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Digital News: Persuasion, Emotion, and Trustworthiness

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Digital News: Persuasion, Emotion, and Trustworthiness

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Abstract

This study was done to discover whether the media platform (Facebook vs. Digital News Site) and personal distance (Personal vs. Impersonal) would affect how emotionally participants responded to a news story and how persuaded participants were by a news story appeal. Sixty-five students at a small Christian Arts and Sciences College (23 men, 42 women) were randomly assigned to read one of four news stories and indicate how emotional their response was and how persuaded they were by the appeals of the stories. Participants also completed Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle’s (1994) Social dominance Orientation (SDO) scale to determine whether personality predicted responses to the news stories. Social Dominance Orientation effectively predicted both emotional response and persuasion; the higher participants scored on SDO the less emotional response they showed and the less persuaded they were by the appeal included in the news story, which was that the displaced homeowners should be assisted by insurance companies. While the Facebook news stories were deemed more personal and less trustworthy than the digital news stories, there were no significant differences in emotional response and persuasion ratings for either the platform or personal distance manipulations. The implications of these results for the impact of various forms of media news story presentations are discussed.
Digital News: Persuasion, Emotion, and Trustworthiness

Given the rise of digital culture, larger populations rely on internet sources for information about current events as well as social interactions. The internet disseminates both information and human relationships, suggesting that it works on cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural levels. Because it is not a pure news source, but rather mixes social activities with information gathering, it has the potential to affect the way viewers interact with current events. This kind of effect could be especially important in the action of emotions such as empathy and anger. If digital audiences respond more or less emotionally on digital platforms because of the social context, news stories might be reacted to differently through the internet than through other mediums. Digital interactions, then, could open a new branch of persuasion studies.

Within the digital world, there are also different mediums through which news can travel – personal communications, digital news publication, videos, etc. These different mediums might also affect the way content is received. In addition to the emotional response, the persuasiveness of a message might vary depending on source credibility, as suggested by the current research and theories on persuasion (Clark & Evans, 2014; Meitz et al., 2016; Smith, Houwer, & Nosek, 2012), and source comprehensibility (Septiano & Pratiwi, 2016; Wyer & Shrum, 2015). The influence of the source on overall persuasion might be because the viewer’s response to the trustworthiness of the source could affect how persuasive the message is believed to be. Observing the way viewers interact with and react to digital media might contribute to an understanding of what kinds of communications solicit emotion and persuade effectively.

Theories of Persuasion

The rationale for this study is located within the broader body of persuasion research as a whole, which suggests that the process of persuasion is complex and multivalent. Many factors
that influence the outcome of a persuasive message reside in the viewer, such as familiarity with the topic (Wyer & Shrum, 2015), attitude accessibility (Clark, 2014), already formed opinions (Wyer & Schrum, 2015), sex (Clark, 2014), psychological distance from the topic (Septianto & Pratiwi, 2016), and method of forming previously held opinions (affective or cognitive) (Ryffel & Wirth, 2016). Particularly relevant to this study are findings that the source of a message influences both persuasiveness and emotion evoked (Clark & Evans, 2014; Meitz et al., 2016; Smith, Houwer, & Nosek, 2012). Also of interest is the finding that elements of narrative and the inclusion of pictures within a persuasive message render it more comprehensible, and therefore, more persuasive (Septiano & Pratiwi, 2016; Wyer & Shrum, 2015). Given that digital media relies more heavily on images and stories, persuasiveness could function differently on these platforms than traditional print mediums. While the influence of the source depends on many pre-existing characteristics of the recipient of the message, studies suggest that source does have an impact on persuasiveness.

The source of a persuasive message is especially important for the viewer’s judgment of credibility. Source credibility has been shown to have a significant impact on different aspects of persuasiveness (Clark & Evans, 2014; Meitz et al., 2016; Smith, Houwer, & Nosek, 2012) and has been a part of the research on persuasion since the first studies on the topic (Ryffel & Wirth, 2016). At times, a highly credible source can actually more firmly convince a person of their preconceived opinion; when the source is more credible and the already held opinion is strong, the credible source will force the creation of a stronger counterargument (Clark & Evans, 2013). But highly credible sources can also persuade through making the message more relevant (Meitz et al., 2016) and agreeing with preconceived ideas (Clark & Evans, 2013). Highly credible sources have a greater overall impact on both explicit and implicit evaluations, though this
impact might be affected by cognitive load and attention paid to the source (Smith et al., 2012). The research suggests that highly credible sources are more important sources of persuasion. Even if the sources strengthen a preconceived opposing opinion, they still demonstrate a greater effect on the opinions and beliefs of the viewer.

