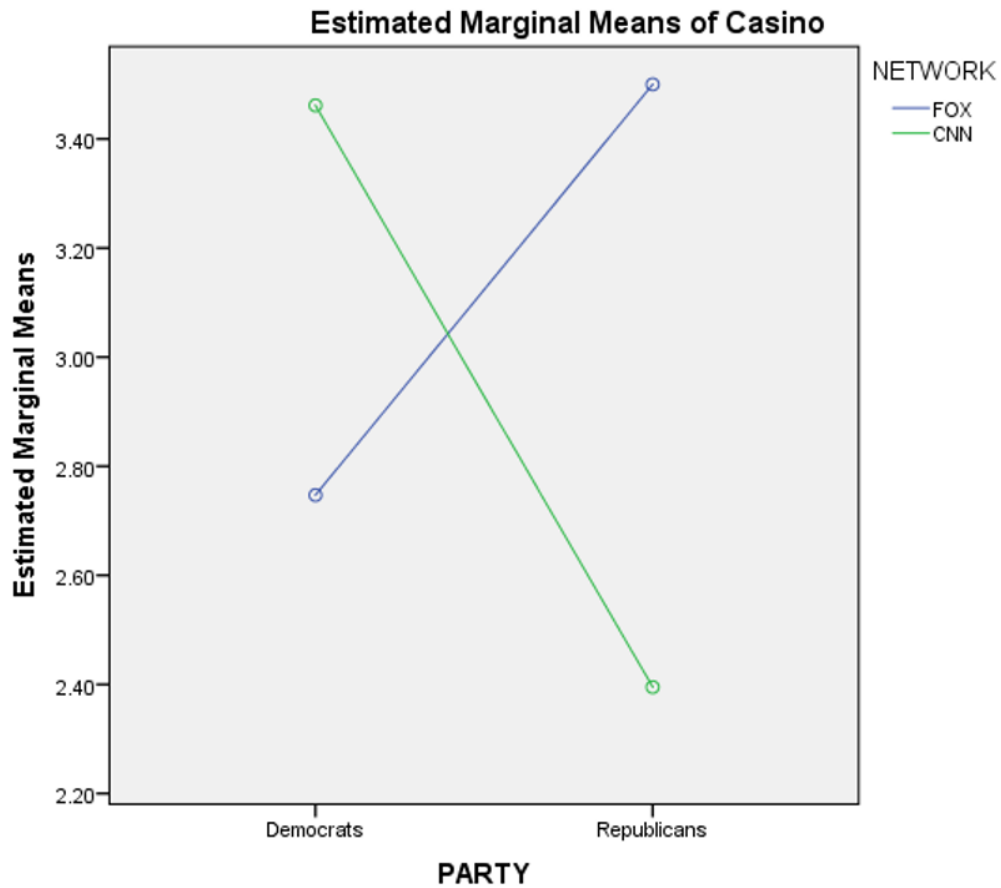*Figure 2*: *Estimated Marginal Means: Casino Story*

Table 14: *Between Subjects Testing: Casino*

TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS						
Dependent Variable: Casino						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	35.576ᵃ	6	5.929	1.495	.188	.085
Intercept	41.638	1	41.638	10.501	.002	.099
Gender	2.720	1	2.720	.686	.410	.007
Age	1.352	1	1.352	.341	.561	.004
Race	.013	1	.013	.003	.955	.000
PARTY	.005	1	.005	.001	.973	.000
NETWORK	.167	1	.167	.042	.838	.000
PARTY * NETWORK	33.499	1	33.499	8.449	.005	.081
Error	380.642	96	3.965			
Total	1347.222	103				
Corrected Total	416.218	102				
a. R Squared = .085 (Adjusted R Squared = .028)						

When the descriptive results are converted into CP numbers (Table 15), Republicans found the Fox-branded story to be more credible than the CNN version by 19 points, while Democrats did the opposite in similar proportion, favoring the CNN-branded story by 17 points.

Table 15: *Casino Story Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: CASINO	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	59	43
CNN	40	60

Story #3: Immigration

Content of Story Tested:

A blogger from Singapore who was jailed for his online posts blasting his government was granted asylum to remain in the United States, an immigration judge has ruled.

Amos Yee, 18, has been detained by federal immigration authorities since December when he was taken into custody at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Yee left Singapore with the intention of seeking asylum in the U.S. after being jailed for several weeks in 2015 and 2016. He was accused of hurting the religious feelings of Muslims and Christians in the multiethnic city-state. Yee is an atheist.

President Donald Trump had opposed the asylum bid, saying Yee's case didn't qualify as persecution based on political beliefs. But the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch applauded the asylum decision, claiming Singapore is a pressure cooker environment for dissidents and free thinkers.

Credibility judgments from the third of three political stories are in sync with findings from both the Abortion and Casino stories: Republicans gave higher credibility to the Immigration story when it is branded Fox (3.40) than when it is branded CNN (1.70). But Democrats again found the CNN version to be more credible (3.79) compared to Fox (2.66). Descriptive statistics are listed in Table 16 with the inverse relationship illustrated in Figure 3. Between subjects testing (Table 17) confirms no significant carryover effect from gender, race, or age on the measurement.

Table 16: *Descriptive Statistics: Immigration*

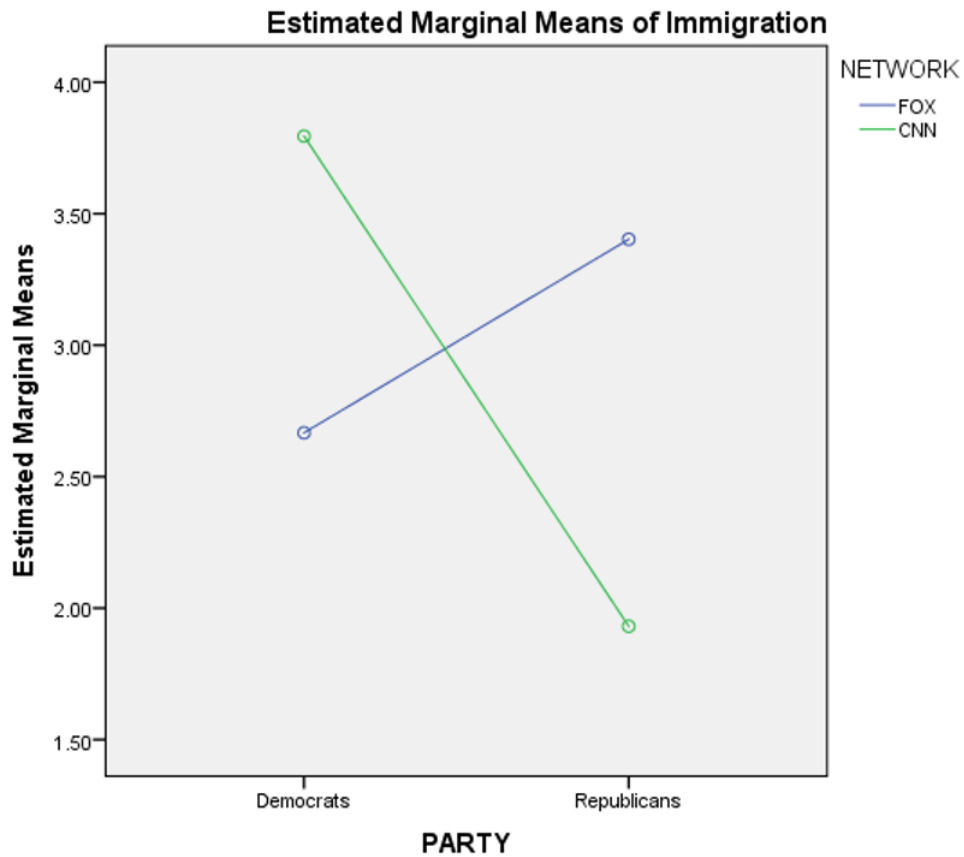| DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS				
Dependent Variable: Immigration				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	2.6667	2.10006	27
	CNN	3.7949	2.12932	26
	Total	3.2201	2.17006	53
Republicans	FOX	3.4028	1.65351	24
	CNN	1.7037	1.64948	27
	Total	2.5033	1.84556	51
Total	FOX	3.0131	1.92060	51
	CNN	2.7296	2.15733	53
	Total	2.8686	2.03974	104

