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"Fake News Is Anything They Say!" — Conceptualization and Weaponization of Fake News among the American Public

Chau Tong [a], Hyungjin Gill [a], Jianing Li[a], Sebastián Valenzuela [b], and Hernando Rojas[a]

[a]School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison; [b]School of Communications, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

ABSTRACT

This study examines the articulation of public opinion about so-called fake news using a national survey (N = 510) of U.S. adults conducted in 2018. We coded respondents' open-ended answers about what is "fake news" and found that while some respondents adopted a politically neutral, descriptive definition, others provided a partisan, accusatory answer. Specifically, the weaponization of fake news was evident in the way respondents used the term to blame adversarial political and media targets. Perceptions of fake news prevalence, partisanship strength, and political interest were associated with a higher likelihood of providing a politicized and accusatory response about fake news. Accusations were polarized as a function of partisan identity and positively correlated with affective polarization. Results are discussed in light of the linguistic distinction of the term and what it means in the context of news media distrust and polarization.

The lead-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, featured with deep tensions between the then-candidate Donald Trump and news media organizations, has given rise to a nation-wide discourse on "fake news." Misinformation and propaganda are inescapable features of politics, but "fake news" takes on new symbolic meanings to signal a post-truth era where the conventional notions of news and truth are deeply challenged amid the chaos of the current information environment (Waisbord, 2018).

CONTACT Chau Tong cttong@wisc.edu School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706, USA.

In this study, we are particularly interested in the articulation of public opinion about "fake news," that is, how people understand this term. Previous media research defined and categorized fake news as news parody, fabrication, propaganda, and advertising disguised as journalism (Tandoc et al., 2018). Political elites including politicians, high-level government officials, political pundits and specialists (Zaller, 1992) also increasingly articulate the term in ways to discredit information they do not agree with and delegitimize political opponents (Farkas & Schou, 2018). Then, to what extent does the polarized elite discourse on fake news infiltrate general public opinion and affect the way ordinary citizens articulate and make sense of it? This study proposes a closer examination into the public's articulation of fake news, the premise being that given the polarized discourse on fake news at the elite level, the conceptualization of fake news at the public level may no longer hold neutral implications. A portion of the public will likely take on slanted and polarized interpretations of the term, and articulate "fake news" in ways that suggest the expression and reaffirmation of one's political identity.

Literature review

Current literature on fake news demonstrates the challenges in reaching a consensus over a single definition of the term. In early mass communication research, fake news was "false content," which covered not only inaccurate news coverage but also encompassed entertainment-oriented content, such as news satire and parody (Rubin et al., 2016; Tandoc et al., 2018). More recent definitions emphasize the intention to deceive, defining fake news as a type of disinformation (Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Kumar & Shah, 2018). Research on fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections considers the phenomenon at the publisher level, operationalizing fake news as stories from digital outlets that violate editorial norms by either exclusively producing fabricated stories or spreading questionable claims (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019; Lazer et al., 2018). The widespread transmission of problematic information on social media demonstrates the increased role of the audience as users, distributors, and gatekeepers of content (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan et al., 2018; Silverman, 2016). There is thus a need to examine how ordinary citizens perceive fake news and the implications of such perceptions, a topic less considered in current research.

From the audience's perspective, information can be perceived as false based on its quality, for example, content that diverges from single-valued ground truth, or individual opinion that is exaggerated to generate attention and influence others (Kumar & Shah, 2018). An examination using focus groups and survey data in four countries by Nielsen and Graves

(2017) showed that the public associated different types of content with the term "fake news," among which poor journalism, political propaganda, and advertising were the main forms. People also did not see clear-cut differences between fake news and real news and tended to perceive "fake news" as a larger issue with the current information landscape. However, one key aspect that remains unexplored in this study was whether certain individual characteristics and predispositions would determine the audience's articulation of fake news. Our first research question is:

> RQ1: When asked about fake news, how do people articulate their conception of it? In other words, what kinds of definition will the audience give concerning fake news?

Political predispositions, perceived exposure and politicization of "fake news"

The term "fake news" becomes politically charged in the context of polarization and declining trust in the news media. In 2018, only 12% of Americans surveyed said they had "a great deal" of trust in the news media, and only 13% considered information posted by news organizations as "very accurate." This widespread skepticism was divided along partisan lines, with Republicans being three times less likely than Democrats to report "a lot of" trust in national news organizations (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2017, 2019a).