In addition to source credibility, emotion evoked by a source also plays a large role in persuasion. Highly emotional content, such as angry facial expressions, can encourage processing by the viewer, which can lead to greater persuasiveness (Calanchini, Moons, & Mackie, 2016). Emotional appeals can often be superior to cognitive appeals (Ryffel & Worth, 2016; Septianto & Pratiwi, 2014). Emotional appeals can persuade a person more strongly if the individual is psychologically distant from the material; therefore, material that does not affect the viewer personally will be more persuasive if it is emotional (Septianto & Pratiwi, 2014). Affective appeals also are more effective when the previously held opinion was based on emotions (Ryffel & Worth, 2016). However, the converse is also true: cognitive appeals are more effective when the person is closely related to the issue and when the previously held opinion was based on cognitive reasoning (Ryffel & Worth, 2016; Septianto & Pratiwi, 2014). Affective reasoning can play a large role in general persuasion processes depending on context and viewer.

Previous research has suggested that storytelling elicits different emotion from other kinds of communication (Bas & Grabe, 2015; Koopman, 2015; Tamagawa et al., 2014; Altmann, Bohrin, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2014). Personal stories can evoke a more emotional response and deeper understanding of current events (Bas & Grabe, 2015), but stories create less emotion than having a conversation with another person (Tamagawa et al., 2014). This research is relevant because internet news includes traditional fact-based reporting, personal stories, and
personal communications through social media. Experiencing emotion while reading leads to
greater reflection (Koopman, 2015), suggesting that if different digital platforms adapt
themselves to more emotional forms of storytelling, they might create a greater response. The
persuasion literature suggests that emotional appeals can be more affecting and cause a
persuasive appeal to be processed more. Because personal stories evoke emotion, persuasion
based on personal stories could be stronger.

However, these forms of information dissemination are mediated by readers’ ideas about
the person behind the digital post and the digital platform itself. While many young adults
express empathy and personal connection through online communities such as support groups
(Siriaraya, Tang, And, Pfeil, & Zaphiris, 2011), studies have suggested that people change their
reactions to an online presence based on preconceived ideas about the interaction (Guadagno,
Swinth, & Blascovich, 2011). For instance, a smile from an online avatar can be perceived as
friendly or menacing based on participants’ beliefs (Guadagno et al., 2011). In addition, different
online news platforms are used with different motivations by users, such as entertainment,
information, etc., which influence how the users perceive different sites (Choi, 2015). Also, more
personal Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are perceived as less trustworthy by audiences (Go,
Kyng, Eunhwa, & Hongjin, 2015). Therefore, even though the previous studies suggested that
the greater the amount of personal storytelling the greater the emotional response, these effects
might be mediated by internet-specific beliefs about trustworthiness of information. The
persuasion literature on source credibility suggests that low credibility sources are generally less
effective, which suggests that the high emotionality of SNSs might be affective without actually
persuading the reader or viewer because of their lack of trustworthiness.
Given the ways in which storytelling and storytelling platforms affect audiences, the current study hypothesizes that the digital medium and perspective through which an event is communicated will affect the emotional responses of the participants. Personal storytelling elicits more emotion; however, it also can decrease trustworthiness. By manipulating the personal nature of the news story (third person or first person perspective) and the trustworthiness of the digital source (digital news site or SNS), this study aimed to study persuasiveness in digital news stories. Based on previous research, it is expected that the greater amount of personal storytelling, more emotion will be evoked but less trust will be earned. Emotion plays a key role in attention and therefore persuasion, but the credibility of the source often predicts actual attitude change. While previous research has studied the link between SNSs and trustworthiness, there is a gap in the research concerning responses to news stories spread through SNSs. The present research sought to bridge this gap.

