Article

The Awkward Moment When You Agree With News Outlets That You Normally Distrust

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Abstract
News source attribution in selective exposure has been examined in many contexts, but rarely in the context of selecting news from distrusted sources. As such, 800 US adults were asked to select one of two headlines attributed to CNN and/or Fox News. Results showed some people selected news from a distrusted source, but only under very specific circumstances. Others avoided the awkward moment of siding with a distrusted source, even when that meant selecting news from a trusted source that was counter-attitudinal to the source's typical slant on global warming.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Trust, Social Cohesion, and Information Quality in Digital Journalism" edited by Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (University of Utah), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin).

1. Introduction

News consumption is riddled with difficult choices in the current media ecology. Humans are bombarded with news messages with only limited capacity to interact with them (Arendt et al., 2019). There are situations in which particular messages directly compete with each other for attention, for instance, in the way that online news aggregators such as Google News, Yahoo!, or MSN present news options in the form of headlines. These news websites and portals are part of the media diets of many relatively moderate US news consumers. Although most people visit these websites for activities not related to news (e.g., email) or just seek out primarily non-political news, they are still exposed to political news from a variety of sources with varying ideological leanings as there are many political stories to choose from in the form of headlines (Guess, 2021; Mummolo, 2016; Tyler et al., 2022). This study focused on such competitive settings to explore the extent to which people seek out news from distrusted sources over news from trusted ones.

News headlines from CNN and Fox News are frequently featured on these news websites and portals.

They are among the best-known news sources in the US and are also exceedingly polarizing in the present-day political climate. In one study, Fox News was the only outlet that a majority of Republicans trusted; 20 other news sources were distrusted more than trusted, especially CNN. However, CNN was the most trusted news source for Democrats and Fox News was their most distrusted outlet (Jurkowitz et al., 2020; see also Hoewe et al., 2023). Source attribution to prominent news sources, such as CNN and Fox News, has been regarded as an important shortcut for exposure and avoidance of news stories, as well as for the perceptions of those reports once accessed. Therefore, it is vital to study source cues of cable news and their effects on perceptions of reality (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Because of a widespread desire to hold accurate beliefs, exposure to opposing viewpoints or sources could trigger a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This discomfort can be alleviated by paying attention to pro-attitudinal news and avoided by ignoring counter-attitudinal news because of confirmation bias (Garrett, 2009). In this study, participants negotiated a combination of favorable or unfavorable content and/or news sources, though communication scholars

have often not made a "critical distinction" between trust in sources and trust in messages (Barnoy & Reich, 2022, p. 197; see also Hoewe et al., 2023). Given trust in sourcing can affect trust in messaging, communication research pioneers have warned that persuasion or believability cannot be fully understood without taking *both* elements into account (e.g., Asch, 1948). Later research has provided additional evidence that interactions between sources and content have been vital in explaining message perceptions (Blom, 2021a). Nonetheless, much scholarship has focused primarily on the relationship between source trust on attitude change. The results showed that people are ordinarily more convinced by messages from trusted sources than sources that they do not trust. However, this is not always the case: Distrusted sources can be more persuasive than trusted sources, but mainly *when messages are unexpected* (Sternthal et al., 1978). Therefore, Republicans may consider some CNN headlines more believable than Democrats, and vice versa for Fox News, in particular when people are highly surprised by a headline's slant (Blom, 2021b).

In the current study, participants were exposed to two headlines (attributed to CNN and/or Fox News) and had to decide for which headline they wanted to read the full story. All headlines focused on global warming, but some were slanted with a frame depicting global warming as a large threat and others with global warming as a low or nonexistent threat. This made it possible to examine headline selections of voters in different configurations based on message slant and source attribution—most importantly, situations in which pro-attitudinal news was attributed to a distrusted source and counter-attitudinal news to a trusted source. Notably, some participants were inclined to choose news from a distrusted source, whereas others chose a headline they likely would not have selected when both headlines would have been attributed to the same, trusted or distrusted source. This provided a stepping-stone for future research on selective exposure and avoidance of political news headlines in competitive news environments.