Political elites on both sides utilize the fake news discourse to critique, delegitimize and attack the opposition. On the one hand, the term has been popularized by Donald Trump and the right-wing media to accuse the mainstream media of "lying, misreporting, and having liberal bias" (Flood, 2018). Throughout his campaign and presidency, Trump openly denunciated and discredited a broad range of news organizations, calling their coverage "fake" and "unverifiable" (Erlanger, 2017; Estepa, 2017; Jamieson, 2017). A similar theme of the mainstream media being corrupt and having "politically motivated" bias also recurred constantly in conservative talk radio and channels (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). On the other end of the political spectrum, discourse on fake news condemned right-wing politics, right-leaning media platforms and conservative voters. The political right was accused of endorsing conspiracy theories and holding persistent misperceptions (Krugman, 2018). Right-leaning media outlets were frequently listed as "fake news sites" by academic researchers and liberal columnists (Silverman et al., 2016; Zimdars, 2016). Some scholars argued that these accusations blurred the lines between right-leaning opinion, conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation (Farkas & Schou, 2018).

The rhetoric use of fake news in political elite discourse can serve as a heuristic for citizens to interpret the term. Past research shows that public understanding of political issues is significantly shaped by elite discourse and citizens often access and process political information under the influence of high-profile political actors (Zaller, 1992). Thus, the politicized use of "fake news" among the elites can alter the public's understanding of the term. However, there is room for ambiguity in terms of the extent to which ordinary citizens adopt the rhetoric. Individual predispositions, such as interest and attention to politics, can influence the way people conceptualize fake news. In other words, awareness of the issue via political attentiveness can affect citizens' access to the term and their subsequent formation of judgment. We, therefore, hypothesize that:

H1: Individuals with a high general interest in politics are more likely to offer a politicized definition of fake news compared to a descriptive definition.

Individuals' perceived exposure to fake news could associate with their neutral or politicized conception of fake news. It is, however, difficult to establish a ground truth of the actual amount of false content that people consume. Previous research using recall measures to estimate individuals' encounters with fabricated information (for example, Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) raised the issue of measurement, as people often misremember or distort contents uncongenial to preexisting beliefs. Indeed, recall of content often depends on the audience's relationship with the information source and the message (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Stamm & Dube, 1994). Selective categorization determines the cognitive mechanisms through which highly involved individuals on opposing sides process the same piece of information differently (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). We hypothesize that as the perceived prevalence of fake news in one's information environment increases, an individual is more likely to have colored, non-neutral ideation of the term. For instance, partisans who have been exposed to contrasting rhetoric about fake news through news media and political elites are more likely to incriminate information coming from ideologically unfriendly sources as fake. In this case, there is a direct connection between providing an estimation of fake news and politically internalizing the term.

H2: Higher recall of fake news exposure is positively associated with offering a politicized definition of "fake news" compared to a descriptive definition.

Partisanship can also influence the politicization of "fake news" for several reasons. First, party identification implies higher involvement

beyond mere interest. It has been consistently identified as a strong predictor of important political outcomes, including polarization as a result of opinion extremity (Abramowitz, 2010) and heightened partisan animosity (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Partisans also tend to be persuaded by morally congruent political rhetoric (Clifford et al., 2015; Koch, 1998), thus more likely to adopt the polarized conception of fake news in the elite discourse.

H3: Strong partisans will be more likely to offer a politicized definition of "fake news" compared to a descriptive definition.

Blame attribution of fake news

Attribution theory proposes that people constantly attribute causal inferences to make sense of social situations and seek explanations for other individuals' behaviors (Heider, 1958; Taylor & Doria, 1981; Wortman, 1976). In communication research, it has been well established that both media priming (i.e., the suggestion that specific issues should be used as standards to make political evaluations) and framing (i.e., the promotion of certain characterizations of issues over others) can provide heuristics for individuals to identify targets of blame (see for example, Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Regarding fake news, exposure to different news reports and discussions about fake news can prime individuals to attribute the problem of fake news to certain entities, be it a political actor, an institution, or more broadly, the chaotic information landscape.

Partisan identity plays an important role in influencing judgments of political responsibility (Rudolph, 2006). Research in political science shows that individuals assign blames to political actors in a partisan manner, i.e., officials of the *opposite* party are often criticized for problems related to both policy issues and uncontrollable events (Bellucci, 2014; Brown, 2010; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008; Marsh & Tilley, 2010; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Importantly, as partisan strength increases, the gap in blame attribution between opposite party identifiers also widens (Bisgaard, 2015). As fake news takes on a politicized aspect, blame attribution for its problems and solutions is expected to be similarly polarizing, i.e., partisans will reference the political outgroups as targets of blame (Huddy & Bankert, 2017).

