

Going against the grain? Examining the efficacy of media literacy interventions on congenial media effects

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ABSTRACT

While people's proclivity toward congenial partisan media has been well documented, methods of resistance are less researched. This study explores the congenial media effect, the phenomenon of our gravitation to and acceptance of like-minded media, and whether a media literacy intervention can mitigate people's acceptance of ideologically congruent partisan media. In an online experiment ($N = 199$), conservatives and liberals were exposed to differing media literacy interventions, one reviewing the traits of objectivity and bias, another which combined the former with an opportunity to reflect on participants' own political beliefs. All were then exposed to amenable partisan content on the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh. Results demonstrated that neither intervention affected participants' perceptions of bias toward the material, however, liberals were more critical in their evaluations, deeming the partisan content as less credible than conservatives. Additionally, for liberals exposed to the objectivity and bias intervention, lower perceptions of credibility were seen compared to liberals who received no intervention.

Keywords: *media literacy, congenial media effect, interventions, partisan media, credibility.*



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INTRODUCTION

According to a recent report by Pew Research Center, the average U.S. citizen's ability to distinguish between factual and opinion statements within news is only slightly better than that of random chance (Mitchell et al., 2018). While the ability to delineate between fact and opinion statements is a bedrock requirement for information assessment (Merpert et al., 2018), it is made increasingly problematic due to the proliferation of online content (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) and a high-choice media environment, or the ample availability of many media resources to consumers (Sude, et al., 2019). Although access to more information would seem to be positive, it is also correlated with the increase of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012), or false information that is created and spread unintentionally (Ireton & Posetti, 2018), disinformation, information that is purposely misleading (Kuehn & Salter, 2020), and more extreme and polarized forms of "post-broadcast" media contents (Levendusky, 2013, p. 566). The latter, especially, is exacerbated by what Sude et al. (2019) identify as the prominence of an "à la carte" selection of opinion environments and the conscious avoidance of engaging in "attitude-discrepant messaging", or media espousing beliefs and viewpoints that are against your own (pp. 472-473).

In today's media reality, people are becoming their own "editors," "gatekeepers", and information "aggregators" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, p. 7), and the information gathered is based on increasingly partisan and agreeable with your view sources (McGeoguh & Rudick, 2018). Thus, the problem of today's media environment isn't a lack of information. Rather, it is the nature of our penchant to consume media that we ideologically align with causing a lack of diverse viewpoints in what we read and view. The outcome of this process raises the potential for significant problems in the electorate including a perpetual parallel public (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008), with the two sides never meeting, or worse: a symmetric divergence of partisan groups moving in opposite ideological directions (Blanco et al., 2021). From perceptions of the severity of climate change to who won the 2020 U.S. election, the prospect for a nation increasingly unable to agree upon a common ground of political thought is increasingly becoming a reality.

Given the fear of a "less tolerant and more fragmented public" that exists because of partisan and polarized environments, we need to address the following question: How do we counter, as Stroud (2010) states, the "forces that pull people apart with the forces that pull people together" (p. 571)? Helping us navigate this question in an increasingly complicated and polemic landscape is media literacy, which can help by "increasing awareness and promoting deeper understanding of the meaning contained in media messages" (Byrne, 2009, p. 2).

This study asks if a media literacy intervention can aid information consumers in recognizing partisan bias in news that is ideologically congruent to them. There is hope that such an intervention would lessen the congenial media effect, or the innate acceptance of media we are ideologically attuned to agree with. It is also important to mitigate the availability of congenial media items through algorithmic changes or greater oversight by the tech industry. However, this research approaches changes to the media system via interventions that diminish the effectiveness of congenial partisan media and allow media consumers to be in the driver's seat. Ideally, this would free intervention participants from "self-reinforcing knowledge networks" that falsely assure that our beliefs are the "most credible and unbiased" (Kelly, 2019, p. 458).

Overall, this study works to fill a gap in research on the influence of congenial media and accomplishes this goal by testing two types of media literacy interventions. It posits that increasing cognitive demands on participants, rather than passive consumers, will help them become more active media consumers and to evaluate congenial news more efficiently. This work also explores the question of how partisan groups evaluate congenial information, and if the effectiveness of a media literacy intervention differs along party lines. This study begins with a review of literature exploring how credibility and media bias are evaluated and interpreted by news consumers and reviews previous scholarship in media literacy, examining how media literacy is defined and what type of literacy interventions have been used. Finally, to answer our central research question and hypotheses, an experiment was conducted in which varying media literacy interventions, followed by exposure to congenial partisan news sources on the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh, were presented to participants ($N = 199$). The results address important concerns for media practitioners and media literacy

educators in the formulation of interventions that work to best assuage the grip of media we may unconsciously align with ideologically, a move against-the-grain of what is typically seen in today's news consumer.