2. Literature Review

Tully et al. (2020) interviewed 22 US adults about their perceptions of bias in a news article on climate change attributed to Fox News and another such story attributed to *The New York Times*. They found that political news consumers relied heavily on source cues—as shortcuts—to determine bias and viewed stories mainly through an ideological lens. The source cues led many participants to expect liberal or conservative biases for *The New York Times* and Fox News, respectively, even when a story published by the latter outlet was in actuality a wire story by the Associated Press. As the researchers observed: "Source cues colored then expectations of the stories with little critical evaluation beyond suggesting that each outlet has a partisan perspective" (p. 219). Hence, a news

source's trustworthiness can affect the validity of its messages as perceived by its audience. As Kim and Grabe (2022) specified, the "origin or source from which information flows is a central cue in triggering heuristics for news selection" (p. 2). A source becomes trusted when it typically provides believable news and distrusted by providing unbelievable information. This is because most people want to be accurate and assume their beliefs to be true. They also think truthful information can only come from sources they therefore deem credible. This has resulted in a "belief force equals credible source" heuristic that influences people's perceptions of news quality (Fragale & Heath, 2004, p. 233). Baum and Gussin (2008) argued reliance on source heuristics in news selection "raises the possibility that an individual's ex ante assessment of the ideological orientation of a specific media outlet will condition subsequent responses to the information it provides" (p. 4). Therefore, scholars have maintained that the *messenger* can often be regarded as the *message* (Turner, 2007).

As a result, audiences have selected trusted sources more often than distrusted sources in competitive news environments. In the case of trusted sources that is largely because of their pro-attitudinal content (Metzger et al., 2020). Pro-attitudinal content from a trusted source is often seen as fair and balanced, whereas counter-attitudinal content from a distrusted source is often seen as less informative (Arceneaux et al., 2012). For that reason, people often prefer content from like-minded news outlets (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Metzger et al., 2020). That said, just because there generally is a preference for pro-attitudinal information does not mean that counter-attitudinal information is fully ignored (Jang, 2014; Winter et al., 2016). In fact, many news consumers are exposed to heterogeneous perspectives (Garrett, 2009) and fears of echo chambers or filter bubbles have been overblown (Bruns, 2021). Yet, access to mixed messages does not automatically equate to avoiding biased news as it is still possible to exclusively select pro-attitudinal news from trusted sources from the overall news mix (J. W. Kim & Kim, 2021). However, this could sometimes lead to moments of dissonance, because (trusted) news outlets cannot always present news favoring their ideological slant (when even those organizations are constraint by the real world), and people may be surprised about these *unexpected* reports—without their usual ideological slant—which could affect the believability of those news stories.

2.1. Expectancies

The cognitive basis of surprise is unexpectedness when messages disconfirm expectations or contradict implicit beliefs. The more the messages differentiate from previous experiences or positions, the larger the unexpectedness—hence, the larger the ensuing surprise (Reisenzein et al., 2019). The principal aspect of expectancy violations is the pre-existing representation,

not the actual message. Without a pre-existing representation, it is not possible to assess (un)filled anticipation, regardless of whether that position is based on long-term memory or an instant judgment (Casati & Pasquinelli, 2007). In essence, surprise is "one of the basic and universal of human emotions" (Maguire et al., 2011, p. 176) and plays a key role in ongoing sense-making and representational updating processes once it becomes challenging to square new messages with prior representations, which affects learning and decision making (Barto et al., 2013).

The most likely inference from expectancy violations is that messengers reveal their true selves because people usually do not make claims against their self-interest, whereas messengers with expected messages do not reveal any additional information. According to Burgoon (2016), counter-attitudinal messages that violate expectations may be preferred over pro-attitudinal messages—depending on the source. For instance, distrusted sources with counter-attitudinal messages could be highly effective in persuading an audience—even more so than trusted ones with the same (thus pro-attitudinal) message. The former has been considered more sincere and honest than the latter because of the expectancy violation, and sources with expected messages are considered more biased (Eagly et al., 1978). Therefore, Petty et al. (2001) stated: "The merits of the message must have overcome the source's desire to act in his or her own personal best interest" (p. 419). They also found trustworthiness positively correlated with selflessness. E. J. Lee and Shin (2021) concluded that "(in)congruity of the message with the audience's preexisting attitudes seem to set the tone before any other considerations" (p. 4). Consequently, observed expectancy violations caused liberals to believe a news headline from a distrusted conservative news source more than a trusted liberal source, and vice versa (Blom, 2021b), which raised questions about the consequences for news selection of partisan news users: To what extent are people willing to select news from distrusted sources? And to what extent do expectancy violations play a role? This warranted further investigation of source *and* content heuristics in news selection. As Westerwick et al. (2017) said: "Differentiation between content cues' and source cues' impacts will ultimately help to reconcile inconsistent prior findings in the flourishing research on selective exposure to political messages and subsequent impacts on attitudes" (p. 344).