**Social Dominance Orientation**

One personality factor that has been shown to have strong correlations with political views is Social Dominance Orientation. The Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) measure, developed by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle (1994), is a personality measure consisting of 16 questions. These questions are designed to quantify the individual’s stance on group inequality. A higher score on the SDO measure suggests that the respondent is more favorable towards preserving group inequality, while a lower score on the measure suggests that the respondent is more favorable towards promoting group equality. The original study suggested that men tend to score higher on the SDO measure than women, that individuals with higher scores on SDO tend to work in jobs that increase hierarchies, and that SDO was linked with beliefs in various sociopolitical ideologies relating to hierarchy and control (Pratto et al., 1994).
Since the original study, SDO has been linked with a variety of political beliefs. In general, those who score high on the SDO measure are more likely to favor their in-group over the out-group and rely more heavily on political structures that will maintain this inequality (Pratto et al., 1994). SDO has also been shown to correlate with conservatism in areas such as economics, social issues, and foreign policy (Harnish, Bridges, & Gump, 2017). SDO can even predict an individual’s level of care for the environment (Stanley et al., 2017). Because of its influence on political opinions, SDO could have an effect on how readers interact with digital news stories that are related to political opinions or conservatism. SDO could be an important personality factor when considering the persuasiveness of any given news item. The news stories in this present study asked the reader to indicate the extent to which he or she sided with the insurance companies, which would preserve social inequality, or the displaced homeowners, which would decrease social inequality. Given these scenarios, it was expected that a higher rating on the SDO measure would predict support for the insurance companies rather than the homeowners.

Present Study

The present study aimed to test theories of persuasiveness within the context of digital media. The goal of the study was to discover whether or not source credibility and emotion could work against each other in a persuasive environment. Because a personal story could be more emotional but also less credible, the present study aimed to measure the possible effects of having emotional material told in an untrustworthy setting. Given the tension between the theories on the influence of source characteristics and personality factors, the current study measured the influence of SDO as well as two different sources: Facebook and digital news. As previous research has suggested that personal stories are more emotional than impersonal stories,
the present study also measured the effect of changes in personal distance. In order to measure the effects of these variables, the stories used in this study includes a persuasive element. Measuring how persuaded participants are by the news stories operationally defines and measures how effective and affective personality, source, and narrative distance were. Participants’ emotional responses were also measured in order to judge whether or not persuasion can be separated from emotion when reading digital media.

**Hypotheses.** The hypotheses for the present study are as follows: (1) Higher scores on the SDO measure will be correlated with less emotion and less persuasiveness in response to the message because research on SDO suggests that it predicts a desire to preserve social inequality; (2) Facebook will evoke more emotion but less persuasion than digital news platforms because it tells story in a personal way, evoking emotion, but is not as credible as an established news source; (3) Close distance sources will produce more emotional response and less persuasion than distant sources because they will be more personal but less credible; (4) The close personal distance Facebook condition will be the most emotional but least persuasive because it will be the most narrative, personal account but the least trustworthy.

**Methods**

**Participants**

This study included 65 participants (23 male, 42 female) from Introduction to Psychology Classes. Participants were between 17 and 22 years old with an average age of 19. Fifty-nine participants indicated that they had a Facebook profile, and six said they did not. All students attended a small Christian liberal arts college.
Materials

The materials used in the present research included personality and news habit measures, four digital news stories, and demographic information.

Social dominance orientation. Social dominance orientation was measured using Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle’s (1994) Social Dominance Orientation Scale (see Appendix A). This personality measure consists of 16 questions, eight of which were worded in the pro-trait direction (e.g., “to get ahead in life it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups”) and eight in the con-trait direction (e.g., “all groups should be given an equal chance in life”). Participants indicated their responses to the 16 items on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The con-trait items were reverse-scored so average scores on the scale could range from 1 to 7, with higher scores equivalent to higher social dominance orientation. The alpha for the scale was .86, indicating that the measure was reliable. In the present study, the average SDO score was 2.68 (SD = .82), ranging from 1.00 to 4.75. The scores are similar to what has been reported elsewhere (e.g., Pratto et al. 1994)

Digital platform. These stories either looked like they were from a Facebook profile or a digital newspaper (see Appendix B). All four news stories described the same basic scenario: a flood in Baton Rouge, Louisiana had left many homeowners homeless. While they could have purchased an additional flood insurance plan, the cost of this plan was prohibitive for many. An individual affected family was described who was without a home while the mother in the family was pregnant, and one of the children was celebrating a birthday. All stories argued that the insurance companies should automatically include flood insurance to their plans for the future, and the federal government should, in the meantime, provide for the displaced homeowners. The target sentence for persuasion was also identical in all four: “In order to address the great
suffering of displaced Louisiana citizens, many are calling for insurance reform, saying the current system is run by insurance companies’ greed. For now, the federal government should provide taxpayer money to take care of homeless families.” All four stories were matched in word count (248 words). The differences in style between platforms were preserved, but within platforms the only variation in text were the pronouns used (see next section).