The tendency of strong partisans to perceive media content to be unfairly biased against their ideological viewpoint has been well documented as hostile media perceptions (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). Such perceptions among the general public are further induced by the rise of populist actors, who frequently criticize and depict the

mainstream media as detrimental to "the people" and collective interest (Krämer, 2018; Schulz et al., 2018). Experimental evidence indeed shows that exposure to Trump's remarks on fake news decreases trust in the media and less accurate identification of real news (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). When being made more accessible, the term will influence the standards used to evaluate media content (Price & Tewksbury, 1997), making the news media a susceptible blame target. Finally, in a fragmented environment where partisan media promote congenial content and belittle contradictory narratives (Arceneaux et al., 2012), viewers will be more likely to identify oppositional media as fake news. Strong partisans with unbalanced news diets (Stroud, 2011) will constantly be reminded of the "evil" outgroup and thus become more prone to biased attributions. In other words, the hyper-partisan climate gives rise to the proposition that strong partisans on both sides will not only be more likely to politicize "fake news" but also incriminate the opposition for such problems.

H4: Strong partisans are more likely to blame political opposition and opposite partisan media for fake news.

Politicization of "fake news" and affective polarization

One consequence of politicization found in past research was that individuals would interpret the politicized issues heuristically through a partisan perspective, which then led to biased processing and motivated reasoning (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006). Controversies and conflicts induced by politicization could also influence larger public attitudes about the political system, including the erosion of trust and cynicism toward democratic institutions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Moy & Pfau, 2000). For example, in the field of science and health issues, empirical evidences indicate that politicization of topics like climate change and vaccinations not only polarizes public opinion but also decreases support for policies and reduces confidence in health care professionals and the government (Chinn et al., 2020; Fowler & Gollust, 2015).

We suspect that the politicization of fake news could have similar potential consequences. Prior research suggests that sometimes people use the term "fake news" when referring to information uncongenial to one's own beliefs (Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). That is, the specific ideation of fake news can be associated with certain attitudes and biased evaluations. Individuals who hold more unfavorable feelings toward disagreeable content likely go through similar psychological mechanisms when forming biased perceptions of the outgroup holding contrasting beliefs. Affective polarization is the notion that

people who identify as members of a party tend to "view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 691). This animosity is the by-product of partisan social identity and is distinct from differences in policy or issue positions (Iyengar et al., 2012). We expect that politicized interpretation of "fake news" and the tendency to blame political and media targets could be related to affective polarization due to common negative perceptions of the outgroup. In hypothesis form, we propose that:

H5: Politicized conception of fake news will be positively associated with affective polarization.

Methods

Sample

Data for this study came from survey data collected in May of 2018 in the United States (with University of Wisconsin-Madison IRB approval dated May 2, 2018). Participants were recruited using online survey panels administered by Qualtrics. The sample was designed to reflect the U.S. adult population. Qualtrics usesd a two-stage sampling process: First, subjects were randomly selected from each country's online opt-in panel constructed along geographic and demographic parameters. Next, subjects were presented with profiling questions to create a final sample that was balanced regarding certain demographics: age, gender, and education. Potential respondents were given access to the survey through a web portal on the panel or sent an e-mail invitation informing them that the survey was for research purposes only, how long the survey was expected to take and what incentives were available. Members may unsubscribe at any time. To avoid self-selection bias, the survey invitation did not include specific details about the contents of the survey.

The dataset was completed between May 8 and May 21 in 2018 and contained 510 complete responses. The sample resembled the U.S. adult population in terms of gender (49.2% males), and educational level (11% did not complete high school, 57.2% high school and/or some college, 31.8% college). Still, the sample was somewhat older in terms of age (M = 50.8, SD = 16.5), which suggests caution in terms of interpreting the sample as nationally representative (see the Appendix, Table A1).

Data and analysis plan

Coding procedures for the descriptive analysis

The first RQ concerning how the public articulate or define "fake news" is examined by a close analysis of the survey participants' responses to an

open-ended question on fake news. We coded the answers to this question item to investigate the major themes that emerged from these responses. Participants in the survey were asked what the term "fake news" means to them. The exact wording of the item is: *"There has been increasing discussion about FAKE NEWS. For you, what is fake news?"*

Initially, each response was coded to see if it was answering the question or not, and whether the respondent provided a "don't know" or "not sure" answer. Nineteen responses were noted as "don't know/not sure" and 63 responses were noted as not answering the question. For 447 responses that were deemed valid (87.65% of the full sample), coders then determined whether the respondent gave a "descriptive" answer, i.e., they made an effort to define or explain fake news, or a "politicized" answer, i.e., they mentioned specific political figure(s), news media source(s) or political issue(s). Examples of "descriptive answer" included "news without foundation," "news that is not true," "any news report that is not true," whereas examples of "politicized answer" included "what is on Fox News," "what Trump doesn't like," and "mainstream media." The categories of "descriptive" and "politicized" were coded as mutually exclusive. If elements of both were present in a response, coders had to make a judgment as to which one prevailed.