Perceived credibility and the interpretation of media bias

Given the importance of credibility to journalism, as “nothing is more valued” (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, p. 139), it might be surprising to some to learn that the concept of credibility isn't universally interpreted or understood by audiences and practitioners. Yet, the ramifications for not having credibility, in both groups, are severe. In fact, research has demonstrated that media consumers prioritize credibility as a factor to be demonstrated within the news they consume, severely judging the reputation of a news organization that would distribute even a few fake news articles (Altay et al., 2020). Reputation in journalism, in this sense, is easy to lose and hard to restore. Even though credibility is valued, defining it has been challenging for scholars (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Indeed, several foundational works on credibility give no definition of the term (see Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). However, an important general understanding concerning credibility is that it is an audience-derived concept. Put simply, credibility is based on criteria that audience members use to evaluate a media text (Newhagen & Nass, 1989). This includes an examination of content from the source, the message and the medium (Meyer et al., 2010). According to this definition then, criteria can and do change depending on who is doing the evaluating. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) considered credibility as a “multidimensional” concept with shifting criteria dependent on the study at hand (p. 451). Diving into message credibility specifically, Appelman and Sundar (2016) defined it as an “individual's judgment of the veracity of the content of communication” (p. 63). Given that the perception of credibility depends on who is doing the evaluating, personal beliefs and ideology may complicate and ultimately skew the assessment of what is believed to be credible and confound the process of constructing a media literacy intervention to work against the acceptance of congenial media.

The Hostile Media Environment (HME) is one such example of a potential difficulty. First

discussed by Vallone et al. (1985), it is defined as a process of media consumption that evaluates unbiased media content as slanted and potentially hostile to one's own position and views. Vallone's work draws on the concept of assimilation bias, and closely related, confirmation bias, which in the former see news users unfairly weight evidence that supports their own worldview (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004) and in the latter, react more positively and less critically to confirming versus disconfirming information (Lee & Shin, 2021). Assimilation and confirmation bias explain how, even in news materials created to be as objective and transparent as possible, personal ideology could skew the perception of the coverage as antithetical to that of your own. Though news is always produced from the vantage point of the creator, as Kavanagh et al. (2019) remind, the nature of news grounded in personal perspective and opinion has dramatically risen in the last twenty years with partisan media now more commonplace than before (Vraga & Tully, 2015). Because of this heightened amount of explicitly partisan news content, the concept of HME was expanded to include the study of biased news programming. Gunther et al. (2001) coined the term *relative hostile media effect*, which occurs when individuals with different attitudes toward an issue exhibit significantly different evaluations of the same media content. For example, the relative hostile media effect would demonstrate that while a conservative-leaning text is perceived by a conservative viewer as leaning in a conservative direction, the degree of this perceived slant would be substantially greater among liberals as compared to conservatives. Similarly, both liberals and conservatives may view programming on MSNBC as leaning toward liberals, but liberals will perceive such bias as comparatively less biased than conservatives. Thus, the strength of the relative hostile media perception is based on the degree of the partisan slant of a program, and more importantly, the ideological bias of the consumer.

Exploring this phenomenon and specifically the influence of personal political ideology in the interpretation of the partisan slant of media, Kelly (2019) found evidence of a congenial media effect at work. In this understanding, media consumers, when exposed to ideologically congruent news materials, would diminish their perceptions of bias toward the material, evaluating the media to be “objective”, and thereby conflating this “objectivity” with credibility. This, states Kelly,

occurs “despite the lack of a news source’s ‘brand’ as a heuristic” (p. 451). Within this work, it was found to be more pronounced for Republicans than Democrats. This latter point is replicated in work from Feldman (2011), who described liberals as having a greater “intolerance for opinionation [sic] in news” (p. 427) but both groups having a “bias against bias” concerning congenial media (p. 430).

These findings point to the congenial media effect operating as a catch-22 for news consumers. Viewers and readers of partisan media evaluate the credibility of a source based on the perceived credibility of the information experienced, a credibility that is evaluated based on the alignment to the media coverage experienced (Kelly, 2019). Thus, while news users have a desire to consume credible news, because of the evaluative lens typically used, they seek out partisan issue agreement in the attempt to find “objectivity”. The question for this study is whether it is possible to escape the trap of deferring to partisan materials to understand one’s world, and whether media literacy interventions can be devised to mitigate the seemingly entrenched outcome of believing what is safe and congenial to your viewpoint over media expressing another.