Figure 3: *Estimated Marginal Means: Immigration*

Table 17: *Between Subjects Testing: Immigration*

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Dependent Variable: Immigration						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	89.573[a]	6	14.929	4.272	.001	.209
Intercept	67.090	1	67.090	19.199	.000	.165
Gender	2.817	1	2.817	.806	.371	.008
Age	13.725	1	13.725	3.928	.050	.039
Race	4.865	1	4.865	1.392	.241	.014
PARTY	4.230	1	4.230	1.210	.274	.012
NETWORK	2.661	1	2.661	.762	.385	.008
PARTY * NETWORK	65.136	1	65.136	18.640	.000	.161
Error	338.964	97	3.494			
Total	1284.333	104				
Corrected Total	428.537	103				
a. R Squared = .209 (Adjusted R Squared = .160)						

In the third of three political stories, the CP again illustrates the inverse relationship between Republicans and Democrats (Table 18). Although overall credibility ratings are lower across-the-board compared to the Abortion story, the level of credibility discrepancy is similar. Republicans give the Fox News-banded story 29 more credibility points, more than double CNN-branded credibility, while Democrats rate the CNN version 19 points higher than Fox News.

Table 18: *Immigration Story Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: IMMIGRATION	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	57	44
CNN	28	63

Story #4: Hercules

Content of Story Tested:

Lawyers say a Roman-era coffin depicting the 12 labors of Hercules is set to go home to Turkey, ending a legal battle over a prized artifact that had mysteriously turned up in Geneva's secretive customs-office years ago.

The decision follows a nearly seven-year legal saga for the sarcophagus after it turned up in the secretive Geneva Free Ports warehouse. Cultural officials said the coffin, showing scenes of Hercules strangling the Nemean Lion and killing the Hydra is one of 12 of its kind known in the world.

It is not clear how the sarcophagus ended up under the legal possession of Inanna Art Services, a private cultural goods importer, or how it came to the warehouse.

Hercules is the first of three stories in the non-political story set. Similar to the first three stories, Republicans give higher credibility to the Fox-branded story (3.76) compared to the CNN version (2.58). Democrats once again find the CNN version to be more credible (3.42) compared to Fox (2.87). Descriptive statistics are listed in Table 19 with the inverse relationship illustrated in Figure 4. Between subjects testing (Table 20) confirms no significant carryover effect from gender, race, or age on the measurement.

Table 19: *Descriptive Statistics: Hercules*

Descriptive Statistics				
Dependent Variable: Hercules				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	2.8765	1.86316	27
	CNN	3.4231	2.13449	26
	Total	3.1447	2.00054	53
Republicans	FOX	3.7639	1.76241	24
	CNN	2.5802	1.75556	27
	Total	3.1373	1.84050	51
Total	FOX	3.2941	1.85310	51
	CNN	2.9937	1.97797	53
	Total	3.1410	1.91440	104
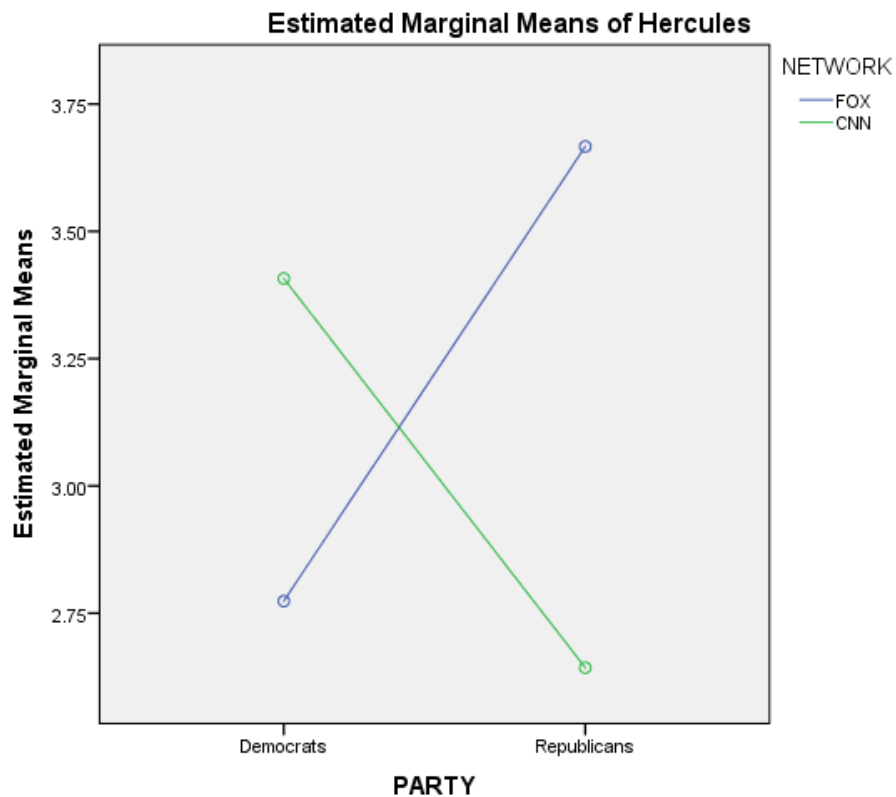
Figure 4: *Estimated Marginal Means: Hercules*

Table 20: Between Subjects Testing: Hercules

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Dependent Variable: Hercules						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	30.066[a]	6	5.011	1.399	.223	.080
Intercept	35.213	1	35.213	9.832	.002	.092
Gender	7.271	1	7.271	2.030	.157	.021
Age	.447	1	.447	.125	.725	.001
Race	.307	1	.307	.086	.771	.001
PARTY	.834	1	.834	.233	.630	.002
NETWORK	2.291	1	2.291	.640	.426	.007
PARTY * NETWORK	23.575	1	23.575	6.582	.012	.064
Error	347.421	97	3.582			
Total	1403.556	104				
Corrected Total	377.487	103				
a. R Squared = .080 (Adjusted R Squared = .023)						

The Credibility Percentage (Table 21) illustrates the proportion of differences. Republicans rate the Fox version 20 points higher in credibility, while Democrats give nearly same amount of preference, 19 points, to the CNN-branded version.

Table 21: Hercules Story Credibility Percentages

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: HERCULES	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	**63**	**48**
CNN	**43**	**57**

Story #5: Milk

Content of Story Tested:

Dairy producers are calling for a crackdown on the almond, soy and rice "milks" they say are masquerading as the real thing and cloud the meaning of milk.