Under the category of "descriptive answer," we used Nielsen and Graves (2017) classification of fake news from the audience perspective as guiding principles to detect themes in the responses. Based on the frequency of these categories in our dataset, we then narrowed down to code for three main subcategories: whether the answer referred to false information with the *intention* to mislead or deceive (e.g., using words such as "lies," "propaganda," "manipulation," "to sway"), whether the answer referred to the *bias* or *slant* element of information (e.g., using words such as "opinion," "one-sided," "half-truth," "exaggerate"), and whether the answer referred to poor journalism (e.g., misreporting, lack of media research, unverified, not fact-checked). These categories were coded as not being mutually exclusive, with "presence" (1) or "not present" (0) for each response.

Under the category of "politicized" answer, we employed an inductive approach in which we examined the themes emerging from respondents' answers and used them to build the codes throughout the coding process. Specifically, we coded for whether the answer mentioned a specific name or entity or not, who or what this entity was, and whether the entity was mentioned in a way that indicated an attribution of blame. Entities were separated into two main domains: politics-related and media or journalism-related. Politics-related actors/entities included President Donald Trump, the Trump administration, the White House, Democrats or the Democratic Party, Republicans or the Republican Party, Russia, and others. Journalism-related actors/entities included

news media in general (including mentions of "the media," "mainstream media," "the news media," non-specified news organizations). If the respondent named a specific media source, it was recorded and later coded into whether it was a mainstream, online, or partisan media source on the left (e.g., HuffPost, MSNBC), or the right (e.g., Fox News, Breitbart).

To determine intercoder reliability between three coders, a random 10% (50 responses) of the full sample (N = 447) was selected, a threshold commonly used in communication research (e.g., De Vreese, 2005; Lombard et al., 2002). Using the Reliability Calculator 3 (ReCal3) tool to compute intercoder reliability coefficients for nominal data coded by three or more coders (Freelon, 2010), the results indicated satisfying reliability ("descriptive answer": Krippendorff's α =.88; "politicized answer": Krippendorff's α = .95; average Krippendorff's α = 91.5 with all pairs of coders achieving a Pairwise Cohen's Kappa score of above 0.88) (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Riffe et al., 2005).

Measures in the inferential analysis

After the first step of exploring the articulation of fake news, we conducted statistical analyses to test our hypotheses. Below is the description of the measures employed:

Party ID. Respondents were asked to specify their party of preference, with a range from 1 (strong Republican) to 7 (strong Democrat). This was transformed into two dummy variables indicating respondents identifying as a Republican (38.2%) or a Democrat (37.2%).

Strength of partisanship. Party ID was recoded into strength of partisanship, with 0 indicating Independent (24.5%), 1 indicating party leaners, 2 Democrat or Republican, and 3 Strong Democrat or Strong Republican.

Traditional media use. The frequency of using national and local television and newspapers for news and political information on a scale from never (1) to frequently (6) was assessed. These four items were aggregated and averaged to create an index of traditional media news use. (M = 3.67, SD = 1.42, Cronbach's alpha = .77).

Social media use. The frequency of using social media such as Facebook and Twitter for news and political information on a scale from never (1) to frequently (6) was measured (M = 3.87, SD = 1.99).

Affective polarization. Adopting the "feeling thermometer" measure used in the American National Election Study (ANES) time series, respondents

were asked to rate feelings toward Democrats and Republicans on a scale of 0 (very cold/unfavorable) to 100 (very warm/favorable). Affective polarization was then computed as the absolute value of the difference between the scores given to the two groups (M = 44.45, SD = 32.81).

Political interest. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest in politics, from 0 ("not at all" to 5 "a lot") (M = 2.99, SD = 1.6).

Demographics variables (gender, age, education, income) were included as control variables. *Gender* was a dummy variable, with male coded as 0. *Age*, measured in years, ranged from 18 to 87 (M = 50.8, SD = 16.5). *Education* ranged from 1 ("less than high school diploma") to 6 "graduate degree") (M = 3.35, SD = 1.6). *Income* ranged from 1 ("less than 25,000 USD") to 7 ("more than 200,000 USD") (M = 3.22, SD = 1.7).

Results

Descriptive analysis

Conceptualization of fake news among respondents

RQ1 asked how the term "fake news" is articulated from the audience's perspective. Responses varied in length from proper nouns naming specific entities such as names of people, issues (e.g., "Trump," "Fox") to full sentences. Descriptive statistics showed that out of 447 valid responses analyzed, 294 responses (65.8%) lacked a subject to blame, articulating fake news in a neutral, nonpolitical way (e.g., "*news that can't be verified*"), whereas 153 responses (34.2%) identified at least one subject to blame and thus were considered politicized definitions of fake news.

Descriptive definition. The nonpolitical, descriptive definitions of fake news varied in length and depth – some were as sophisticated as *"fake news is news that is fabricated for the sake of destroying the reputation of a group or person,"* while others were as simple and succinct as *"stories that aren't true,"* "*bad information*" or "*lies*."