Media literacy interventions

Although the exact definition of media literacy has been debated by scholars, one of the more prominent definitions stems from the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy in 1992, defining media literacy as the ability to “access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 6). Others have conceptualized media literacy as the “skillful collection, interpretation, testing and application of information, regardless of medium or presentation, for some purposeful action” (Anderson, 1981, p. 22). Still others describe media literacy as relating to a type of “education that aims to increase students’ understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality” (Duncan, 2006, p. 31). Overall, media literacy research has generally classified itself into one of three categories: (1) those that explore the definition or meaning of media literacy; (2) work towards the creation of instructional curriculum and capacities (heavily youth focused); and (3) interventions

focused on changing or preventing specific behaviors (Potter, 2013).

Concerning interventions, scholars have identified two distinct areas of research: media-related and behavior-related outcomes and purposes (Jeong et al., 2012). Potter (2013) outlined three general philosophies concerning interventions, 1) media exert “direct” or “indirect influences on society,” 2) these effects are “harmful to individuals, or at least not useful,” and 3) interventions can “help people avoid these negative effects” (p. 423). Relevant literature describes how media literacy interventions have effectively assuaged negative effects of media related to such topics as sexualized media and adolescent sexual attitudes (Pinkleton et al., 2008), mitigation of racial stereotypes (Erba et al., 2019), as well as drug and substance abuse, eating disorders and body dissatisfaction (Xie et al., 2019). Interventions primarily operate in either one-shot or multi-lesson format styles and vary in exposure length dependent on researcher needs (Chen & Erba, 2017). One-shot interventions, though abridged compared to multi-lesson and other longer exposure formats, have been previously shown to be effective (Brown, 2006; Guess, et al., 2020; Neely-Sardon & Tignor, 2018). They may provide practitioners and educators with increased literacy opportunities for adults 65 and older, or other non-traditional student populations, a vital and needed area of scholarship (Lee, 2018; Tully et al, 2020).

Overall, as Jeong et al. (2012) suggest, media literacy interventions should increase audiences’ “knowledge, criticism, and awareness of the influence of media” (p. 457) and reduce “the impact of the media on audiences’ beliefs, attitudes, norms and behaviors” (p. 455). Certainly, within the realm of motivating health and behavioral changes, media literacy interventions have shown to be valuable. However, raising awareness to partisan congenial media is a less explored outcome. Work in news media literacy, which focuses on understanding “how and why people engage with news media, how they make sense of what they consume, and how individuals are affected by their own news consumption” (Maksl et al., 2015, p. 29), is ongoing. The application of interventions in this area have displayed mixed results.

In Vraga and Tully’s (2015) work with undergraduate university students, the effectiveness of implementing a news media literacy intervention was tested in the form of a PSA that outlined the role

of news in “informing citizens” and “representing diverse viewpoints”, and of consumers in “critically engaging with news” and in “overcoming personal biases” (p. 432). Following exposure to the media literacy PSA, participants were shown a political talk show espousing conservative, liberal or politically neutral views. Results from this study showed the intervention effectiveness differed along party lines, with conservatives seeing right leaning congruent programming and its host as more credible, even after exposure to the PSA, while improving conservative views toward the neutrally produced content. Liberals, on the other hand, were not affected by the PSA.

Combined with the previous literature on news credibility and the perception of partisan media, this study works to clarify media literacy’s effectiveness at assuaging the congenial media effect. As part of the study, participants were only presented with information that they were ideologically aligned to agree with. More specifically the study posited that:

H1: Those who have been exposed to a media literacy intervention are more likely to perceive congenial partisan media content as partisan than those who have not been exposed to such media literacy intervention.

H2: Those who have been exposed to a media literacy intervention are more likely to perceive congenial partisan media texts as less credible than those who have not been exposed to any media literacy interventions.

Additionally, given the diversity in the responses seen between conservatives and liberals within Vraga and Tully (2015) and Kelly (2019), this study asks:

RQ1: Will the effectiveness of a media literacy intervention differ among political groups exposed to congenial media?

Cognitive theory of media literacy

One potential challenge concerning a media literacy intervention focused on congenial media is that media consumers are often in a state of “automaticity” and influenced by schemas that are established by the media (Potter, 2004, p. 269).

FOX and MSNBC news are created and positioned by its production to be perceived and read in a certain way. In daily experiences with media, people simply reach for their cognitive shortcuts, limiting the interaction and critical evaluation of the media text itself. Indeed, public discourse has been

found to be increasingly devoid of a “rigorous analysis of evidence” and prone to “anti-intellectualism” and “fringe thinking” (McGeough & Rudick, 2018, pp. 165-166). Therefore, a media intervention must generate a “drive-state” (Potter, 2004, p. 277) that rises above simple acceptance or agreement with the dominant interpretation of a media item, especially one in which people feel is congruent to their own views.