It's the latest dispute about what makes a food authentic, many of them stemming from developments in manufacturing practices and specialized diets. These standards of identity, such as what qualifies to be called French dressing, canned peas and raisin bread, often trigger food fights within the industry.

Though soy milk and almond milk have become commonplace terms, milk's standard of identity says it is obtained by "the complete milking of one or more healthy cows," and nothing else, according to the dairy industry.

But (Fox or CNN) News has learned that a group of advocates for plant-based products, the Good Food Institute, is pushing back by insisting terms such as "milk" and "sausage" can be used as long as they're modified to make clear what's in them.

Milk is the second of three stories in the non-political set. Republicans favored the Fox version, with a credibility rating of 4.23 compared to the CNN version which was rated at 2.62 (Table 22). As with Hercules, Democrats favored the CNN version, although more narrowly, 3.89 to 3.50). Between subjects testing (Table 23) confirms no significant carryover effect from other variables.

Table 22: *Descriptive Statistics: Milk*

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS				
Dependent Variable: Milk				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	3.5062	2.02626	27
	CNN	3.8933	2.25405	25
	Total	3.6923	2.12655	52
Republicans	FOX	4.2319	1.62193	23
	CNN	2.6296	1.97058	27
	Total	3.3667	1.97289	50
Total	FOX	3.8400	1.86900	50
	CNN	3.2372	2.18565	52
	Total	3.5327	2.04905	102
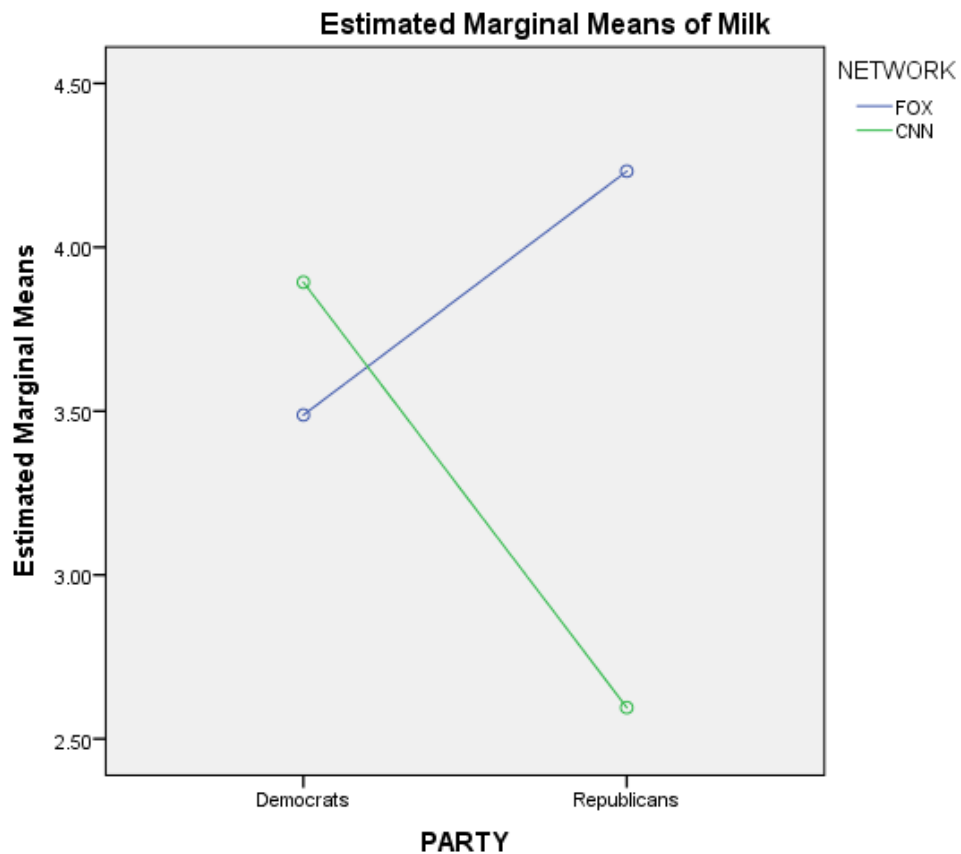
Figure 5: *Estimated Marginal Means: Milk*

Table 23: *Between Subjects Testing: Milk*

	Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: Milk						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	55.515a	6	9.253	2.385	.034	.131
Intercept	73.991	1	73.991	19.073	.000	.167
Gender	5.610	1	5.610	1.446	.232	.015
Age	6.424	1	6.424	1.656	.201	.017
Race	5.839	1	5.839	1.505	.223	.016
PARTY	.017	1	.017	.004	.947	.000
NETWORK	9.186	1	9.186	2.368	.127	.024
PARTY * NETWORK	34.985	1	34.985	9.018	.003	.087
Error	368.543	95	3.879			
Total	1697.000	102				
Corrected Total	424.058	101				
a. R Squared = .131 (Adjusted R Squared = .076)						

The CP shows the proportion of difference (Table 24). Although Republicans and Democrats gave higher credibility scores to their network of preference in all six stories, the Democrats assessment of the Milk story showed the closest equability. Democrats gave the CNN version only 7 more credibility points than Fox, a difference of just 12%.

Table 24: *Milk Story Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: MILK	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	70	58
CNN	44	65

Story #6: Tree

Content of Story Tested:

In California, falling trees are now to blame for at least three deaths in recent months. The latest victim is a 21-year old woman. Officials tell (Fox or CNN) News she was pronounced dead after her lifeless body was found beneath a tree at Yosemite National Park.

The accident happened Sunday in the area formerly known as Curry Village.   Weather conditions may be responsible, as a windy, cold storm swept through Northern California dumping hail this past weekend.   The area was closed immediately after the tragedy, but expected to reopen when weather conditions improve later this week.

Earlier this winter, at least two others in California were killed by falling trees. In January, once woman was struck and killed by a tree while walking on a northern California golf course. In December, a woman posing for photographs as part of a wedding party was killed and five others injured by a falling eucalyptus tree in southern California.

Tree is the final story of the non-political set. As with the five previous stories, both political and non-political, Republicans judged greater credibility in the Fox-brand version, 4.29 to 2.09 (Table 25). Democrats judged greater credibility for the CNN-branded version, 4.03 to 2.83. Figure 6 illustrates the cross-over of preference. Between subjects testing (Table 26) confirms no significant carryover effect from gender, race, or age on the measurement.