Some of the more frequently recurring keywords were identified (e.g., "*lies,*" *"biased,"* *"false"*). The made-up/lie responses (i.e., those that included the specific word "made-up" or "lie(s)") comprised around 25% of descriptive responses. These responses defined fake news as deceptive information, and such definitions alluded to the intentional nature of false stories. Some were more straightforward and explicit ("*Lies spread for the purpose of misinforming people*") than others ("*news that is made up*").

One hundred sixteen responses (nearly 40%) defined fake news as "disinformation" with an overt intent to deceive the audience, akin to

Kumar and Shah (2018) categorization. A participant defined the term "*lies told to promote a particular agenda*," while several others used the term "*spin*" (e.g., "*news that has been given a spin to seem different than it really is*"). Some viewed fake news as biased information which attemped to sway public opinion.

The responses showed, however, that the word "bias" was not a sure indicator of intent to mislead people. That is, regardless of whether or not a news story adhered to the truth, 15% of those who gave a neutral definition of fake news (44 responses) perceived a news article as fake if they thought the information was slanted one way or another. For instance, the response that read, "*News expressing their point of view instead of what is true*," suggested that news story promoting (or even holding) a particular stance was simply seen as information "not true."

Some respondents perceived opinion articles (or other types of news articles that express an opinion) as false information largely because the term "opinion" was often an indicator of "lack of evidence." A response that read, "*fake news is news that has no physical evidence or proof to back up claims … it is opinion speculation*" exemplified how news stories expressing a viewpoint were thought of not only as information unverified but a form of misreporting.

Finally, about 33% of the neutral/descriptive definitions (97 responses) fell under the category of "misreporting," (e.g., "*news that had not been reviewed to be true*," "*incorrect stories*," "*when [information] is not accurate*," "*misinformation released as true news*").

Politicized definition. In our sample, 153 answers (34.2%) were coded as politicized definitions of fake news, as they indicated at least one actor to blame for fake news production and circulation. Some blamed politicians and the Trump administration, while others identified specific news organizations as culprits. The politicized definitions as a whole implicitly (or sometimes even explicitly) promoted the idea that fake news is a report that opposes one's viewpoint.

Sixty-two politicized definitions (roughly 40%) included the word "Trump," most of them identifying the U.S. president as the perpetrator or the victim of fake news. Forty-five answers (73%) held Trump responsible for fake news (e.g., "*a ridiculous term invented by Donald Trump*," "*Anything trump does not like*," "*anything that the president says*," "*Anything the [trump] administration calls facts*"), while a smaller portion (17 answers or roughly 13%) described Trump as the unfair victim of fake media coverage (e.g., Fake news are "*coming from stations who are still mad that Trump won the election*").

One hundred seven answers (over 70% of all politicized responses) identified at least one particular media outlet as the perpetrator of fake

news (as opposed to less than 10% pointing fingers at a political party e.g., the GOP). Organizing them into categories of mainstream, conservative, liberal and online media outlets, we found that almost 37% of "media responses" (39 responses) blamed the mainstream media with a very cynical tone (e.g., "CBS, NBC," "*anything that mainstream media says*"). 27% blamed conservative news sources such as FOX (29 responses), while 24% blamed liberal-leaning channels such as MSNBC (26 responses). Of all responses that blamed the news media (mainstream, liberal and conservative media outlets combined), 53% came from those who identified as conservatives, 24% from self-proclaimed independents, and the rest (around 23%) from liberals.

Lastly, only around 10% of those who gave a politicized definition of fake news in our sample (15 responses) identified Facebook, Twitter and online news outlets (e.g., Buzzfeed) as perpetrator of fake news (e.g., "*anything on Facebook*," and "*Breitbart*").

Inferential analysis

We next turned our attention to the second part of our analysis, in which we are interested in examining the implications of the public's conceptions of fake news. Our first three hypotheses propose that the tendency to give a politicized definition of fake news and attribute blame to political and media targets will be higher among those highly attentive to politics, who embrace a strong partisan identity, and those with high perceptions of fake news exposure. We employed logistic regression analysis to predict the probability that a respondent would provide a politicized answer when being asked about fake news, as opposed to a neutral/descriptive definition. Predictors included demographics, political predispositions, media use, and perceived exposure to fake news. The model was statistically significant, χ^2 (11, 435) = 36.79, $p < .001$, correctly classifying 92.2% of those giving a neutral answer, and 22.9% of those giving a politicized answer, for an overall success rate of 68.5%.

Table 1 shows the logistic regression coefficient, Wald test, and the odds ratio for each of the predictors. H1, H2, and H3 were supported. Accordingly, high political interest, the strength of partisanship, and high perception of fake news exposure were associated with a *higher* likelihood of providing a politicized definition of fake news. In particular, the effect of perceived exposure to fake news was the strongest, with a one-point increase on the five-point scale being associated with the odds of giving a politicized answer increasing by a multiplicative factor of 1.43 ($p < .05$). Similarly, when holding all other variables constant, for each one-point increase in strength of partisanship and political interest, the odds of articulating "fake news" in a politicized way were 1.35 times ($p < .05$) and 1.26 times higher ($p < .01$) respectively. Chi-square test showed no statistically significant difference in the level of

Table 1. Logistic regression predicting politicized definition of fake news.