It is suggested for this work, that a media literacy intervention that asks participants to focus internally on their own personal beliefs and how these beliefs may dispose them to a particular media type, or to “recognize that their [citizens] biases influence how they interpret news” (Vraga & Tully, 2019, p. 81) would trigger a “drive-state” in media users. This will give media users an opportunity to push back against the automatic schemas often utilized in their understanding and interpretation of congenial partisan media. For this “cognitive” element of a media literacy intervention, the individual is considered as the prime factor of a successful intervention and “media industries and societies and institutions... downstream of individual actions” (Potter, 2004, p. 267). Thus, for a cognitive media literacy intervention, the emphasis is less on media systems and how they work and more on the individual.

In a work by Byrne (2009), participants performed a cognitive activity directly after exposure to the educational components of the media literacy intervention on violence in media. For the cognitive intervention, children wrote a paragraph on what they had learned and then read this aloud. This was contrasted with a group that did not write a paragraph but had exposure to the same literacy intervention. In this study, children were significantly less willing to use aggression to solve problems in the cognitive group versus the non-cognitive group. Thus, there is some research to show that the effortful thinking on an issue within a media literacy intervention can bolster its effectiveness and is akin to the call by Tully et al. (2020) to emphasize the importance of engaging and dealing with an individual’s “political predispositions and stances toward controversial issues that influence news choice” (p. 223).

Based on these thoughts, the current study investigated if the addition of a cognitive activity to a media literacy intervention would instill a greater level of critical assessment toward amenable partisan media materials. The study posits that:

H3: Those who have been exposed to a media literacy intervention containing a “cognitive” component will evaluate congenial partisan media texts as more partisan than those who are not.

H4: Those who have been exposed to a media literacy intervention with a “cognitive” component will evaluate congenial partisan media texts as less credible than those who have not.

METHODS

To test these hypotheses, a 2 (liberal vs. conservative) X 3 (two differing media literacy intervention conditions and one no intervention group) mixed factorial design experiment was conducted via the Qualtrics online platform. Following an online informed consent, participants ($N = 199$) were randomly assigned to one of the three media literacy conditions: the “objectivity” intervention condition ($n = 67$), the “objectivity-plus” intervention condition (i.e., the “objectivity” intervention with an additional “cognitive” self-reflection task) ($n = 56$), and the no intervention condition serving as a control group ($n = 75$).

Participants, other than those in the control group, were first presented with one of two media literacy treatments (the “objectivity” or “objectivity-plus” intervention, see Appendix A). Following this, all participants were exposed to a manufactured news article that aligned with their ideological orientation (i.e., a FOX news article for conservatives and an MSNBC news article for liberals, see Appendix B). The FOX news article was written to reflect a conservative partisan viewpoint regarding the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh. The MSNBC article represented a liberal partisan viewpoint on the same issue. After participants read their stimulus news story, a questionnaire was given to assess the degree of perceived partisanship of the article and its credibility.

Participants

Overall, 99 conservatives and 100 liberals were recruited through the platform Amazon Mechanical Turk and were compensated one dollar for participating. Amazon’s platform is demonstrated to be an effective data gathering tool for academic research (Crump et al., 2013), allowing for data to be gathered quickly, effectively and with access to a more diverse population than an undergraduate

student body alone (Sheehan, 2018). It is also a platform in which cognitive processes can be successfully explored with results comparable to other academic works (Amazeen, 2020). Of the participants, 52% were female and 47% were male with 1% identifying as non-binary. A majority of participants were Caucasian (77%), followed by multiracial (10.5%), Black or African American (8%), Asian (4%), and Hispanic (0.5%). The mean age of participants was 43 ($SD = 13.5$), with the youngest participant being 21 and the oldest 80. Regarding education, of the 199 who took part in the experiment, 23 had graduated high school (or had a GED), 47 had some college but had not completed a degree, 29 had associate degrees, 74 had a bachelor’s degree, 21 had a master’s degree, 4 had professional degrees (a JD or MD), and one individual had a doctoral degree. Participants were limited to those living within the U.S. and declared themselves as either a conservative or liberal.

Media literacy interventions

The overall media literacy intervention titled “objectivity” outlined common tropes and signifiers of biased and opinion-based statements in media and was based on work created by Imagine Easy Solutions, as K-12 educational company that provides reading and writing tools (Lardinois, 2016).