2.2. Selective Exposure

Bias perceptions could affect what news people expose themselves to or explicitly avoid. Selective exposure is the act of seeking out specific (news) content and selective avoidance is the act of deliberately ignoring specific (news) content. Surprisingly, many news stories that served as experimental stimuli in selective exposure studies have not been attributed to a news source or were attributed only to fictional outlets (e.g.,

Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Yet, as stated earlier, people have always assessed the truth of statements by drawing inferences from their perceived knowledge about the message content *and* source (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). For instance, an experimental design involving content attributed to CNN and Fox News found that distrusted news sources could enhance the believability of news messages relative to a more trusted news source (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Others have also found that distrusted sources could be persuasive with unexpected messages, even more than trusted sources (Bergan, 2012).

There are also studies that found results contradictory to the vital role of source trust on story believability. For example, Austin and Dong (1994) found no source effect on the believability of fictional articles attributed to *The New York Times*, a tabloid magazine, and a fictional source, although that study was conducted in a pre-internet era with less polarization in media bias perceptions, which may have played a role. Selective exposure studies integrating real-world sources also found that confirmation bias was not always moderated by source cues (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019), yet many of those studies focused on blogs and non-profits, not major news outlets with well-known political-ideological slants. A study involving such news outlets, such as Fox News, MSNBC, and *The New York Times*, found that political partisans prefer pro-attitudinal sources over counter-attitudinal sources (M. Kim & Lu, 2020); however, this study did not control for source slant matching expected content slant. This was also the case for Arendt et al.'s (2019) study in which participants were asked to choose between two headlines, one attributed to Fox News and one to MSNBC, as well as Mummolo's (2016) study comparing exposure to headlines of those news networks and *USA Today*. Headline stimuli did not always address clear ideological slants in some of those studies, making it much more ambiguous to predict expectancies among and between partisan groups interpreting the headlines. Hence, those studies found that explicit and implicit attitudes toward news sources predicted headline choice, but did not control for content in relation to potential expectancy violations. The current study intended to bridge this gap, because source heuristics may play a larger role when news consumers develop expectancies about what kind of stories and underlying slants could be expected from news sources they trust *and* do not trust.

A major difference in the emphasis of the current study in relation to prior work was comparisons on the macro (group) level, whereas the aforementioned studies mainly focused on the individual level. Evidently, those studies focused on differences among partisans (i.e., liberals vs. conservatives, or Democrats vs. Republicans), and the current study is not an exception; however, the gravity here was on the behavior of each voter block (i.e., Biden *and* Trump voters) in their selections when they were constraint by source-message

combinations that could cause dissonance (e.g., a believable headline attributed to a distrusted sources and another less believable headline from trusted sources) in comparisons to conditions in which the same headlines were both attributed to one source. Thus, to better understand the extent voters are willing to expose themselves to distrusted sources, we ask: How did partisans in the form of voting groups—each collectively—grapple with news selection in situations with or without unexpected source–message combinations?

2.3. Headline Selection

Headlines have always played an important role in news environments (Ng & Zhao, 2020) because news consumers are essentially "shoppers of headlines" while determining which stories they want to consume fully (English, 1944, p. 217). Headlines may play an even larger role today, especially because smartwatches and mobile phones have only limited space to report news at a glance (Luo et al., 2022). Whereas the main story accompanies a headline on a printed page, often it is up to digital news consumers to click on a hyperlink to reach the whole story. Hence, news consumers need to make decisions on news utility based on headlines (Winter et al., 2016). Sülflow et al. (2019) posited that source characteristics play an especially large role in situations with limited content, for example, for headlines and social media news posts. They found high source trustworthiness increased exposure to short online news posts and was a decisive factor in selecting full stories.