The digital news stories were formatted with a banner similar to the newspaper title banner used online, with a fake website address at the top of the page. The Facebook posts were simulated by creating a Facebook profile, posting a status, and then taking a screenshot of the Facebook page with the status in the “News Feed”, which is a scrolling list of new posts presented on the Facebook user’s homepage. No profile picture was used for the Facebook account. In order to maintain external validity to real web browsing, an ad was in the margin of all four news stories. This advertisement was identical in all four conditions.

**Distance.** In order to change how personal the news story was, the stories were either written from a first person or a third person perspective (see Appendix B). In the digital newspaper condition, this meant either a direct quote was included from an individual who was affected or an example of a family was presented in third person without ever being quoted. The same situation was described in both – the only difference was whether the person being described spoke from a first person perspective or was described third person. In the Facebook condition, the distance was manipulated by either including a first person post told from the perspective of someone involved directly or including a third person post in which the Facebook user was describing someone else’s story.

**Emotion.** Emotion was measured using a 12 item response sheet (see Appendix C, response questions #13-#24). This emotion measure’s 12 items gauged how much emotion
participants felt on behalf of the displaced homeowners. Six of the items were worded in the pro-trait direction (e.g., “this story would cause anyone to feel sympathetic”) and six in the con-trait direction (e.g., “I cannot sympathize with people who do not put in the extra work to protect their families”). Participants indicated their responses to the 12 items on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The con-trait items were reverse-scored so average scores on the scale could range from 1 to 7, with higher scores equivalent to a stronger emotional response to the homeowner’s plight. The alpha for the scale was .8, indicating that the measure was reliable. In the present study, the average score on the emotion measure was 4.88 ($SD = .82$), ranging from 3.64 to 6.55.

**Persuasion.** Persuasion was measured using a 10 item response sheet (see Appendix C, response questions #3-#12). This persuasion measure’s 10 items measured how strongly participants were persuaded to side with the displaced homeowners. Five of the items were worded in the pro-trait direction (e.g., “I feel like I am on the homeowners’ side”) and five in the con-trait direction (e.g., “I feel like I am on the insurance companies’ side”). Participants indicated their responses to the 10 items on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The con-trait items were reverse-scored so average scores on the scale could range from 1 to 7, with higher scores equivalent to stronger persuasion by the homeowners’ argument. The alpha for the scale was .84, indicating that the measure was reliable. In the present study, the average persuasion score was 4.48 ($SD = .86$), ranging from 2.90 to 6.30.

**Manipulation checks.** Three measures to check the efficacy of the manipulation were included: **Trustworthiness, Distance,** and **Tone.**
Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was one item measuring how much the participant trusted the news source (see Appendix C, response question #1). The statement was “I trust the news source that this story came from”. Participants indicated their responses to the 10 items on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). In the present study, the average trustworthiness score was 4.00 (SD = 1.50), ranging from 1.00 to 7.00.

Distance. Distance was a three item response sheet measuring how personal the participant thought the news source was (see Appendix C, response questions #2, #27, #28). Two of the items were worded in the pro-trait direction (e.g., “the story I just read seems like a very personal one”) and one in the con-trait direction (e.g., “the story of the flood seemed to be covered in an impersonal way”). Participants indicated their responses to the three items on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The con-trait item was reverse-scored so average scores on the scale could range from 1 to 7, with higher scores equivalent to a higher rating of the story’s personal nature. The alpha for the scale was .75, indicating that the measure was reliable. In the present study, the average distance score was 5.18 (SD = 1.21), ranging from 2.00 to 7.00.

Tone. Tone was a two item response sheet measuring how personal the participant thought the news source was (see Appendix C, response questions #25 and #26). One of the items was worded in the pro-trait direction (“the overall tone of this news item was formal”) and one in the con-trait direction (e.g., “the overall tone of this news item was informal”). Participants indicated their responses to the two items on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The con-trait item was reverse-scored so average scores on the scale could range from 1 to 7, with higher scores equivalent to a higher
rating of the story’s formality. In the present study, the average tone score was 2.68 (SD = 1.20), ranging from 1.00 to 6.00.

**Design and Procedure**

This study has a 2 [Platform; Facebook vs Digital News Story] x 2 [Distance; Personal vs Impersonal] design. Upon arrival to the computer lab, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of news story. Participants chose their seats themselves and were given the informed consent form and the questionnaires. All participants were then emailed their news story (participants in the same condition were blind copied so that it was impossible to see who else received the same item). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. All news stories were presented digitally while the questionnaires were hard copy. Following the reading of the news item, participants completed the SDO measure, dependent measures and manipulation checks. Participants were elaborately debriefed at the conclusion of the study.