Participants in this group read a one-page document describing what constitutes fact-based versus opinion-based statements, including heightened or emotional language, the failure to provide alternative viewpoints, and the inclusion of extremely partisan language. This listing of tips for participants, though less interactive than a one-to-one conversation, has demonstrated previous success in research for bolstering the discernment of credible sources from non-credible ones (Guess, et al., 2020). Following this information, participants took part in a word grouping exercise to reinforce the concepts they read. This activity asked participants to categorize six media traits into two overall categories: fact or opinion. The specific terms to categorize included: “verifiable,” “extremely partisan,” “multiple references provided,” “can’t be proven,” “heightened emotions and language,” and “multiple perspectives provided.”

The second intervention, “objectivity-plus”, matched the procedures described above but with an

additional “cognitive” element asking participants to consider their own personal and political ideologies. A statement was included in the media literacy intervention stating that research has shown that media users tend to believe content that aligns with their own personal worldview. The exercise then asked participants to list three areas in which they maintained strongly held personal principles, no matter what media entity distributed the content. The control group was not exposed to any media literacy intervention and proceeded directly to a stimulus article.

News stimuli construction

Following the media literacy interventions (or no intervention control group), participants were asked to read a news article written to heighten its conservative or liberal ideology concerning Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court. The article was designed to mimic the look and feel of real news article, using an article from The Associated Press as a starting point.

However, to heighten the partisan tone of the article, statements such as “a besieged Brett Kavanaugh,” “ruthlessly obstructed by Democrats,” “ruthlessly enacted by Republicans,” and “powerful testimony from Dr. Blasey Ford,” replaced the neutral text of the original story. The article was declared to be a screengrab from a real news site, with a FOX or MSNBC news web banner included at the top to further align it to its respective ideological side. In addition, banner ads were placed within the margins of the story to bolster its believability as an online media artifact.

To maintain consistency, both articles were produced to be as similar as possible, including similar word counts. Following exposure to an article, participants were asked to answer three memory recall questions including: the author of the article, the news source providing the story, and any ads seen. This was done to help ensure accurate participation.

Dependent variables

To answer the hypotheses and research question, a series of dependent variables were assessed and included factors of perceived partisanship and credibility. The former used one measure and the latter uses two measures.

Perceptions of partisanship. To evaluate the perceived level of partisanship of the article, Hostile Media Effect scales were adapted from Gunther and Schmitt (2004). Using an eleven-point scale with zero as the (neutral) midpoint, participants were first asked, “Would you say the portrayal of the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh in the news article was strictly neutral, or was it biased in favor of one side or the other?” Strongly biased against was evaluated at -5 and strongly biased for was evaluated at 5. Two more questions asked participants to gauge the percent of the story favorable or unfavorable to Kavanaugh asking, “What percentage of the news story was favorable to the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh?” and “What percentage of the news story was unfavorable to the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh?” (from zero to 100 percent). These responses were then recoded to match the first question’s eleven-point scale range. Once recoding was complete, these items were combined into a new scale for perceived partisanship ($\alpha = 0.90$). To account for the differing directions (liberal estimates running from -5 to 0), liberal means were converted into their absolute value to assess potential mean differences.

Credibility. Two scales were used to measure the assessment of credibility. The first was a message-specific scale, adopted from Appelman and Sundar (2016), that assessed the content of the news item. This included the following seven-point Likert scale items: “How well do the following adjectives (accurate, authentic and believable) describe the content you just read?” (from 1 = describes very poorly to 7 = describes very well), and was highly reliable at ($\alpha = 0.94$).

This scale was combined with a more universal scale for understanding credibility adopted from Newhagen and Nass (1989). This nine-item semantic differential word pair scale ($\alpha = 0.90$) asked if the article was: fair/unfair, unbiased/biased, trustworthy/untrustworthy, factual/not factual, told the whole story/did not tell the whole story, accurate/inaccurate, concerned mainly about the public interest/is not concerned about the public interest, concerned about the community’s well-being/is not concerned about the community’s well-being, separates facts from opinions/doesn’t separate facts from opinions.

This measurement was reverse-coded so that a higher mean value equated a more credible assessment and a lower score equated a less credible assessment.

RESULTS

Effect of media literacy interventions on perceived partisan bias

A one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post hoc test was conducted to examine the effects of the media literacy interventions on perceived media partisanship. Overall, results showed no significant difference in mean values between media literacy conditions and the control group on partisan readings (see Table 1). Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 3, both the “objectivity” media literacy intervention and the “objectivity-plus” intervention, had no effect on participant evaluations of the degree of partisanship attributed to the news articles. Notably, levels of perceived partisanship by participants ran in the direction of the stimuli even without a media literacy intervention (i.e., control group). Liberals assessed the MSNBC article as slightly slanted to the left, conservatives viewed the FOX article as slanted slightly to the right, and no one group reported the article as being excessively partisan from the other, evaluating each one’s respective stimuli at similar levels.