Table 25: *Descriptive Statistics: Tree*

Descriptive Statistics				
Dependent Variable: Tree				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	2.8395	1.85447	27
	CNN	4.0385	1.97164	26
	Total	3.4277	1.98862	53
Republicans	FOX	4.2917	1.66031	24
	CNN	2.0988	1.90773	27
	Total	3.1307	2.09346	51
Total	FOX	3.5229	1.89532	51
	CNN	3.0503	2.15569	53
	Total	3.2821	2.03622	104
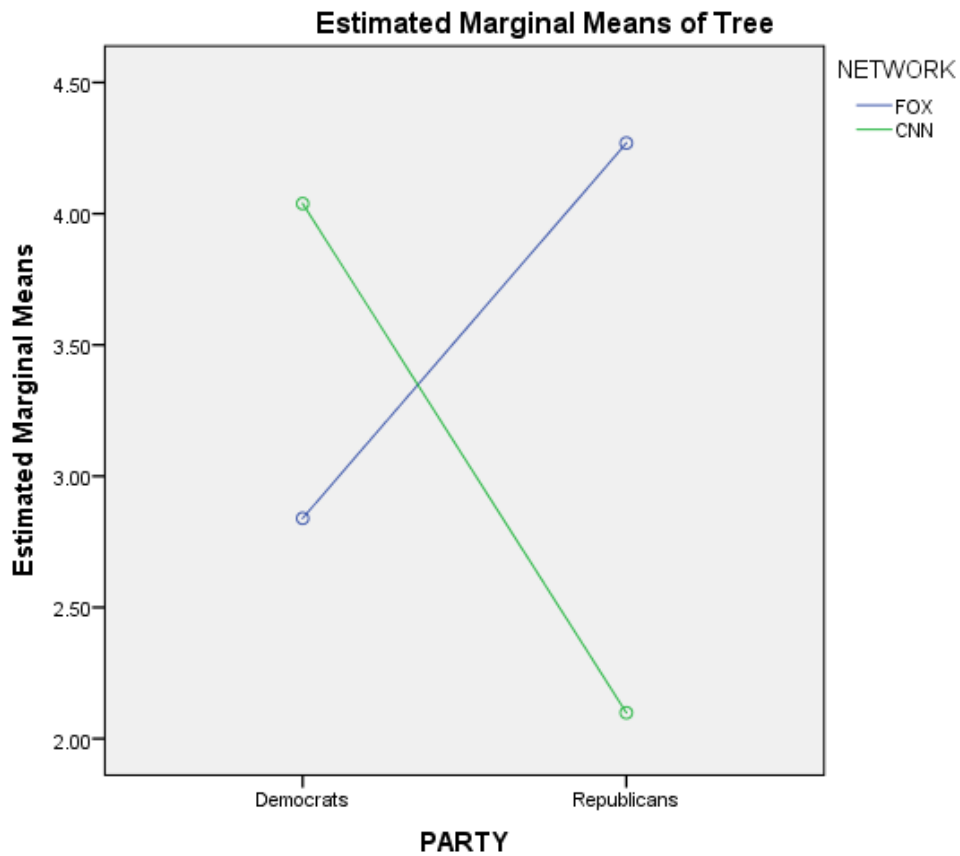
Figure 6: *Estimated Marginal Means: Tree*

Table 26: *Between Subjects Testing: Tree*

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Dependent Variable: Tree						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	92.951a	6	15.492	4.498	.000	.218
Intercept	29.232	1	29.232	8.487	.004	.080
Gender	6.998	1	6.998	2.032	.157	.021
Age	2.425	1	2.425	.704	.404	.007
Race	2.330	1	2.330	.676	.413	.007
PARTY	.661	1	.661	.192	.662	.002
NETWORK	4.331	1	4.331	1.257	.265	.013
PARTY * NETWORK	76.046	1	76.046	22.078	.000	.185
Error	334.109	97	3.444			
Total	1547.333	104				
Corrected Total	427.060	103				
a. R Squared = .218 (Adjusted R Squared = .169)						

The CP illustrates the amount of difference in preference (Table 27). Republicans rate the Fox version more than twice as credible as the CNN version, while Democrats favor the CNN-branded story by 19 points.

Table 27: *Tree Story Credibility Percentages*

CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: TREE		
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	72	48
CNN	35	67

Network Preferences

Both H1 and H2 propose that news credibility will align with network partiality, regardless of whether the story is political or non-political in nature. While previous research has demonstrated Republican preference for Fox News and Democrat preference for CNN (Baum & Gussin, 2008; Turner, 2007), this survey also measured network preference and credibility to determine if the sample set of this experiment coincided with earlier conclusions. Results in this experiment were consistent with those findings.

Posttest, participants were asked to rate television news overall, Fox News, and CNN, for both preference and credibility (Table 28). For preference, participants used 7-point bipolar semantic measures of good vs. bad, likeable vs. non-likeable, and favorable vs. non-favorable. For credibility, measures were accurate vs. non-accurate, truthful vs. non-truthful, and trustworthy vs. not trustworthy. Cronbach's alpha testing confirms internal consistency for preference and credibility (Table 29).

Table 28: *News Source Measures for Preference and Credibility*

Table 29: *News Source Consistency for Preference and Credibility*

SCALE INTERNAL CONSISTENCY: NEWS SOURCE CREDIBILITY		
News Source	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**N of Items**
Television	.957	3
Fox Network	.978	3
CNN Network	.973	3

SCALE INTERNAL CONSISTENCY: NEWS SOURCE PREFERENCE		
News Source	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**N of Items**
Television	.980	3
Fox Network	.988	3
CNN Network	.988	3

T-tests demonstrated statistically significant differences in both preference and credibility of the three television sources surveyed (Table 30). Levene's test also demonstrated homogeneity of variances for each news source (Table 13).

Table 30: *T-tests for Preference and Credibility*

T- TESTS NETWORK PREFERENCE AND CREDIBILITY					
	PARTY	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error Mean**
FOX Preference	Democrats	54	.6173	.87213	.11868
	Republicans	50	4.4200	1.35996	.19233
FOX Credibility	Democrats	54	.6790	.89011	.12113
	Republicans	50	4.5400	1.30217	.18415
CNN Preference	Democrats	54	4.3580	1.16167	.15808
	Republicans	50	1.2200	1.38605	.19602
CNN Credibility	Democrats	54	4.6420	1.01942	.13873
	Republicans	50	1.0200	1.35092	.19105
TV Preference	Democrats	54	3.8210	1.49592	.20357
	Republicans	50	2.1333	1.76383	.24944
TV Credibility	Democrats	54	3.9012	1.23477	.16803
	Republicans	50	1.6400	1.49199	.21100

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Table 31: *Levene's Test for News Preference and Credibility*

	LEVENE'S TEST		T-TEST FOR EQUALITY OF MEANS					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
FOX Preference	6.880	.010	-17.101	102	.000	-3.80272	.22236	-4.24378	-3.36166
FOX Credibility	6.600	.012	-17.765	102	.000	-3.86099	.21733	-4.29207	-3.42991
CNN Preference	.886	.349	12.546	102	.000	3.13802	.25012	2.64192	3.63413
CNN Credibility	2.437	.122	15.505	102	.000	3.62198	.23360	3.15863	4.08532
TV Preference	1.833	.179	5.275	102	.000	1.68765	.31993	1.05307	2.32224
TV Credibility	3.366	.069	8.444	102	.000	2.26123	.26778	1.73010	2.79237

For the purpose of determining hypotheses results, we can conclude that the Republicans in this experiment prefer Fox News in comparison with CNN, while Democrats do the opposite, preferring CNN in comparison with Fox News. When Credibility Percentages are used to illustrate the results, it is well apparent that Republicans view Fox News as preferable and with higher credibility, rating it more than 60 points higher in each category compared to CNN. Democrats do just the opposite, and in nearly similar proportions, preferring CNN over Fox News by more than 50 points, and rating CNN's credibility more than 60 points higher.