This study focused on the selection of headlines from trusted and distrusted news sources based on whether the headline content was expected or unexpected on a group level between presidential candidate voters. It was anticipated that these voter groups would make different news choices when both trusted (for one group but not the other) and distrusted (in the reverse order) news sources provided unexpected headlines in comparison to other combinations of content and source. This is because, in the opposite scenario (two sources present a pro-attitudinal headline), the more believable headline from the trusted source would likely be preferred over a less believable headline from a distrusted source. When the situation is the other way around, the choice is between incongruent source-message combinations for both the trusted and distrusted sources. Even though the voter groups could gravitate to different headline preferences, this could mean that these voter groups respond similarly to the task by selecting opposite headlines.

This study explored headline selections for voters of Democratic nominee Joe Biden and voters of Republican nominee Donald Trump based on the 2020 US presidential election. As aggregate groups with opposing positions on news source trust for CNN and Fox News, as well as positions on global warming (see Tully et al., 2020), it was expected that they behaved contrarily in selecting headlines. In fact, as congruent headlines have usually been considered more truthful than incongruent headlines (Mourão et al., 2023), in many instances, it would be anticipated that Biden voters would mainly prefer one headline and Trump voters prefer the other when the headlines depict opposite positions on global warming. However, that difference may only disappear because of a substantial group of people's need to avoid selecting headlines from a distrusted source even when such headlines are considered congruent with the individuals' beliefs. In other words, even though news consumers generally prefer pro-attitudinal news over counter-attitudinal news (Hart et al., 2009), selecting one from a distrusted source may be too much of a constraint for some voters. Thus, on the aggregate (voter group) level, there would be less polarization in the headline selection in comparison to a situation in which the same headlines were attributed to the same source. In the latter situation, there may be a 90% to 10% selection in favor of the pro-attitudinal headline, whereas it may be 60% to 40% in favor of that headline when attributed to a distrusted source—It may even be that the counter-attitudinal headline attributed to a trusted source may be more popular in such situation (e.g., 40–60%). Thus, it would be expected that the selection outcome is less polarized (90–10% vs. 60–40% or 40–60%) for each voter group within these hypothetical scenarios. Therefore:

H1: (a) Biden voters and (b) Trump voters display a different headline selection pattern when both a trusted and a distrusted news source provide unexpected headlines compared to other news source and message configurations.

H2: In conjunction, there is less polarization between Biden and Trump voters when both a trusted and a distrusted news source provide unexpected headlines compared to other news source and message combinations.

As explained above, the crossover conditions (choice between a CNN headline vs. a Fox News headline) can be reflected in terms of the percentage of voters selecting distrusted sources, in particular, because same-source conditions cannot reflect a choice on source trust as both headlines are attributed to the same source. Therefore, in this study, someone distrusting CNN (Fox News) always selects a news source of a distrusted source in the CNN/CNN (Fox News/Fox News) condition. Hence, it was explored to what extent voters would entertain the possibility of selecting a headline from a distrusted source in crossover conditions within the study design:

RQ1: What percentage of (a) Biden voters and (b) Trump voters selected a headline from a distrusted source in the crossover (i.e., CNN vs. Fox News) conditions for each of the story selection pairs?

3. Method

3.1. Sample and Procedure

3.1.1. Sample

This study was conducted in June 2021 by YouGov by surveying 1,334 US adults online who were then matched down to a sample, based on the full 2018 American Community Survey one-year sample, of 1,200 to produce the final dataset. A subset of 800 participants were analyzed for this study based on the headline content they were exposed to. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The average participant was born in 1972 with a range from 1927 to 2002. A quarter of the participants was born before 1959, whereas another quarter was born after 1987.

There were slightly more female participants (53%) than male participants (47%). Two-thirds of the participants identified as White (67%), other significant groups were Hispanic (14%) and Black (11%). The median income was between $40,000–49,000 and reported higher levels of education than is the case for the entire population. Democrats (38%) outnumbered Independents (30%) and Republicans (22%). That resulted in more voters supporting Joe Biden (47%) than Donald Trump (32%) in the 2020 presidential election; 18% did not vote.