Table 1. *Perceived Partisanship of article across media literacy interventions*

Intervention type	Conservatives		Liberals	
	M	SD	M	SD
Objectivity	2.98	1.50	2.73	1.64
Objectivity-plus	2.73	1.64	2.95	1.51
Control	2.32	1.73	2.98	1.40

Effect of media literacy intervention on perceptions of credibility

The media literacy interventions were also posited to lead to a lower level of perceived credibility toward ideologically congruent media materials (hypotheses 2 and 4). Results indicated that neither literacy intervention significantly impacted the evaluation of credibility of the congenial media texts. Means for the content credibility scale ran at similar levels (“objectivity” = 4.97, “objectivity-plus” = 5.27, control = 5.36) as did means for the general credibility scale

(“objectivity” = 3.76, “objectivity-plus” = 3.87, control = 4.21).

Differences between Liberals and Conservatives. While these hypotheses are not initially supported, an interesting pattern emerged when comparing liberal and conservative perceptions of stimulus credibility and sheds light on the overall research question of this study, the effectiveness of a media literacy intervention between political groups. A one-way ANOVA test showed significant differences between liberals and conservatives in their assessment of the credibility of their respective congenial news article, both for the general credibility scale, $F(1, 197) = 8.319, p = .004$, and the content credibility scale $F(1, 197) = 9.329, p = .003$ (see Table 2). Based on a MULTIVARIATE with Bonferroni pairwise comparison test, liberals were more skeptical of their congenial article, giving lower ratings for each credibility measurement.

Table 2. *Perceived credibility of stimuli between Conservatives and Liberals*

Credibility type	Conservatives	Liberals	MD	<i>p</i>
Content	5.52	4.87	.649	.003
General	4.20	3.71	.493	.004

Looking specifically within the liberal group only and running an ANOVA test, there was a marginally significant difference on content credibility across conditions (“objectivity,” “objectivity-plus,” and control), $F(2, 96) = 2.989, p = .055$, and a significant difference in general credibility, at $F(2, 96) = 3.967, p = .022$. Looking at a pairwise comparisons with Tukey HSD for all three conditions and both credibility scales, significant differences in credibility measures become clearer (Table 3). For content credibility, the “objectivity” media literacy intervention ($M = 4.49$) contrasted with the control group ($M = 5.35$) displayed significant difference in mean values ($p = .049$). The general credibility measure mirrors this pattern with participants in the “objectivity” intervention condition ($M = 3.44$) displaying significantly lower levels of perceived credibility compared to the control group ($p = .032$). For both credibility scales, the “objectivity-plus” intervention condition did not show significant difference compared to the other conditions.

Table 3. *Perceived credibility among Liberals between media literacy interventions*

Credibility measurement	Intervention type	Intervention type	Mean Difference	Sig.
Content	Objectivity	Objectivity	-.27524	.764
		Control	-.86068*	.049
	Objectivity-plus	Objectivity	.27524	.764
		Control	-.58545	.284
	Control	Standard	.86068*	.049
		Objectivity-plus	.58545	.284
General	Objectivity	Objectivity-plus	-.05846	.978
		None	-.68094*	0.32
	Objectivity-plus	Standard	.05846	.978
		None	-.62248	.078
	None	Standard	.68094*	.032
		Objectivity-plus	.62248	.078

*p < .05

Given that the “objectivity-plus” intervention mirrored the “objectivity” intervention, but with the inclusion of the cognitive self-reflection point, the addition of this element seemed to cancel any of the benefits of the “objectivity” intervention for liberals. It is also worth noting that this general pattern of negation mirrors in the means values for partisanship within both political camps (though not significantly). Concerning conservatives, no significant differences were detected. Overall, regarding the results seen, liberals were more critical of their congenial media stimulus compared to conservatives. In addition, the “objectivity” media literacy intervention negatively impacted their credibility evaluations of the congenial news article providing mixed support for hypothesis 2.

DISCUSSION

This study examined if media consumers, upon exposure to a media literacy intervention, can foster an against-the-grain assessment and increased criticality toward congenial partisan materials. At first glance it would seem that the intractability and stubbornness of partisan biases and innate partisan media readings overshadowed the effect of the media literacy interventions of this study. In all treatment conditions, partisan evaluations were not affected by the interventions. Additionally, in terms of the “objectivity-plus” condition, rather than enabling an independent “drive-state” that Potter (2004) has called for within a cognitive theory of media literacy, getting participants to reflect on their own ideological beliefs seems to have negated the effect of the “objectivity” media literacy

intervention. This was especially pronounced among liberals for their assessments of the perceived credibility of the MSNBC stimuli. It might be that the process of going inward and reflecting on one’s ideological leaning may have reinforced their own bias and assessment of the credibility of the article and is a finding that diverges from the success of Byrne (2009) in the use of a cognitive element in a media literacy intervention. Practically speaking, though we want people to be aware of their own partisan positions and leaning, interventions that ask individuals to focus on their own political ideologies may work against the desired goal and outcome of media literacy instructors.