Table 32: *Percentages of News Network Preferences and Credibility*

	NETWORK PREFERENCE & CREDIBILITY	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News - Preference	74	10
Fox News - Credibility	76	11
CNN - Preference	20	73
CNN - Credibility	17	77

Hypothesis #1 Results

HI proposes news viewers will give higher credibility ratings to *political news stories* when those stories are presented by networks that align with their political ideology and lower credibility to the same stories when presented by networks that do not align with their political preferences.   To determine support, this study measured credibility within a defined set of three political stories, (Abortion, Casino, and Immigration) among two distinct populations of different political ideology and network news preference. **HI is supported by results from both Republicans and Democrats.** Combined results of the three political news stories show Republicans give higher credibility when those stories are presented by their network of preference, Fox News, 3.73 to 2.10. In contrast, Democrats assign greater credibility to those same stories when they are branded with their network of preference, CNN, 4.11 to 2.94 (Table 33). Figure 7 illustrates the respective shifts in preference, and between subjects testing confirms no significant carryover effect from extraneous variables (Table 34).

Table 33: *Descriptive Statistics: Political News Stories*

| Descriptive Statistics				
Dependent Variable: Political Stories				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	2.9465	1.07919	27
	CNN	4.1156	1.43102	25
	Total	3.5085	1.38032	52
Republicans	FOX	3.7315	1.08961	24
	CNN	2.1029	1.29280	27
	Total	2.8693	1.44542	51
Total	FOX	3.3159	1.14382	51
	CNN	3.0705	1.68724	52
	Total	3.1920	1.44220	103
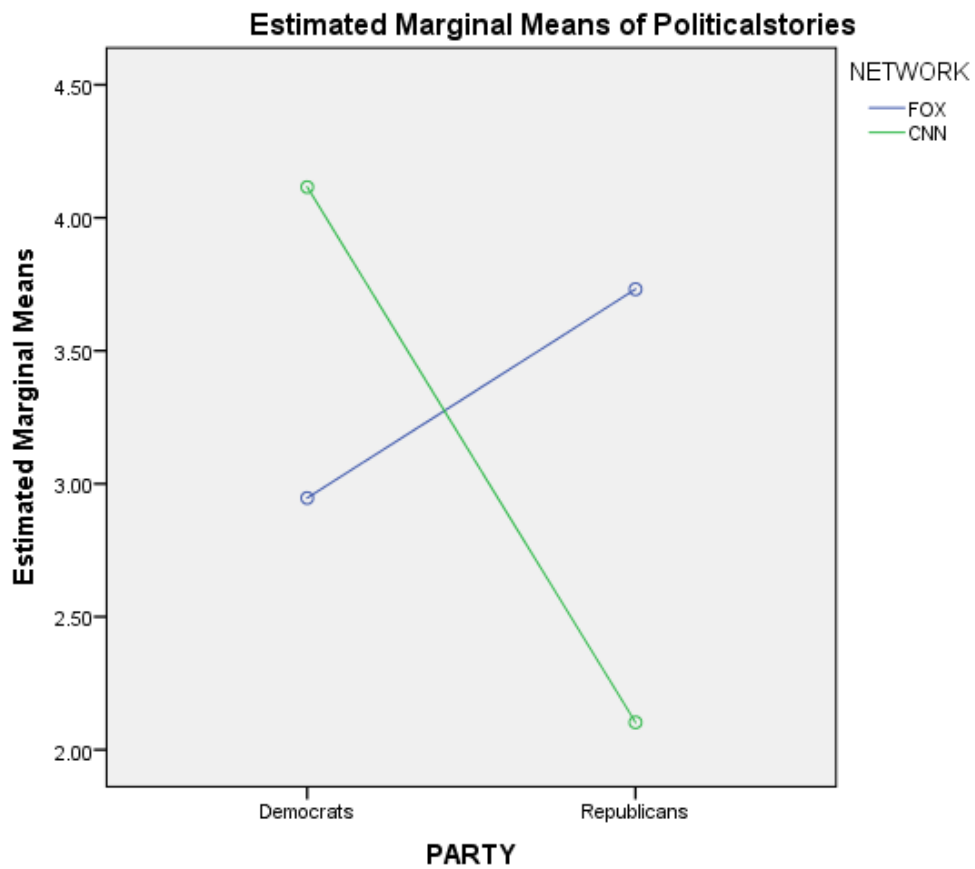
Figure 7: *Estimated Marginal Means of Political News Stories*

Table 34: *Between Subjects Testing: Political News Stories*

			Tests of Between-Subjects Effects			
Dependent Variable: Political Stories						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	69.439[a]	6	11.573	7.785	.000	.327
Intercept	56.295	1	56.295	37.868	.000	.283
Gender	2.447	1	2.447	1.646	.203	.017
Age	4.308	1	4.308	2.898	.092	.029
Race	.002	1	.002	.001	.970	.000
PARTY	4.725	1	4.725	3.178	.078	.032
NETWORK	1.711	1	1.711	1.151	.286	.012
PARTY * NETWORK	55.483	1	55.483	37.322	.000	.280
Error	142.714	96	1.487			
Total	1261.617	103				
Corrected Total	212.153	102				
a. R Squared = .327 (Adjusted R Squared = .285)						

Credibility Percentages can also be used to illustrate the proportion of difference in credibility between sources (Table 35). Republicans rate political news stories 77% more credible when those stories are branded with Fox News, as opposed to CNN. Democrats assign 40% greater credibility to CNN-branded stories compared to stories branded Fox News.

Table 35: *Political News Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: POLITICAL NEWS	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	**62**	**49**
CNN	**35**	**69**

Hypothesis #2 Results

HI confirms what previous research (Baum & Gussin, 2008; Turner, 2007) has demonstrated, that news viewers prefer news from networks when they believe those sources align with their political ideology. H2 goes a step further, by seeking to separate the political ideology of news content to determine if those same preferences still hold true regarding the dissemination of non-political information, a critical need in a well-functioning republic such as the United States. H2 proposes that viewers will give higher credibility ratings to *non-political news stories* when those stories are presented by networks that align with their political ideology and lower credibility to the same stories when presented by networks that do not align with their political preferences. To determine support, this study measured credibility within a defined set of three non-political stories, (Hercules, Milk, and Tree) among two distinct populations of different political ideology and network news preference. **H2 is supported by results from both Republicans and Democrats.** Combined results of the three non-political news stories show Republicans give higher credibility when those stories are presented by their network of preference, Fox News, 4.05 to 2.43. In contrast, Democrats assign greater credibility to those same stories when they are branded with their network of preference, CNN, 3.79 to 3.07 (Table 36). Figure 8 illustrates the cross-over, with Table 37 confirming no significant impact on results because of race, gender, or generation.