3.1.2. Procedure

The participants started the study by answering questions about the extent to which they trust CNN and Fox News in covering global warming. They were later exposed to two news headlines accompanied by a logo of CNN or Fox News, with the task to select one headline for which they wanted to read the entire news story. This was similar to other studies asking participants to choose between headlines attributed to specific news sources, such as Fox News, that were selected by the researchers and randomly presented (Arendt et al., 2019; M. Kim & Lu, 2020; Mummolo, 2016). The respondents did not know there were two pairs of headlines to test the hypotheses, yet each participant only read one pair of headlines. The headlines were collected from actual news coverage on global warming from both conservative (e.g., Fox News and Breitbart) and non-conservative (e.g., *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, *The Washington Post*) news sources over the years. There were headlines in both liberal and conservative outlets that supported the existence of global warming and that put doubt on it, or at least hinted at a slower process than described by other experts. Based on the results of pre-studies with student and MTurk samples (not depicted here), four headlines were selected:

- Pair A: "Hurricane Florence not Caused by Global Climate Changing" (Headline 1) and

"Research: World's Warming, Expect More Intense Hurricanes" (Headline 2);
- Pair B: "Climate Change: 'I Cannot Think of a Greater Health Emergency'" (Headline 3) and "New Study Says Threat of Man-Made Global Warming Exaggerated" (Headline 4).

The news source attribution of the two headlines was experimentally manipulated in four conditions (CNN/CNN, CNN/Fox News, Fox News/CNN, and Fox News/Fox News). After the participants had indicated which headline they preferred, they were asked whether they could indicate which news source was attributed to the news headline they had selected and the extent to which they expected each of the headlines to be published by its attributed news source.

After completing all questions, participants were debriefed about the deception in source-headline attribution and the need for the experimental design. They were informed that they had the right to have their data removed from the data analysis; no participants opted for exclusion.

3.2. Operational Definitions

The experimental manipulation hinged on participants' perceptions of trust in news sources, in this case CNN and Fox News. Prior research had established that Fox News is perceived as presenting a conservative slant in its reporting, whereas CNN is perceived as non-conservative (S. Lee & Cho, 2022). Trustworthiness is the result of credibility, which is associated with terms such as bias, fairness, accuracy, and believability (Sundar, 1999). Therefore, study participants responded to four statements for each news network, "CNN [Fox News] is _____ when covering news about global warming," with the blank representing: fair, unbiased, accurate, and believable. They answered on a seven-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Confirmatory factor analysis indicated the items formed a coherent scale for both networks. Cohen's alpha was 0.97 for each news outlet.

The experimental manipulation also hinged on participants' perceptions of news content expectancy, in particular the extent to which they were surprised or unsurprised that CNN or Fox News was the source of a particular news. News content expectancy was measured after the participants were exposed to the headlines with source attribution. Participants answered four questions, "To what extent do you think it is _____ that this news organization published this news story?" with the blanks representing: expected, predictable, anticipated, and unsurprising. They answered on a seven-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). The headline and a news network logo accompanied the questions. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the items formed a coherent scale for both networks, and they were closely aligned together:

Cohen's alpha was 0.95 for the expectancy assessment of the first headline they were exposed to and 0.96 for the second headline.

For RQ1a and RQ1b, individual news source trust scores for CNN and Fox News were retracted from each other to assess whether participants considered CNN more or less trustworthy than Fox News. This outcome was compared with the headline selection they made as part of this study. If a participant favored CNN (Fox News) and selected a CNN (Fox News) headline, it was considered a congruent source selection (also described as "same source" in this manuscript); however, participants favoring CNN (Fox News) selecting Fox News (CNN) was categorized as incongruent source selection. Participants who were equally trusting CNN and Fox News were excluded from these analyses.