It is notable, however, that liberals reacted differently than their conservative counterparts in their perceptions of the overall credibility of congenial news article, which mirrors the outcomes demonstrated by Vraga and Tully (2015) and Kelly (2019). For both credibility measures, liberals rated their congenial article as less credible than conservatives. In particular, the “objectivity” media literacy intervention incited a greater reflection on the MSNBC piece as less credible. Previous studies indicate that liberals tend to evaluate media materials more cautiously and holistically than conservatives (Mooney, 2012), so they may simply be more discerning during the evaluation process. Regardless, at least within the confines of this work, a media literacy intervention (without added self-reflective element) was able to nudge certain media consumers (liberals) to be more critical in their assessment of a congenial media piece.

The fact that conservatives did not mirror liberal findings displays an increasingly reoccurring pattern

of divergent outcomes between political groups in the processing of amenable partisan information. Researchers have found that conservatives tend to evaluate the media system as more often running against their viewpoints and as a group operating in the minority (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Lee, 2005). Additionally, conservatives have been shown to be more rigid in their ideologies (Toner et al., 2013), unified (Abramowitz, 2015), and more sensitive to partisan cues than liberals (Bullock, 2011). Thus, conservatives overall, concerning congenial media, may simply be harder to influence through media literacy interventions. It may also be the case that because conservatives are more experienced to heightened partisan tones stemming from the prevalence of conservative talk radio, blogs, and FOX News (Feldman, 2011; Wicks et al., 2014), partisan materials for them may feel more normalized and justified. However, while these studies shed light onto this process, we cannot state that an explanation for the nature of the congenial media effect concerning conservatives has been fully understood.

CONCLUSION

The ability to assess media content, both systematically and neutrally when confronted with a congruent partisan text, is an important skill for successfully traversing through today's highly partisan media landscape, and in macro terms, for the health of our democracy. Media literacy interventions, though holding much promise for educating a populace on the pitfalls and ills of the media system, in so far as the confines of this study, cannot be said to counter the innate tendencies toward agreeable information, enhancing the risk of parallel and further drifting apart publics remaining in our politics. Yet, changes in the evaluation of a partisan text in terms of its credibility were detected among liberal participants, raising the prospect for success with the implementation of a media literacy intervention, dependent on the group or person interacting with the materials. That differing ideological groups showed a divergent response is also a reminder that interventions, especially surrounding politics, may not work the same way for every group.

Given that this study only tested one issue (the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh), experiments using multiple issues could provide a better understanding of the effects of media literacy interventions. Such

experiments would be helpful in accounting for some of the discrepancies between liberals and conservatives found in this study as well. Conservatives and liberals may prioritize different issues and thus their evaluation of the slant and credibility of a partisan media text may vary based on the topic experienced. Finally, as with all media literacy interventions, the length of exposure is a factor that must be considered. Though one-shot procedures hold the potential to provide increased access to media literacy pedagogy for a wide swath of media consumers, accessibility and ease should be considered with other factors. How might a longitudinal study with multiple exposures to a media literacy intervention over an extended period impact people's perception of partisan bias and credibility regarding congenial news content? These are useful questions for researchers to consider in future scholarship that works to assuage the congenial media effect.

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APPENDIX A
Media Literacy Interventions

The “objectivity” intervention

Separating Fact from Opinion: Can You Tell the Difference?

Telling fact from fiction, especially online, can be a difficult and time-consuming process. With so much information available, it can be hard to tell if what you’re reading or seeing is factual or based off of opinion. Sometimes a story can be written or communicated in such a clever way that it can seem like it is factual when it really is subjective. So how can you tell what is fact or opinion?

Here are a few tips to help you tell the difference.

One, is the author known for having an extreme point of view? Or is the content coming from an extremely partisan perspective? For more controversial topics, you may come across what seem like a credible source, but the author may have an extreme point of view and be a very convincing writer or speaker. If you are not sure, see what you can learn about the author to determine if there is a bias within their work, or look at other stories on the website or news channel to see if they lean in a particularly partisan direction. If you hear someone say during an interview or read in an article essentially any statement involving personal feelings that’s an opinion.

For example, when someone says, “George Washington was the greatest president of all time,” this is an opinion. What marks a president as “greatest” would change depending on whom you talk to and ultimately there isn’t any means for proving a specific president as the “greatest”. George Washington was the first president of the United States and was born in Virginia. These are verifiable facts, with sources available to back up and prove these claims.