**Results**

**Preliminary Results**

Distance was subjected to a 2 [Platform; Facebook vs Digital News Story] x 2 [Distance; Personal vs Impersonal] ANOVA. Results revealed a significant main effect for platform, $F(1, 61) = 4.25, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$. Facebook was rated as more personal $(M = 5.47, SD = 1.21)$ than Digital News Story $(M = 4.92, SD = 1.17)$. Also, as expected, the distance manipulation was significant. Personal distance was rated as more personal $(M= 5.56, SD = 1.21)$ than impersonal distance $(M = 4.83, SD = 1.12), F(1,61) = 7.44, p = .008, \eta^2 = .11$. The interaction was not significant although it was approaching significance.
Tone was subjected to a 2 x 2 ANOVA. The only significant finding was that the Platform, Facebook ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .83$) was less formal than the Digital News Story ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.05$), $F(1, 61) = 38.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. This result followed the prediction that Facebook would be seen as less formal than the digital news story.

Trustworthiness was subjected to a 2 x 2 ANOVA. The only significant finding was the Platform. As expected, the digital news story ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.46$) was more trustworthy than Facebook ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.34$), $F(1, 61)$. Distance was approaching significance.

**Test of Hypotheses**

It was predicted that higher scores on the Social Dominance Orientation measure would predict lower scores on persuasion and emotion. As predicted, the SDO rating was correlated negatively with persuasion, $r(64) = -.61$, $p < .001$, and emotion, $r(64) = -.54$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the higher the participants were on SDO the less supportive they were of the displaced homeowners.

There was no significant difference between platforms on the measure of emotionality, $F(1, 61) = .01$, ns. There was no significant difference between different levels of personal distance on the measure of emotionality, $F(1, 61) = .00$, ns. There was no significant interaction effect between platform and personal distance on the measure of emotionality, $F(1, 61) = .01$, ns. There was no significant difference between platforms on the rating of persuasiveness, $F(1, 61) = .67$, ns. There was no significant difference between levels of personal distance on the rating of persuasiveness, $F(1, 61) = .04$, ns. There was no interaction effect between platform and personal distance on the rating of persuasiveness, $F(1, 61) = .07$, ns. These findings did not support the hypothesis that platform and personal storytelling would impact the emotionality and persuasiveness of a news item.
Discussion

Implications

The results of this experiment suggested that the best predictor for the persuasiveness and emotionality of a news piece was the SDO measure rather than the platform or distance of the piece itself. The findings of this study support the research that suggests that personality factors play a large role in persuasion and could be more influential than source factors. It is possible that this could be dependent on the content of the news story. If the news story does not contain any information about social inequality, perhaps the source would be more important than Social Dominance Orientation. The research on Social Dominance Orientation suggests that it is a strong and influential personality trait, which might be a possible reason it played such a large role in the present study. Given the uniqueness of digital interactions, this study might suggest that personality factors play an especially large role online, where the user interacts with news pieces in a digital vacuum. They do not have an established relationship to the information source that predicts a feeling of trust, such as a favorite newspaper, and the social interaction is not face-to-face.

While the independent variables did not have an effect as was predicted, the manipulation checks suggest that the manipulation was felt and clearly registered by participants. The present study found that the manipulation check Trustworthiness was effective. Participants did rate materials as more or less trustworthy based on the platform and personal distance. Despite the significant difference in how credible students found different sources, the participants’ opinions of credibility did not seem to have any effect on persuasiveness and emotion. This suggests that while it may be easy for internet users to tell which sources are supposed to be trusted, this judgment will not be reflected in the actual perception and judgment of the news story. It is also
possible that trustworthiness might not be very important to the individual. It has already been suggested by previous research that it is difficult for a jury to discount the testimony of a discredited witness, such as Loftus’ (1975) finding that 68% of participants believed an untrustworthy eyewitness. Even though the jury is aware that the testimony is untrustworthy, simply hearing the testimony is enough to make an impact. A meta-analysis of jury studies performed by Whitley (1987) found that overall, all of the studies on discredited witnesses analyzed suggested that while a discredited witness was not as impactful as a trustworthy one, a discredited witness was more influential than no witness at all. Similarly, even though participants were aware of which digital source was more trustworthy, hearing the story might have had just as great of an impact regardless of the credibility. Because personality factors could have had more influence on persuasiveness than source factors in this study, individuals who read online material might have become more loyal to their pre-existing views even if the news is disproved and might be unlikely to change their views when faced with news from the opposing opinion.