The political leaning of the participants was probed in several ways: political partisanship (e.g., Democrat vs. Republican), political ideology (e.g., liberal vs. conservative), and political vote (e.g., Biden vs. Trump). All three measures had significant missing data or otherwise undesirable data for large group comparisons because of respondents indicating non-partisanship or partisanship outside the Democratic or Republican parties, non-ideology or undecided or moderate ideology, and voters for third-party candidates or non-voters. Because of their opposing views on global warming among the 2020 presidential candidates—Trump has called it a hoax, whereas Biden wanted to reverse Trump's environmental rollbacks (Phillips, 2020)—it was decided to use the 2020 political vote for the partisan group comparisons.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

Participants were asked to identify the news source of the headline they selected after they made that decision and answered the items generating the discomfort scale and items measuring believability and news content expectancy: 80% of the participants correctly identified the news source of the news headline they selected. The statistical analysis presented below only includes data from people who identified the headline source correctly.

The manipulation checks were conducted with independent-sample t-tests. Differences in news source trust for CNN were examined between Biden and Trump voters. The same was the case for news source trust for Fox News. Differences in headline content expectancy were examined by comparing each headline attributed to CNN and the same headline attributed to Fox News. Effect sizes were reflected with Cohen's d. Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine news headline selection differences among Biden and Trump voters based on the news source(s) experimental conditions participants were assigned to (H1a and H1b). Fisher's exact tests were conducted for the remaining analyses.

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation Checks

4.1.1. News Source Trust

As expected, Biden voters trusted CNN (M = 5.27, SD = 1.27) to a much higher degree than Trump voters on global warming news coverage (M = 1.99, SD = 1.37). An independent-sample t-test found a statistically significant difference between those means, $t(779)$ = 34.19, $p < 0.001$, d = 1.31. In contrast, Trump voters trusted Fox News to a much higher degree (M = 4.76, SD = 1.52) than Biden voters (M = 2.03, SD = 1.53), with $t(779)$ = −24.46, $p < 0.001$, d = 1.52.

4.1.2. News Content Expectancy

After exposure to the attributed headlines, participants were asked to what extent they expected a particular headline to be published by CNN or Fox News. Table 1 shows that Headline 1 was considered more expected for Fox News and Headline 2 was considered more expected for CNN. This order was reversed for the second headline pair (Headline 3 vs. Headline 4). All mean differences were statistically significant with large effect sizes.

4.2. News Selection

For most Biden voters it was a relatively easy choice between Headline 1 and Headline 2 when the news source did not play a role. Table 2 demonstrates that 90% of Biden voters selected Headline 2 in the CNN/CNN condition and 88% in the Fox News/Fox News condition. In the Fox News/CNN condition, it was an even easier

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and t-test results for news content expectancy for each headline.

	Headline 1		Headline 2		Headline 3		Headline 4	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
CNN	2.90	1.61	5.55	1.26	4.93	1.34	3.12	1.66
Fox News	5.09	1.48	3.37	1.76	2.85	1.70	4.86	1.74
	***		***		***		***	
	d = 1.5		d = 1.5		d = 1.5		d = 1.7	

Notes: For t-test results, $p < 0.001$; effect sizes indicated with Cohen's d; N = 800.

Table 2. Percentages of headline selection for each experimental condition based on headline source(s).

| First headline | CNN | | CNN | | Fox News | | Fox News | |
Second headline	CNN		Fox News		CNN		Fox News	
	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump
Headline 1	10%	79%	38%	48%	02%	71%	12%	62%
	(n = 3)	(n = 23)	(n = 15)	(n = 14)	(n = 1)	(n = 17)	(n = 4)	(n = 16)
		***		n.s.		***		***
Headline 2	90%	21%	63%	52%	98%	29%	88%	38%
	(n = 28)	(n = 6)	(n = 25)	(n = 15)	(n = 45)	(n = 7)	(n = 29)	(n = 10)
Headline 3	75%	17%	89%	08%	58%	38%	84%	12%
	(n = 36)	(n = 3)	(n = 41)	(n = 2)	(n = 21)	(n = 11)	(n = 31)	(n = 3)
		***		***		n.s.		***
Headline 4	25%	83%	11%	92%	42%	62%	16%	88%
	(n = 12)	(n = 15)	(n = 5)	(n = 22)	(n = 15)	(n = 18)	(n = 6)	(n = 23)