Table 36: *Descriptive Statistics: Non-Political News Stories*

Descriptive Statistics				
Dependent Variable: Non-political Stories				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	3.0741	1.38126	27
	CNN	3.7911	1.25721	25
	Total	3.4188	1.35916	52
Republicans	FOX	4.0580	1.22262	23
	CNN	2.4362	1.58187	27
	Total	3.1822	1.63265	50
Total	FOX	3.5267	1.38883	50
	CNN	3.0876	1.57694	52
	Total	3.3028	1.49670	102
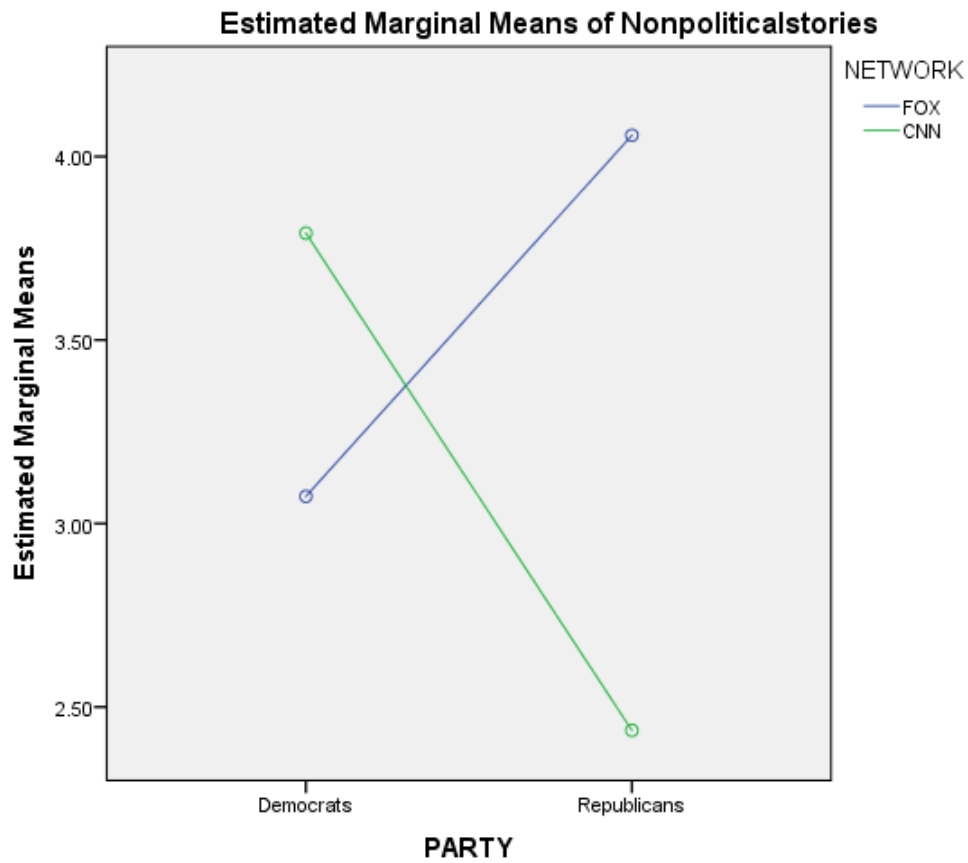
Figure 8:   *Estimated Marginal Means of Non-Political News Stories*

Table 37: *Between Subjects Testing: Non-Political News Stories*

	Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: Non-political Stories						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	49.546ᵃ	6	8.258	4.439	.001	.219
Intercept	44.490	1	44.490	23.919	.000	.201
Gender	6.208	1	6.208	3.338	.071	.034
Age	.363	1	.363	.195	.659	.002
Race	2.204	1	2.204	1.185	.279	.012
PARTY	.012	1	.012	.006	.936	.000
NETWORK	4.439	1	4.439	2.387	.126	.025
PARTY * NETWORK	41.035	1	41.035	22.061	.000	.188
Error	176.705	95	1.860			
Total	1338.938	102				
Corrected Total	226.251	101				
a. R Squared = .219 (Adjusted R Squared = .170)						

The Credibility Percentage table illustrates the proportion of difference in credibility between sources (Table 38). Republicans assign non-political news stories 66% more credibility to Fox-branded stories as opposed to the same stories branded from CNN. Democrats give 24% greater credibility to CNN stories compared to those labeled from Fox News.

Table 38: *Non-Political News Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: NON-POLITICAL NEWS	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	**68**	**51**
CNN	**41**	**63**

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

Previous research has demonstrated cable news networks have differing political affinities among viewers (Iyengar & Han). In addition, the networks themselves have acknowledged intentional ideological content positioning to better compete for viewers in an era of increased "opinion motivated news consumption" (Lee, p. 306). Viewers choose the channels they will watch based on these ideologies (Feldman, 2011). In making these cognitive decisions on *what they will watch*, are similar cognitive cues being used to determine *what they will believe*? This experiment was designed to apply social judgment theory (SJT) to measure whether a single variable, news network affiliation, could reflect an individual's judgment, and be heuristically applied in the process of credibility assessment, regardless of whether the information presented was political. By measuring the credibility of both types of news and comparing the results to predisposed attitudes, new insight can be gained on the public's contemporary use of media and the amount of trust news viewers ascribe to the information they consume.

In this study, both hypotheses were supported. Results demonstrate, at least in this limited experiment, that political ideology can bleed over to news credibility, regardless of the face value political nature of content. For a nation that prides itself in the free flow of information, as protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, this should give pause to all stakeholders in the American republic: those who report the news, those who make it, and those who consume it. We can expect that the greater the media's believability is

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compromised, the greater its ability to function as a necessary component of American society will be questioned and challenged.

While the hypotheses are independent of each other, it is interesting to note the level of distrust among survey participants when all stories across both brands are totaled and comparisons observed between the two parties. Because both hypotheses are supported, it is no surprise that All Story credibility also aligns with network preference for both Republicans and Democrats (Table 39). Figure 9 illustrates the cross-over. Of particular interest, the level of perceived credibility by both Republicans and Democrats for their preferred network is nearly identical. The mean credibility rating by Democrats for all CNN stories was 3.95, while Republicans rated all Fox News stories at 3.91, a difference of less than 1%. However, the gap is far bigger when the non-preferred networks are compared. While Democrats gave all Fox News stories a mean credibility score of 3.01, Republicans only rated CNN stories 2.26, or 25% lower. The Republican credibility level of the CNN story set was the lowest of all the four measures. These differences are noted in the All Stories Credibility Percentages (Table 40).

Table 39: *Descriptive Statistics: All News Stories*

Descriptive Statistics				
Dependent Variable: All Stories				
PARTY	NETWORK	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Democrats	FOX	3.0103	1.13521	27
	CNN	3.9533	1.11811	25
	Total	3.4637	1.21312	52
Republicans	FOX	3.9179	.98543	23
	CNN	2.2695	1.30705	27
	Total	3.0278	1.42518	50
Total	FOX	3.4278	1.15264	50
	CNN	3.0791	1.47678	52
	Total	3.2500	1.33285	102