The findings of this study are relevant because they corroborate the current studies on “fake news”. The results suggest that individuals might be able to recognize fake news without changing their reaction to reading it; previous studies have found similar results. Studies on fake news have focused on the impact of political satire, rather than the relatively new phenomena of fake news “passing” as real news, on opinions about current events. These studies suggest that repeated exposure to satirical news stories does impact viewers and change awareness and opinions about current events (Balmas, 2014; Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013). This research has not examined the fake news that is not political satire but instead news presented as if it is true when it is actually sensationalized or tabloid-style news. However, this kind of fake news is
largely circulated on the internet through means such as Facebook and seemingly real looking news websites. If satirical fake news, when viewed repeatedly, can influence opinions, it is possible that more blatantly untrustworthy sources, such as Facebook, could become just as influential through repeated exposure. These trends could be because views circulated on the internet, regardless of their credibility, affect existing beliefs.

Limitations

Because the manipulation checks worked as predicted, it is possible that trust and emotion antagonized each other and cancelled each other out. The more personal source, Facebook, was rated as less trustworthy, but it was also rated as more personal. Because it was more personal, it is possible that it evoked more emotion but its lack of credibility negated the emotion felt. News stories, on the other hand, were more credible but less personal. They could be believed, but it is possible that the lack of personal storytelling kept them from having a larger impact on persuasiveness. Because the research on persuasion has suggested persuasion is a multivalent, complex combination of many factors, it is possible that some of the factors in this study effectively worked against each other.

Possible problems with the current study could have included the possibility that the two media platforms might not have been different enough from each other. Comparing two digital sources, Facebook and a news website, might not be strong enough to appear as a true change in source to the participants. Perhaps many readers now read all digital materials the same way. Many digital news articles are now disseminated through Facebook users, which could cause readers to respond similarly to both. Because participants were not comparing the two forms of news media, but were only exposed to one, the strength of the manipulation should be increased. In order to increase the strength of the manipulation, a print newspaper article could be compared
to a digital Facebook status. The print newspaper story should also include a more direct personal appeal – such as a letter to the editor or an op-ed. In a traditional news story, the appeal gets diluted while on Facebook, the personal appeal is present and expected. The manipulation of the medium could be made more salient by comparing a newspaper piece written by a specific person making a specific appeal to a Facebook status, in which a specific person always makes a direct appeal. In addition, the direct appeal target statement could be replicated in the response sheet so that participants could rate to what extent they agreed with that particular statement.

The order of materials also could have influenced participants’ answers. Because the SDO measure was completed first, perhaps participants were primed with their beliefs about social inequality, which then outweighed any influence of the source. In addition, participants were able to sit close enough together in the lab to see each other’s screens. If they were able to glimpse the different sources being used, they might have become aware of the source manipulation. The content of the news story itself was not very current or controversial, as well. Participants might not have cared much about the issue described in the story; if they cared about the topic more, they might have paid more attention to the source credibility instead of being as influenced as they were by a personality factor.

Lastly, in naturalistic settings, SNS users always encounter a Facebook profile linked to a specific user. When the poster is an unknown entity, such as in the Facebook post used for this experiment, readers might not have had the same judgements about the poster’s credibility that might be observed naturalistically. In order to make inferences about the Facebook user’s trustworthiness, there might have to be a profile picture and other posts for the source to influence levels of persuasion. This is how most people encounter news on Facebook, which might be why people get more emotional on Facebook generally than they seem to in the
experiment. It is hard to test Facebook interactions without including the integral social relationship that fuel the SNS. In addition, most news stories are often shared as videos on SNS. In order to capture the full importance of the emotion usually evoked when digital news is shared on a SNS, a video could be used instead of text, which seems to be becoming less popular.

**Future Research**

Future research should examine a wider arrange of personality factors to measure their influence. It should also test controversial issues in order to gauge whether or not the judged importance of relevance of the topic influences participants’ decision making processes. The personality measure could also be administered after the test so that participants do not think about their own personalities before reading the news items. Future research could also try to mimic naturalistic settings more by seeing how individuals react to the same story posted by someone the individual likes versus someone the individual does not like. In everyday use, Facebook users usually encounter news stories as links on Facebook with a poster’s opinion attached to the link. Future research could analyze how a link to an article on Facebook might elicit different emotional and persuasive reactions than the article devoid of the SNS context. In addition, the rise of digital news has also created a rise in multi-modal news: videos, pictures, and sound bites are circulated widely on the internet, which was not as possible with traditional print mediums. Future research could investigate how news might be processed differently given the new forms through which it is presented.