Notes: Percentages presented vertically per headline selection pair, per sub-group based on experimental condition and voter partisanship with 522 participants total (Headlines 1–2, Headlines 3–4); n.s. = not significant, *** p < 0.001.

pick, as the second headline was attributed to (more trusted) CNN, whereas the first headline was attributed to (less trusted) Fox News. As a result, almost all Biden voters selected Headline 2 (98%), yet the CNN/Fox News condition was quite a different story. Although a majority still selected Headline 2 (63%), once Fox News was attributed as the news source of that headline, the other headline (the one most Biden voters stayed away from in the other conditions) became a more desirable choice when attributed to CNN (38%). A similar pattern was visible for Trump voters, although the ratios were not as extremely lopsided as for Biden voters. However, the CNN/Fox News condition was problematic for Trump voters as well, which resulted in a slight preference for Headline 2 (52% vs. 48%). A chi-square goodness of fit test was calculated for the frequency of selecting Headline 1 and Headline 2 in the four news source(s) conditions. The selection pattern deviated significantly for the Biden voters in the CNN/Fox News condition (χ^2 = 22.30, p < 0.001), which provided evidence in support of H1a. However, the relationship was not statistically significant for Trump voters (χ^2 = 6.65, p = 0.121), which provided no statistical support for H1b.

The second headline pair (Headlines 3 and 4) showed a reversed preference for the first and second headlines. Biden voters generally liked Headline 3. That was especially noticeable in the CNN/Fox News condition, in which 89% selected that option. In contrast, 92% of the Trump voters preferred Headline 4 in that same news source(s) condition. The same pattern held for the CNN/CNN and Fox News/Fox News conditions, but not the Fox News/CNN condition. The majority for both groups was still aligned with the preferences in the other conditions, but not as lopsided. Almost half of the Biden voters selected Headline 4 (42%) and 38% of the Trump voters selected Headline 3. A chi-square test found a statistically significant difference in the selection pattern of the Fox News/CNN condition compared to the other con-

ditions for both Biden voters (χ^2 = 12.06, p = 0.007) and Trump voters (χ^2 = 9.29, p = 0.026), supporting both H1a and H1b.

Comparisons were also made between Biden and Trump voters for their news headline selection patterns for each condition within each headline pair. It was expected that in almost all sub-groups, the majority of Biden voters would select a different headline than the majority of Trump voters, except in the double-incongruence condition (CNN/Fox News for the first headline pair and Fox News/CNN for the second headline pair). The data in Table 2 indicated this was indeed the case for both headline pairs, which provided evidence in support of H2.

Selective exposure research has rarely focused on the question of whether news consumers would select news from a source they usually distrust over other options for which the content is less desirable but from a trusted source. RQ1a and RQ1b were proposed to probe the extent to which voters would be willing to select a headline from, what they consider, a distrusted news source. This test focused on each participant's news source trust levels (CNN minus Fox News); not just their voting partisanship to allow for individual differences within the Biden and Trump groups based on their media bias perceptions as a vote for a particular candidate may actually be more of a vote against the other. Table 3 illustrates that a majority of Biden (63%) and Trump (52%) voters selected a headline from a distrusted news source in the CNN/Fox News condition, whereas none of the Biden voters and only 21% of the Trump voters did so in the Fox News/CNN condition. A Fisher's exact test was calculated comparing the frequency of selecting a headline from a distrusted source between the two crossover conditions. There was a statistically significant difference for Biden voters (p < 0.001, Fisher's exact test) but not for Trump voters, although the difference (52% vs. 21%) was in the expected direction. There was also a large difference

Table 3. Percentage of selecting Distrusted News Source based on News Source Trust level.

First headline Second headline	CNN Fox News		Fox News CNN	
	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump
Headline 1/2	63% (*n* = 24)	52% (*n* = 13)	0% (*n* = 0)	21% (*n* = 4)
Headline 3/4	05% (*n* = 2)	18% (*n* = 4)	55% (*n* = 17)	69% (*n* = 18)

between the crossover groups for the second headline pair. Majorities for Biden voters (55%) and Trump voters (69%) selected an opposite source in the Fox News/CNN group, whereas these percentages were much lower in the other condition, 5% and 18%, respectively. There were statistically significant differences between Biden ($p < .001$, Fisher's exact test) and Trump voters ($p < 0.001$, Fisher's exact test) for the headline pair.