58
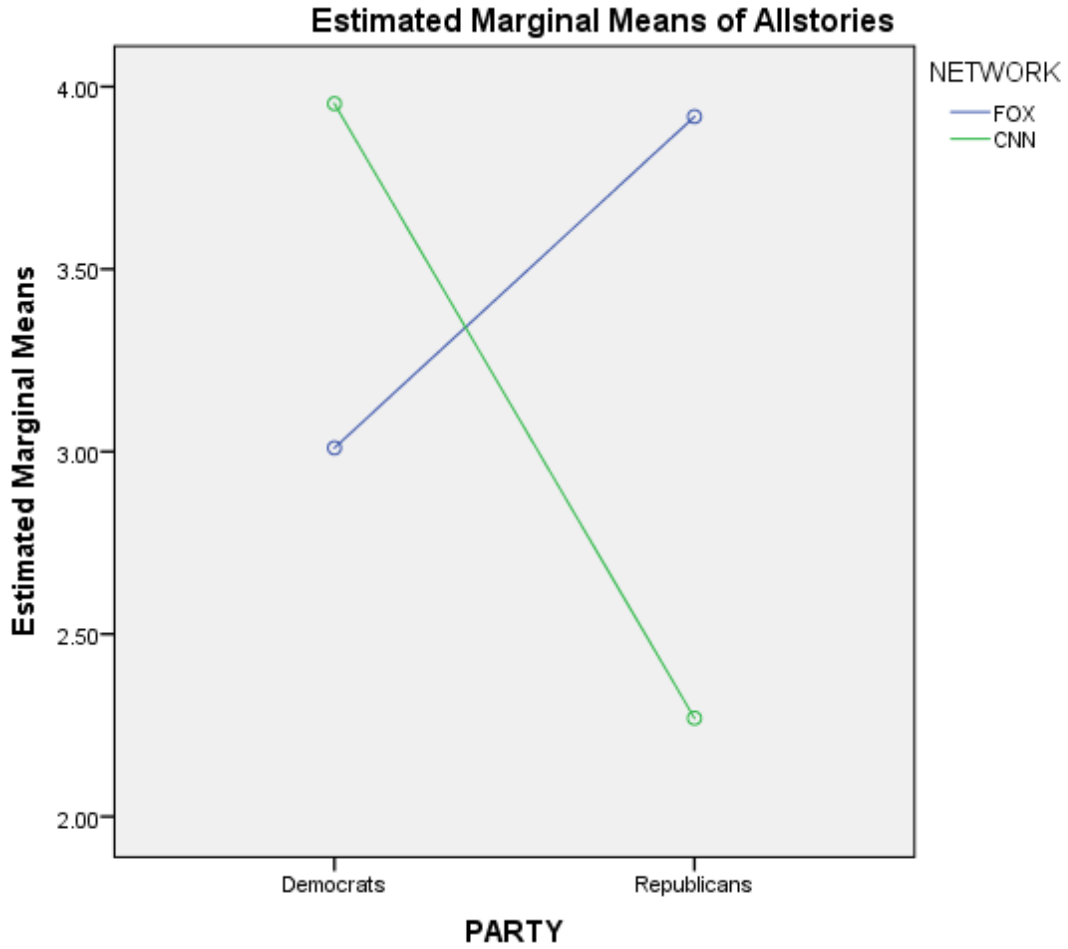
Figure 9: *Estimated Marginal Means of All News Stories*

Table 40: *All Stories Credibility Percentages*

	CREDIBILITY PERCENTAGE: ALL NEWS STORIES	
	Republicans	Democrats
Fox News	65	50
CNN	38	66

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Also notable is the level of credibility for the television news media in general, as rated by Democrats and Republicans, respectively. While judgment of the hypotheses did not depend on media trust regardless of the source, participants were asked to rate the overall credibility of all television news, prior to being asked the same of Fox News and CNN, specifically. Overwhelmingly, the Republican sample was far more critical of television news. Using the same six-point differential scale, Republicans rated television news credibility at 1.64 (27%), less than half the television news credibility 3.90 (65%) rating by Democrats.

As with similar work, this study has limitations. The measurements were modest in that only members of Republican and Democrat clubs were surveyed, a sample that was expected to be strongly partisan and diametrically opposed. As a whole, the American public is far broader and diverse in political ideologies. Those who are independents, or more modestly identify as Republican or Democrat, or members of third parties such as Libertarian, Green Party, etc., were not accounted for in this study. Nor are any geographic distinctions taken into consideration, as participants were only those identified as members of political clubs in Florida. The racial make-up also did not properly reflect the adult population, as only one African-American identified as a participant (1% of the study sample), while blacks or African-Americans make-up 13.3% of the U.S. population (Unites States Census Bureau, 2015). The study also examined only two news outlets, and did not take into consideration the myriad of means by which today's news consumers have access to information, including social media, broadcast networks, local television news and radio, and newspapers. All of that was outside the scope of this study, but offers opportunity for future research.

It should also be noted that, in recruiting the sample, participants were told they would be judging media credibility. This, alone, may have indirectly led participants to question the veracity of a story when they otherwise might not have. However, it is important to also note that participants did not know they were comparing news brands, nor did they know that the stories they would read would have any news brand associated with them. Also, it is not the *level* of credibility that is important in any measure, but rather the *differences* in credibility, since the only controlled variable was network brand. In each of the 12 measures (six stories judged by Republicans, six stories judged by Democrats), there was noticeable distinction in credibility among media source, and each time that difference was in sync with the group's network preferences.

As a manipulated experiment, the insights are valuable and offer a template for future research. The method demonstrated in this experiment of separating political from non-political news within the same medium, then measuring perceived credibility for different types of news stories, can be considered in future research that examines broader populations and other media. For example, is non-political news as reported by the New York Times or Washington Post also subject to political brand influence? Do local newspapers or local television news stations have more or less credibility in non-political news than national media? These questions and many more offer a broad range of topics for researchers to explore. The Credibility Percentage (CP) provides a method of uniform comparison, regardless of the media or population being examined.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Walter Cronkite was named anchor of the CBS Evening News in 1962, a role he filled for the next 19 years. As Cunningham (2016) wrote, "He worshiped from a catechism that preached a journalist's only duty was to get the facts and get them right." His signature line at the end of every newscast, "and that's the way it is" (Cunningham, p. 77) speaks to the ideal that news is a mirror, accurately reflecting what actually happened, and nothing else. For this, he became known as the most trusted man in America.

The philosophical underpinnings of journalists in Cronkite's era may seem quaint and outdated in the 21st century information age. While digital media, combined with expanded cable and satellite offerings, now provide many more voices for news, information, and commentary, increased quantity has not resulted in increased respect. Today, trust in the mainstream news media is not simply being questioned, it is polarized. What is believable when one person's truth is another's fake news? Today's media institutions operating under the benefit of press freedom must be cognizant that they do not simply answer to shareholders. The covenant of press protection includes an obligation to be trustworthy purveyors of news and information. This role will be increasingly difficult to fill if the public progressively sees the news media more as disseminators of partisan political rhetoric and less as a vital cog in the wheels of American democracy.

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Appendix 1: Cable News Credibility Survey

Q1.1 Welcome, and thank you for your participation. This begins a survey that examines the credibility of news.

On the next page you will see a brief news story, one of six in this study. After you read the story you will see three questions below, asking you to rate that story for truth, accuracy and trust.   Please do not consult any outside source for information before clicking the circle that best matches your impressions. When complete, click the arrow to move to the next story.

Click the arrow below to begin.

Q2.1 Please read the story below, then click the circle in each of the three questions below that best indicate how you rate the story:

> *There's no sign of U.S. abortion law changing anytime soon, but Alabama wants to be ready if it ever does.*
>
> *A proposal in the Republican-controlled Legislature would declare Alabama a "right to life" state by amending the state constitution. The House of Representatives will vote on the bill Thursday, and if it passes the Legislature and is signed by the Republican governor, the constitutional amendment would go before voters in 2018.*
>
> *Opponents believe Republicans are just trying to put a largely symbolic anti-abortion referendum on the ballot the same year lawmakers are up for re-election. But there is optimism among conservatives that Roe v. Wade, the 1973 law establishing a women's right to an abortion, could be overturned now that President Donald Trump is in power.*

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Not True:True	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Accurate:Accruate	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q2.2 Please read the story below, then click the circle in each of the three questions below that best indicate how you rate the story:

The casino industry is asking Congress to retain gambling disorders as a serious public health matter in any changes it makes to President Obama's signature health care law.