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds Ratio
Female	−0.374	0.222	2.826	0.688
Age	−0.001	0.007	0.01	0.999
Education	−0.041	0.073	0.315	0.96
Income	0.082	0.068	1.429	1.085
Political interest	0.232**	0.083	7.796	1.262
Republican	−0.802	0.41	3.83	0.449
Democrat	−0.37	0.397	0.867	0.691
Strength of partisanship	0.299*	0.145	4.257	1.349
Traditional media news use	−0.033	0.087	0.139	0.968
Social media news use	0.015	0.058	0.063	1.015
Perceived fake news exposure	0.359*	0.142	6.37	1.431
Constant	−2.325**	0.688	11.407	0.098

*p <. 05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

politicization of fake news between members of the two parties (Pearson's Chi-Square χ^2 (1, 335) = .77, p = .38)). This illustrates that both sides engaged in blame attribution in their response, although the targets of blame, as we discuss next, were vastly different.

Blame attribution to Trump and conservative media

As the descriptive analysis shows, patterns of the most frequent targets of blame fitted into the Trump vs. mainstream media narrative. To understand how blame was attributed, we looked specifically at answers that explicitly accused these actors. Out of 117 responses in our sample, 67 (57.3%) identified either Trump or the right-wing media (e.g., Fox News, Breitbart) as the perpetrator of fake news.[1] Forty-seven (40.2%) blamed the mainstream liberal media (e.g., CNN, New York Times) and 3 (2.6%) indicated both the left and right media as the blame target (these cases were excluded from the analysis that followed).

To predict the probability that a respondent would blame Trump and the conservative partisan media outlets for the problem of fake news, logistic regression was used with predictor variables including party identification (with higher score indicating affiliation with the Democratic Party), strength of partisanship, traditional and social media news use, and perceived exposure to fake news.[2] A test of the full model versus a model with intercept only was statistically significant,

[1]Analysis of respondents who accused Trump and those who accused the right-wing media showed no significant differences between the two groups; hence we collapsed and created a dichotomous variable indicating blame attribution toward Trump and the conservative media (1) versus mainstream media (0).

[2]Social demographics and political interest were excluded in this part of the analysis, considering the smaller sample and that the effects were already considered in the previous analysis. The results did not change when these variables were included.

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting blame attribution to Trump and conservative media.

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds Ratio
Party identification (with the Democratic Party)	1.081***	0.22	24.238	2.948
Strength of partisanship	−0.034	0.542	0.004	0.967
Traditional media news use	0.152	0.307	0.245	1.164
Social media news use	0.183	0.219	0.698	1.201
Perceived fake news exposure	−0.748	0.652	1.318	0.473
Constant	−2.939	2.12	1.922	0.053

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

χ^2 (5, 98) = 78.2, $p < .001$. The model was able to correctly classify 92.3% of those who blamed Trump and the right-leaning media and 89.7% of those who did not, for an overall success rate of 91.2%.

Results in Table 2 indicate that employing a .05 criterion of statistical significance, only partisan identity had significant effects. In other words, partisanship determined the attribution of blame (H4 was supported). The odds ratio for party identification indicated that a one-point increase in affiliating with the Democratic Party nearly tripled the odds of blaming Trump and right-leaning media ($p < .001$). The effects of the type of media use and perceptions of fake news prevalence were not statistically significant.

Politicized definition of "fake news" and affective polarization

Table 3 presents the results of OLS regression models with partisan feeling gap – a measure of affective polarization – as the outcome variable, and strength of partisanship and politicization of fake news as the two main independent variables of interest. The results showed that controlling for demographics, strength of partisanship and fake news politicization positively correlated with affective polarization. In particular, users who provided a politicized answer rated their feelings toward the parties as more polarized by 8.49 points, which is 0.69 standard deviations for that measure, conditional on strength of partisanship (H5 was supported). This finding suggests that beyond what the current literature indicates (i.e. that affective polarization is most prominently found among strong supporters of political parties), the tendency to politicize "fake news" among the public might have some implications about polarizing attitudes.