This research could be useful to news organizations and political groups. If individuals are able to be persuaded equally by trustworthy and untrustworthy sources, companies like Facebook should make a greater effort to screen the news articles that appear. In addition, if personality factors do play a greater role in persuasion than source factors, news sources and
political agencies should re-evaluate their strategies. Instead of using news items to persuade readers, face-to-face interactions or other alternative strategies might be more useful than digital communications.
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Appendix A

Social Dominance Orientation and News Habits

Below are a series of statements with which you may either agree or disagree. For each statement, please indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement by circling a number from 1 to 7 to the right of each item. Please remember that there is no right or wrong answer, and that your first responses are usually the most accurate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I learn about most news stories and current events from Facebook.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I often feel very emotional about current news stories.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I learn about most news stories and current events from digital</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>newspapers or other established news sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I often feel angry about Facebook statuses I see regarding current</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Some groups of people are just more worthy than others.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In getting what your group wants, it is sometimes necessary to use</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>force against other groups.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. If certain groups of people stayed in their place, we would have</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>fewer problems.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. We would have fewer problems if we treated different groups more</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>equally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. No one group should dominate in society.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Group equality should be our ideal.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>All groups should be given an equal chance in life.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>We must increase social equality.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Superior groups should dominate inferior groups.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>We must strive to make incomes more equal.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>It would be good if all groups could be equal.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Inferior groups should stay in their place.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I use Facebook very frequently.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>I would not say that I use Facebook often.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>I use Facebook to follow established news sources.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>I often read articles of established news sources that are posted on Facebook.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>I use Facebook mainly for social purposes that are not news related.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Louisiana flood claims thousands of homes

(BATON ROUGE, La.) -- The August 2016 flooding of southern Louisiana created a state of emergency after water levels were raised by over 32 inches by a storm. This flooding affected millions of Americans and left 150,000 homeless, many of whom have no flood coverage for their houses.

“Our daughter just celebrated her second birthday in a shelter,” said Mark Daniels, a Baton Rouge resident left homeless after the storm. “Our home and business were destroyed in the rainfall – I have no idea how we are going to re-build our lives. My wife is pregnant with twins, on top of it all.”

These Louisiana homeowners face the task of restoring their homes with no insurance money. While they have standard insurance policies, flooding is not covered. Given the frequency of flooding in Louisiana, insurance companies argue that homeowners should have to purchase this insurance for themselves, rather than have it gifted to them. Many working class families could not afford the extra $250 per month flood coverage. If flooding was added to the standard plan, the additional coverage could place a heavier payment plan on all homeowners across the country.

Without an insurance payout, the future for Mark Daniels’ family, like so many others, is bleak. In order to address the great suffering of displaced Louisiana citizens, many are calling for insurance reform, saying the current system is run by insurance companies’ greed. For now, the federal government should provide taxpayer money to take care of homeless families.
Louisiana flood claims thousands of homes

(BATON ROUGE, La.) -- The August 2016 flooding of southern Louisiana created a state of emergency after water levels were raised by over 32 inches by a storm. This flooding affected millions of Americans and left 150,000 homeless, many of whom have no flood coverage for their houses.

One such family left homeless is the Daniels of Baton Rouge who recently moved into a homeless shelter and had to celebrate their daughter’s second birthday there. Daniels’ home and business were destroyed in the rainfall – they have no idea how they are going to rebuild their lives. Mrs. Daniels is pregnant with twins.

These Louisiana homeowners face the task of restoring their homes with no insurance money. While they have standard insurance policies, flooding is not covered. Given the frequency of flooding in Louisiana, insurance companies argue that homeowners should have to purchase this insurance for themselves, rather than have it gifted to them. Many working class families could not afford the extra $250 per month flood coverage. If flooding was added to the standard plan, the additional coverage could place a heavier payment plan on all homeowners across the country.