5. Discussion

Many voters would like to see highly believable news from highly trusted sources within their news diets. However, the findings indicated that a considerable number of voters were also welcoming perspectives from distrusted sources. As expected, the selection of news was not a matter of attention to just the source or just the content for most participants, but that did not mean that the participants selected news from distrusted sources easily. It was primarily in the condition with a believable headline attributed to a distrusted source and a less believable headline attributed to a trusted source that the partisans behaved differently. Still, a considerable group of voters chose the headline with less believability, possibly to avoid selecting a distrusted source. Although this study did not elaborate on the reasons for why individual participants selected exposure or avoidance of these news headlines on global warming, both Biden and Trump voters showed differences in headline selection—as groups—based on constraints of the source-content combinations presented to them with varying levels of expectancy violations.

Notably, on the group level, selective avoidance was not centered on content, unlike much research on selective exposure and avoidance. In this study, avoidance was focused on the news source. For instance, whereas a particular headline was popular among Biden voters in all other conditions, once it was attributed to Fox News (and the other option was incongruent with what would be expected from CNN) that headline was suddenly not so popular in that specific condition. These findings indicated that it is important to consider source *and* message attribution combinations to a higher extent in future research on selective exposure and avoidance because some participants in this study would rather choose an unexpected message from a trusted news—and conse-

quently a headline that is likely counter to their own position on global warming—than selecting news from a distrusted source. That said, it should also be noted that one-fifth of the participants did not recall (correctly) the origin of the news source. This may indicate that a considerable group of US adults pay no attention to news source information at all, which could lead to reliance on disreputable sources voicing mis- and disinformation.

This study did not probe participants to explain *why* they chose a particular headline. It certainly could be possible that someone selecting an incongruent news headline from a trusted source did so to update their opinion and beliefs—if the article provided any reason. Someone motivated to hold accurate opinions and beliefs may well be seeking out news coverage that challenges their knowledge on the matter. However, if that was the case in this study, the data should have discovered similar patterns in other news source(s) conditions. It should not have stopped such participants from choosing a counter-attitudinal headline from CNN (Fox News) in a condition in which both headlines were attributed to CNN (Fox News). This was rarely the case, which suggested selective avoidance (on a group level) is the likely explanation for the distinctive headline selections in crossover conditions with a more believable headline attributed to a distrusted source. Future research should take into account other potential selective exposure and avoidance mechanisms, such as attentiveness, entertainment-value, topic-curiosity, prior knowledge, or issue salience, as well as accuracy, impression, confirmation-seeking, and truth-seeking motivations (see Mourão et al., 2023; Winter et al., 2016).

Future research should focus on explaining motivations for longer deliberation times. It may be that certain people are motivated to develop accurate beliefs and knowledge. Others may be more motivated to defend their existing beliefs and knowledge. Source trust has been considered an important heuristic in perceptions of news, yet it is still unclear how news source attributions prime accuracy and defense motivations, or how some motivations may become more dominant based on attribution to specific news sources. Future research could also explore whether unexpected headlines and news stories from distrusted sources could enhance the trustworthiness of those sources in the short and long term. It would benefit society when people accept factual

information and reject fiction, regardless of whether the source is trusted or distrusted. This study found that accurate (factual) information is frequently dismissed when attributed to a distrusted source, whereas the actual merit of the content deserved a different decision otherwise.

This study was conducted with a large random sample that was designed to reflect the population of US adults, yet by excluding participants missing a manipulation check, as well as non-voters and third-party voters, the overall sample size decreased considerably. Additionally, sub-samples became even smaller because data for hypothesis testing and answering research questions were generated by splitting participants into four news source(s) conditions among two headline pairs. This resulted in statistical tests with relatively low samples and statistical power. Additionally, the headlines only focused on one political topic and were not representative of all news output (yet global warming is a polarizing topic between liberals and conservatives). CNN and Fox News are also not representative of the average US news outlet. It may be that audience perceptions of other media and their content are different. This study also only focused on written headlines, no audio-visual information was added, except network logos.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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