Remember, an opinion is subjective, based on emotions (sometimes extremely heightened) and personal beliefs, and cannot be confirmed or proven. Opinions are also inherently biased. A fact, on the other hand, is accepted by the majority, verified by experts, and can be proven as true. Spotting the difference between the two will help you as you navigate an increasingly complex media environment.

1) Now, please group the following items into their respective box:

Verifiable, extremely partisan, multiple references provided, can’t be proven, heightened emotions and language, multiple perspectives provided

Fact	Opinion

Additional self-reflective component for “objectivity-plus” intervention

In addition to the “objectivity” intervention described above, the following paragraph was provided.

Research has shown that we tend to select media that we agree with and to be less critical in our evaluation of media that shares our world view. Think about your personal and political principles and beliefs. What is important to you? What do you value? Concerning media, what issues might you be inclined to agree with if seen in the media (no matter who sends out the story)? These areas may include (but are not limited to) topics like religion, family and politics.

List three areas or issues below.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

APPENDIX B
Stimuli News Articles

The image shows a screenshot of a Fox News article. At the top, the Fox News logo is on the left, and navigation links for U.S., World, Opinion, Politics, Entertainment, Business, Lifestyle, TV, Fox Nation, Radio, and More are on the right. Below the logo, it says 'Hot Topics' and 'Howard Schultz' with a timestamp of '12:15 PM'. The main headline is 'Trump attends Kavanaugh ceremony at Supreme Court' by 'MARC JACOBSON'. A large photograph shows President Donald Trump in a suit and Justice Brett Kavanaugh in his judicial robes standing together in a courtroom. To the right of the photo is a 'Most Made Today' section with four food items: 'World's Best Lasagna' (12K), 'Fluffy Pancakes' (1.0K), 'Bourbon Street Rib-Eye Steak' (80), and 'Keto Shrimp Scampi with Broccoli Noodles' (16). Below the photo are social media icons and a 'Click to copy' button. A 'RELATED TOPICS' sidebar lists names like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, John Roberts, and Merrick Garland. The main text of the article is fabricated, starting with 'WASHINGTON (NEWSLINE) — President Donald Trump, fresh off a mid-term election triumph, was all smiles during his visit to the Supreme Court on Thursday for the ceremonial swearing-in of besieged Justice Brett Kavanaugh.' It continues with a paragraph about the invitation-only crowd and another paragraph about Kavanaugh's nomination. A third paragraph describes the ceremony. To the right of the article is a JCPenney Home advertisement for solid bath towels, priced at \$239 after a coupon, and a Sling TV advertisement for 40+ channels for \$25 a month.

Figure 1. Fox News (Fabricated) Stimulus Article

Trump attends Kavanaugh ceremony at Supreme Court

By MARC JACOBSON



Click to copy

RELATED TOPICS

- Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- Supreme courts
- John Roberts
- Merrick Garland
- Politics
- North America
- U.S. Supreme Court
- Brett Kavanaugh
- Courts

WASHINGTON (NEWSLINE) — President Donald Trump, fresh off a mid-term election disaster, was all smiles during his visit to the Supreme Court on Thursday for the ceremonial swearing-in of controversial Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

The invitation-only crowd that included Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, retired Justice Anthony Kennedy, and many of Kavanaugh’s family members and former colleagues, gathered to congratulate the Justice on his life-long appointment, a process ruthlessly enacted by Senate Republicans in one of the greatest examples of corruption seen on Capitol Hill in recent memory.

Kavanaugh was nominated to take Kennedy’s seat and confirmed in October amid disturbing allegations and powerful testimony from Dr. Blasey Ford of sexual assault. Kavanaugh has denied it and Democratic attempts to investigate the nominee were ultimately trampled by Senate Republicans.

Chief Justice John Roberts administered the oath Kavanaugh took when he was officially sworn in October. The president and first lady Melania Trump also met privately with the justices before Thursday’s redundant courtroom ceremony.

Most Made Today

- World's Best Lasagna ★★★★★ 12K
- Fluffy Pancakes ★★★★★ 10K
- Bourbon Street Rib-Eye Steak ★★★★★ 80
- Keto Shrimp Scampi with Broccoli Noodles ★★★★★ 15

from **\$239**
after coupon
was \$8 - \$60
JCPenney Home™ Solid Bath Towels
★★★★★ (3,047)

GET 40+ CHANNELS
FOR ONLY **\$25** A MONTH
sling **WATCH 7 DAYS FREE**

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Figure 2. MSNBC (Fabricated) Stimulus Article