Discussion

Fake news discourse prevailed during and after the 2016 presidential election. As the term gains popularity in public communication, it is no

Table 3. Model predicting affective polarization.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Constant)	36.97*** (6.27)	15.96** (5.50)	13.67* (5.50)
Female	−5.19 (3.11)	−2.22 (2.62)	−1.24 (2.62)
Age	.34*** (.09)	.25** (.08)	.25** (2.61)
Education	−.16 (1.05)	−.48 (.88)	−.47 (.88)
Income	−1.65 (.96)	−.99 (.81)	−1.12 (.81)
Strength of partisanship		15.43*** (1.14)	15.02*** (1.14)
Politicized answer			8.49** (2.72)
Additional variance explained		.282	.015
Total variance explained	.043	.324	.339

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

longer a neutral description of a lack of correspondence between facts and reality. Instead, a new set of political and social implications arises from the conflicting narratives over the term. From that perspective, our study examined the conception of fake news among the public. We found that in contrast to a general tendency to articulate fake news in a neutral way, a subset of respondents incriminated opposing political and media entities for the predicament of fake news. Such accusations most likely came from those with high level of political interest, high perceived exposure to false information, and strong partisan identity.

The tendency to attack the mainstream media among conservative politicians has been reported happening on a global scale (Erlanger, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). The literature on fake news discourse among politicians and social media users, as well as digital traces of misinformation online has largely described the response to "fake news" as a right-wing phenomenon (Brummette et al., 2018; Farhall et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019); however, intriguingly, what we found in this study was a symmetrical response to fake news. In other words, the conservatives and liberals in this sample were equally likely to ascribe blame to the other side. This finding highlights the "bipartisan" character of fake news attribution – a point that is rather overlooked in extant research related to fake news. As political elites on both sides weaponize the term to delegitimize the other side (Farkas & Schou, 2018), fake news articulation among the public has consequently become polarized, in yet another example of how elite polarization in the U.S. can influence mass opinion. As Druckman et al. (2013) noted, elite polarization intensifies the impact of party endorsements on people's political definitions and preferences. To the degree that Donald Trump has consistently identified fake news with mainstream news, it is only logical for the most ardent Trump supporters and Trump-approving Republicans to define fake news accordingly. Conversely,

to the degree that Democratic officials and mainstream news outlets have called out the President for spreading misperceptions and fabricated content, politically active Democrats will likely define fake news in terms of "whatever Trump says." Less engaged users, in contrast, are less likely to receive and use political elite cues in their understanding of fake news.

The gap in how members of each party associated the news media or President Trump with "fake news" can be viewed as an extension of the broad partisan divide regarding these two actors. The fact that each discourse embraces vastly different worldviews suggests worrisome consequences. Network analysis of fake news discourse on Twitter shows that conversations surrounding fake news are emotionally charged and occur exclusively within ideologically similar networks (Brummette et al., 2018). This tendency of secluded online network homophiles (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2018; Himelboim et al., 2016) could hinder efforts to counter the spread of misinformation and prevent a rational exchange of opinions. Our study demonstrates that fake news politicization was associated with increased affective polarization, which suggests the former as a contributing factor toward the divides in public sentiment toward political parties. However, further work is needed before making claims about the nature of the relationship that we observed.

Fake news articulation among the general public indicates a deep dissatisfaction with the contemporary politics and media environment populated by a wide range of stakeholders. How to address this negative sentiment is an issue that can only be tackled with an overall improvement in the conditions of the information landscape, which is a challenge in and of itself. Politicization is not unique to the issue of misinformation. In fact, a lot of contemporary issues have become increasingly politicized in communication contexts given the escalating polarization in American politics (e.g., the issue of climate change Chinn et al., 2020). The role of the news media would be crucial in enabling more constructive public debates and countering the politicization of such topics (Bolsen et al., 2019; Nisbet & Fahy, 2015). Initiatives should be taken to reframe politicized issues in terms of matters of importance to the public (such as matters of national security or public health), or to include voices from trusted leaders who appeal to a broad audience of diverse backgrounds and political interests. News coverage should also refrain from the conflict narratives that can trigger activation of partisan identity, as the findings in this study suggest that contention and controversy in political elites' and media discourse could reinforce politicization in public articulation of "fake news."

"Fake news" has increasingly been recognized as problematic and measures have been taken to encourage alternative phrases and abandon the term altogether (Newsweek, 2018). Research might do well to keep in mind the highly politicized and polarized nature of the term when discussing the impact of "fake news." To better understand the experiences of ordinary citizens with false or misleading content and improve self-report measures, scholars should clearly explain what the term means in their measurement to help respondents answer more meaningfully (Guess, Munger et al., 2018).

Our study contains several limitations. First, our data was limited to a small sample of 510 respondents. This limits our ability to paint a comprehensive picture of the articulation of fake news among the public. Our findings, however, are consistent with what has been theorized and empirically examined with other methodologies, lending further support for the validity of our results (Brummette et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019b).

Second, we did not consider the possible outcomes of the tendency to attack media and politicians among the accusatory responses. There might be differences between partisans on the left and the right concerning relevant fake news related variables such as the willingness to correct misinformation or going through extra steps to verify information, depending on how the term "fake news" is conceptualized. Individuals may be more willing to call out fake news or correct misinformation when they perceive the information to be against their liking than when information is perceived to be neutrally "untrue." Future research can further explore these.