Without an insurance payout, the future for Mark Daniels’ family, like so many others, is bleak. In order to address the great suffering of displaced Louisiana citizens, many are calling for insurance reform, saying the current system is run by insurance companies’ greed. For now, the federal government should provide taxpayer money to take care of homeless families.
Did you hear about how I had to throw Ava’s birthday party from a homeless shelter? After all the flooding around here, the water levels went up over 32 inches, and my family and 150,000 other families were left homeless.

I know you’ve probably all seen the Louisiana floods on the news, and my home and business were two of the buildings claimed in the destruction of Baton Rouge. I don’t know how we are going to rebuild our lives. My wife is pregnant with twins and in a shelter – I can’t help but think that’s unfair.

Even though I paid for my home’s mortgage and insurance every month, my family is left with nothing because flooding isn’t covered in my standard insurance plan. The insurance companies will tell you that I should’ve seen it coming and bought an extra flooding plan. Now, is a working class father supposed to afford an extra 250 bucks a month? Insurance companies should add flood insurance to the current plan for everyone so that this doesn’t happen again. I understand that prices might go up a little across the country in order to add the extra coverage, but it would help so many families out in the long run.

Without an insurance payout, the future for my family, like so many others, is bleak. Insurance companies need to stop the greed and pay fair. For now, the federal government should provide taxpayer money to take care of homeless families.

End rant.

Like Comment Share
Did you hear about how Mark had to throw Avia’s birthday party from the homeless shelter? After all the flooding around here, the water levels went up over 32 inches, and Mark’s family and 150,000 other families were left homeless.

Mark knows you’ve probably all seen the Louisiana floods on the news, and Mark’s home and business were two of the buildings claimed in the destruction of Baton Rouge. Mark doesn’t know how he is going to rebuild their lives. Mark’s wife is pregnant with twins and in a shelter – Mark can’t help but think that’s unfair.

Even though he paid for his home’s mortgage and insurance every month, Mark’s family is left with nothing because flooding isn’t covered in his standard insurance plan. The insurance companies will tell you that they should’ve seen it coming and bought an extra flooding plan. How is a working class family supposed to afford an extra $250 per month? Insurance companies should add flood insurance to the current plan for everyone so that this doesn’t happen again. Mark understands that prices might go up a little across the country in order to add the extra coverage, but it would help so many families out in the long run.

Without an insurance payout, the future for Mark’s family, like so many others, is bleak. Insurance companies need to stop the greed and play fair. For now, the federal government should provide taxpayer money to take care of homeless families.

End rant.

Like · Comment · Share
Appendix C

Response Questions

Below are several statements regarding the source you just read about flooding in Louisiana. Please indicate your agreement to each statement, as it pertains to your response to the story, by circling a number to the right, from “1 = strongly disagree” to “7 = strongly agree.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  I trust the news source that this story came from.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  The story I just read seems like a very personal one.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  The homeowners are largely at fault for not purchasing adequate insurance to cover such eventuality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.  Even if taxpayer money has to be used, the displaced families should be given homes.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.  It is unreasonable for people to expect to be bailed out when they did not take the necessary steps to protect themselves.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.  Overall, the plan to bail out the homeowners and reform insurance companies is a good one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.  I feel like I am on the home owners’ side.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.  I feel like I am on the insurance companies’ side.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.  The insurance companies should not feel any obligation to do any favors for the displaced people.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. The insurance companies are responsible for the homelessness of so many families.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. It is unfair for insurance companies to have to pay for flood coverage.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Whether the affected families are at fault or not the insurance companies should help to rebuild their homes as soon as it is practicable.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. This story would cause anyone to feel sympathetic whether or not they think insurance companies are being unfair.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I cannot sympathize with people who do not put in the extra work to protect their families.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I don’t sympathize with the families who shirked their responsibilities, expecting others to bail them out.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I cannot understand why anyone would be unmoved by the plight of the families who lost everything.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>It is frustrating for people to expect insurance companies to forfeit their profits in the name of flood relief.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>In order to feel bad for the people who lost their home, I would have to know that they had bought flood insurance.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I feel bad for the affected families even if it they are at fault for not having adequate flood insurance.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I feel angry about the blame game the insurance companies are playing with the displaced families.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I feel mad that the people who lost their homes did not think ahead to take care of their children.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Insurance companies that do not include flood coverage make me angry.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The people in this story who ask for help make me feel frustrated with their neediness.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>I feel outraged at the greed of the insurance companies in this situation.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>The overall tone of this news item was formal.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>The overall tone of this news item was casual.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>The story of the flood seemed to be covered in an impersonal way.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>The news item I read appears to be personal in tone.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>