(Fox or CNN) news has obtained a copy of a letter that industry representatives sent to congressional leaders, urging them to recognize gambling disorders as an issue that merits inclusion in any replacement to the Affordable Care Act. The letter came a day after House Republicans released their long-awaited plan to unravel the law.

The Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, established 10 categories of essential health benefits, which include mental health and substance use disorder services. The American Psychiatric Association's in 2013 updated its key reference book for mental health professionals, replacing as an addiction what was previously called pathological gambling as an impulse-control disorder. Problem gambling now takes its place among substance-related and addictive disorders.

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Not True:True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Not Accurate:Accruate	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Q2.3 Please read the story below, then click the circle in each of the three questions below that best indicate how you rate the story:

A blogger from Singapore who was jailed for his online posts blasting his government was granted asylum to remain in the United States, an immigration judge has ruled.

Amos Yee, 18, has been detained by federal immigration authorities since December when he was taken into custody at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Yee left Singapore with the intention of seeking asylum in the U.S. after being jailed for several weeks in 2015 and 2016. He was accused of hurting the religious feelings of Muslims and Christians in the multiethnic city-state. Yee is an atheist.

The Trump administration had opposed the asylum bid, saying Yee's case didn't qualify as persecution based on political beliefs.   But the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch applauded the asylum decision, claiming Singapore is a pressure cooker environment for dissidents and free thinkers.

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	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Not True:True	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Accurate:Accruate	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q2.4 Please read the story below, then click the circle in each of the three questions below that best indicate how you rate the story:

Lawyers say a Roman-era coffin depicting the 12 labors of Hercules is set to go home to Turkey, ending a legal battle over a prized artifact that had mysteriously turned up in Geneva's secretive customs-office years ago.

The decision follows a nearly seven-year legal saga for the sarcophagus after it turned up in the secretive Geneva Free Ports warehouse. Cultural officials said the coffin, showing scenes of Hercules strangling the Nemean Lion and killing the Hydra is one of 12 of its kind known in the world.

It is not clear how the sarcophagus ended up under the legal possession of Inanna Art Services, a private cultural goods importer, or how it came to the warehouse.

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Not True:True	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Accurate:Accruate	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q2.5 Please read the story below, then click the circle in each of the three questions below that best indicate how you rate the story:

Dairy producers are calling for a crackdown on the almond, soy and rice "milks" they say are masquerading as the real thing and cloud the meaning of milk.

It's the latest dispute about what makes a food authentic, many of them stemming from developments in manufacturing practices and specialized diets. These standards of identity, such as what qualifies to be called French dressing, canned peas and raisin bread, often trigger food fights within the industry.

Though soy milk and almond milk have become commonplace terms, milk's standard of identity says it is obtained by "the complete milking of one or more healthy cows," and nothing else, according to the dairy industry.

But (Fox or CNN) News has learned that a group of advocates for plant-based products, the Good Food Institute, is pushing back by insisting terms such as "milk" and "sausage" can be used as long as they're modified to make clear what's in them.

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Not True:True	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Accurate:Accruate	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Q2.6 Please read the story below, then click the circle in each of the three questions below that best indicate how you rate the story:

In California, falling trees are now to blame for at least three deaths in recent months. The latest victim is a 21-year old woman. Officials tell (Fox or CNN) News she was pronounced dead after her lifeless body was found beneath a tree at Yosemite National Park.

The accident happened Sunday in the area formerly known as Curry Village. Weather conditions may be responsible, as a windy, cold storm swept through Northern California dumping hail this past weekend. The area was closed immediately after the tragedy, but expected to reopen when weather conditions improve later this week.

Earlier this winter, at least two others in California were killed by falling trees. In January, once woman was struck and killed by a tree while walking on a northern California golf course. In December, a woman posing for photographs as part of a wedding party was killed and five others injured by a falling eucalyptus tree in southern California.

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Not True:True	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Accurate:Accruate	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Q4.1 That completes the story review portion of the survey. There are just a few additional questions that will complete the survey.

First, what is your gender?

○ Male
○ Female
○ Other

Q4.2 Which age group do you belong to?

○ Born Before 1946
○ Born 1946-1964
○ Born 1965-1976
○ Born 1977-1995
○ Born 1996 and After

Q4.3 Which best describes your racial group?

○ Caucasian
○ African American
○ Hispanic
○ Asian
○ Native American
○ Other

Q4.4 Overall, how do you rate television as a source for news?

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Bad:Good	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Likeable:Likeable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Favorable:Favorable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Accurate:Accurate	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Truthful:Truthful	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q4.5 How do you rate Fox News as a source for news?

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Bad:Good	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Likeable:Likeable	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Favorable:Favorable	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Accurate:Accurate	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Truthful:Truthful	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Q4.6 How do you rate CNN as a source for news?

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Bad:Good	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Likeable:Likeable	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Favorable:Favorable	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Accurate:Accurate	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Truthful:Truthful	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Not Trustworthy:Trustworthy	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Q4.7 Generally speaking, I consider my own political ideology to be:

	1 (0)	2 (1)	3 (2)	4 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	7 (6)
Liberal:Conservative	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Left Wing:Right Wing	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Democrat:Republican	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Q4.8 Thank you for your participation, the survey will conclude when you answer the last question below.   The goal of this study is to determine if the brand of a news network influences your assessment of news credibility. In this experiment, you were shown six stories that were made to appear as if they originated from either the Fox News or CNN website. The goal is to measure if the brand of the network impacts reader assessment. Your ratings will be combined with others to determine if there are any measurable findings.

The nature of the phenomenon we are investigating required minor deception on our part. The information presented as news originated with the Associated Press and was not fabricated

by the principal investigator. However, those stories were then made to appear as if they appeared on either Foxnews.com or CNN.com, when they did not. This was done so the exact same stories could be shown to different audiences with the only variable being network news brand.   If you agree to allow us to use your responses, please click "submit," below. If you would like to have the information you provided for this study withdrawn, click the "withdraw" button below and your information will be deleted from this study, with no permanent record retained.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact principal investigator Chris Jadick at 813-xxx-xxxx, or by email at cjadick@mail.usf.edu. Faculty supervisor Dr. Scott Liu can be contacted at sliu@usf.edu.   Finally, we urge you not to discuss this study with anyone else who is currently participating or might participate at a future point in time. As you can certainly appreciate, we will not be able to examine this phenomenon if participants know the purpose and methods in advance.   Thank you!

○ Submit (1)
○ Withdraw responses (2)

Appendix 2: USF IRB Approval Letter

USF
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 ● Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 ● FAX (813) 974-7091

April 19, 2017

Christopher Jadick
School of Advertising and Mass Communications
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00030423
Title: To Tell the Truth: The Credibility of Cable News Networks In an Era of Increasingly
        Partisan Political News Coverage

Study Approval Period: 4/18/2017 to 4/18/2018

Dear Mr. Jadick:

On 4/18/2017, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above
application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
News Credibility Study Protocol_Jadick

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
Jadick _ Informed Consent _ News Survey 04072017.docx

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the
"Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent
document is amended and approved. The online consent form is not a stamped form.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which
includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve
only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review
research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research
proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

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(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. (Online consent).

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John A Schinka, Ph.D.

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board