Lastly, due to the nature of survey data and the focus of the present study, we were not able to examine the effects of the term "fake news" or determine the causal relationship between variables. It could be argued that the particular way one considers fake news to be (i.e., news that they don't like or agree with) would affect the estimation of its presence. In the same fashion, affective polarization could make people more likely to overestimate the amount of fake news they are exposed to and give a politicized definition. There is also the possibility of an escalation of both politicization and affective polarization over time. Longitudinal data on the trend of affective polarization after the "fake news" phenomenon can help answer this question.

To conclude, the approach applied in this study - exploring fake news from the perspectives of the audience – showcases public perceptions and sentiments regarding the topic of fake news. The findings demonstrate that for a portion of highly interested and engaged publics, the term "fake news" has become weaponized to criticize and delegitimize political opponents. Such divided discourse over the term at both the

elite and mass public levels suggests that perhaps the continuous political struggle over the definitions of "truth" and "facts" in contemporary society might be an artifact of the expression and reaffirmation of political identities.

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Notes on contributors

Chau Tong is a doctoral candidate at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests are broadly in areas of public opinion, political communication and political behavior.

Hyungjin Gill is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. His research focuses on examining how digital social networks affect civic engagement and party identification, and aims at identifying mobile user experience that shapes attitudes toward political information.

Jianing Li is a Ph.D. student and a Knight Scholar of Communication and Civic Renewal in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on the formation of misperceptions and the correction of misinformation in a contested communication environment.

Sebastián Valenzuela is Associate Professor in the School of Communications at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and Associate Researcher at the Millennium Institute for Foundational Research on Data (IMFD) in Chile. He specializes in political communication and digital media.

Hernando Rojas is Helen Firstbrook Franklin professor and Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His scholarship focuses on political communication, in particular examining: (a) the deployment of new communication technologies for social mobilization in a variety of contexts; (b) the influence of audience perceptions of media (and audience perceptions of media effects) on both public opinion and the structure of the public sphere; and (c) the conditions under which media support democratic governance.

ORCID

Chau Tong http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6609-9889
Hyungjin Gill http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2478-2954
Sebastián Valenzuela http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5991-7364

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Appendix

Table A1. Comparing study sample with census data.

		Study	Census
		%	%
Gender	Male	49.2	49.2
	Female	50.8	50.8
Age group	18–34	23	36
	35–64	49	46
	65+	28	18
Education	Less than high school	11	13
	High school and/or some college	57.2	56.7
	College or more	31.8	30.3

United States Census Bureau QuickFacts (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/) describes US population estimates as of July 1, 2018.

Table A2. Coding categories' description and examples.

Main category	Description	Examples
Descriptive (294 responses/ 65.8%) (binary coded)	*Dictionary-like definition of fake news. Does not include specific actor(s) and/or an entity*. Three non-mutually exclusive categories: a) False information with the intention to mislead or deceive (65%) - Use specific word/phrases like "made up" or "lies" (25%) - Refer to manipulation, intention to sway, propaganda, etc. (40%) b) Biased/slanted information (15%) - Include the following phrases/terms: "opinion," "biased," "one-sided," "half-truth," "exaggerated" c) Poor journalism/misreporting (33%) - Refer to inaccurate information caused by misreporting, unverified information, lack of fact-checking, etc.	Examples: "News without foundation," "news that is not true," "any news report that is not true," "news that is factually false." a) "News that has been given a spin to seem different than it really is" "Lies told to promote a particular agenda" b) "Biased and slanderous news for the sake of ratings" "News expressing their opinion instead of what is true" c) "News networks now run unsourced rumors as fact" "incorrect stories" "when [information] is not accurate."
Politicized (153 responses/ 34.2%) (binary coded)	*Definition blames a particular actor/entity/ organization*. Two non-mutually exclusive categories: a) Definition mentions at least one specific political actor or an entity - Include references to President Trump (40%) (in an accusatory manner: 45 responses (73%); in a supportive manner: 17 responses (13%)). - Include references to other actors/ entities, including political parties in an accusatory manner (10%) b) Definition mentions at least one specific media/journalism-related actor or an entity in an accusatory manner (70%) - Include references to the mainstream media (37%) - References to left-wing media (24%) - References to right-wing media (27%) - References to social media, online media outlets (10%)	a) "Donald Trump's interpretation of reality" "Anything Trump does not like" "Anything that the president says" "Those coming from stations who are still mad that Trump won the election" b) "CNN news that lies" "Anything that mainstream media says" "CNN MSNBC Most Mainstream Media Outlets" "New York Times CNN ABC NBC and CBS Reporting news that are not real" "Anything on Facebook" "Breitbart"