

Same scandal, different standards: The effect of partisanship on expectations of news reports  
about whistleblowers

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Same scandal, different standards: The effect of partisanship on expectations of news reports about whistleblowers

*The New York Times* faced a reckoning in September 2019. The paper published a news story revealing key details about an unnamed whistleblower who had exposed a possible quid-pro-quo offer from U.S. President Donald Trump to the Ukrainian president. The *Times* did not name the whistleblower, but did include other key details about the person. Those details, the whistleblower's attorney, several political pundits, and some audience members argued, put the whistleblower at risk of retribution from the Trump administration. Executive editor Dean Baquet defended the editorial decision, reasoning that the "role of the whistle-blower, including his credibility and his place in the government, is essential to understanding one of the most important issues facing this country" (Barnes, Schmidt, Goldman, & Benner, 2019). In other words, he argued that revealing certain details about the whistleblower was the right journalistic decision because it allowed the audience to evaluate the credibility of the accusations.

Journalists are guided by their professional and ethical standards when reporting on whistleblowers. As the reaction to the Trump-Ukraine situation revealed, it is not guaranteed that audiences will agree with these decisions. Theory suggests that audiences will adjust their opinion about what is appropriate for journalists to reveal based on their partisanship and the partisanship of the politician. The purpose of this study is to explore how audience standards for whistleblower editorial decisions fluctuate based on factors such as partisanship and news source.

The connotation that audiences interpret news through lenses colored by their own preferences is at the core of research on the hostile media perception (HMP; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), which theorizes that partisans often believe that the news is biased against their beliefs. One potential explanation for this phenomenon is that divergent segments of the

audience have *different standards* for what should and should not be reported. That is, competing partisans have standards for what is “fair game” to include in a story – and these standards fluctuate depending on the perceiver’s relationship to the issue at the center of the news. Our study uses an online survey-embedded experiment ( $N=591$ ) to examine how individual partisanship, news brand, and political party affiliation of the politician at the center of a scandal impact how audiences perceive news stories that reveal details about whistleblowers. Additionally, we test to what extent audiences have different standards for quality journalism by asking audiences what they think journalists should do in a follow up news story.

Further, news organizations attempt to combat negative perceptions of news with unprecedented transparency about the journalistic process. Researchers have examined the extent to which interventions including media literacy messages (Vraga & Tully, 2015), public service announcements (Tully & Vraga, 2017), and “behind the story” stories (Murray & Stroud, 2020) can increase trust of news among audiences. Our experiment tests another type of transparency intervention: editor’s notes. This study uses a 2 (Fox News Channel/MSNBC) X 2 (Democrat/Republican politician) X 2 (heuristic/elaborated editor’s note) design to test how a justification of a controversial journalistic decision by the news organization editor can (1) reduce the amount of information that is categorized as negative by the audience and (2) alter the audience’s standards for a future news story about the same issue. In other words, we ask if transparency about the journalistic process can reduce partisan perceptions.

## **Literature review**

### **In-groups and out-groups**

Partisan cues are well-established to have an effect on how audiences perceive messages. In the United States, identification with a political party guides partisans to organize their values

and beliefs with those who are like-minded and see those who identify with another party as part of the outgroup. Thus, the partisan identity of an audience member becomes part of the audience's social identity (Greene, 1999).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Billic, 1974) separates the in-group from the out-group based on common personal characteristics. This sets the stage for motivated reasoning, which reduces the scrutiny audiences give in-group messages and increases the likelihood disagreeable messages from the outgroup will be reasoned away (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Through this lens, the audience processes information with a bias in favor of messages from or about the in-group and against messages from or about the outgroup, suggesting that audience members are more motivated to hold onto their beliefs than they are to have the most accurate information (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Kunda, 1990). Several decades of research have found that audiences classify the same content according to different standards based on their worldview (Feldman, 2011; Gunther, 1988; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Vallone et al., 1985).

### **Same media, different perceptions**

Audiences tend to interpret mediated information as hostile to their preferences, a phenomenon known as the hostile media perception (HMP; Vallone et al., 1985). When competing groups both sense that media content is undesirable, this can result in two groups walking away with wildly different perceptions of the same media content. Indeed, early hostile media perception research focused on how competing groups interpreted news that researchers had carefully designed to be even-handed. Later studies showed that even when evaluating media content that is not necessarily balanced – like when Democrats and Republicans agreed that MSNBC leaned toward Clinton during 2016 election coverage (Perryman, 2019) – the side not

avored by a perceived slant will still see more bias than those on the other side (i.e., Trump voters, relative to Clinton voters, thought MSNBC was far more biased toward her). This *relative* form of HMP demonstrates that actual content and personal partisanship play a role in how audiences form impressions of bias in news.

Stronger partisans – those said to be *involved* with an issue – are most likely to experience HMP, though the perception persists even among those with weaker stances toward an issue in the news (Hansen & Kim, 2011). Another factor that can impact perceived news bias is the source – partisans generally see less media bias when the information is coming from a source they view as friendly (Feldman, 2011). For example, partisans had diverging perceptions of bias when evaluating the same news story branded as either CNN or Fox News, with the story receiving higher ratings when it was branded as coming from the “ideologically friendly” source (Turner, 2007). The rationale for the role of source in HMP is rooted in social identity theory: Because news consumers tend to associate news sources with a particular ideology (Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014), and individuals are generally more accepting of information delivered from an ingroup member, sources perceived as like-minded are thought to disarm the perceptual bias that leads partisans to assume news content is undesirably biased. Of course, the information itself matters as well. In their study, Gunther, McLaughlin, Gotlieb, and Wise (2017) presented partisans with slanted and neutral content delivered via friendly or unfriendly sources. They found an inconsistent effect for how source and content interact: Respondents generally spied more bias when the content was deliberately slanted against their side, but the presence of a friendly news source attenuated perceptions of bias only among certain partisan groups (Gunther, McLaughlin, Gotlieb, & Wise, 2017).

Scholars have reasoned that the knowledge of media's reach (Gunther, 1998) and a salience of group identity (Reid, 2012) triggers a defensive processing mechanism that causes partisans to interpret media through their own partisanship. That defensive processing may include several mechanisms: *selective recall*, where partisans recall more negative information about their side; *selective categorization*, where partisans recall similar information but categorize more of the story as being negative toward their side; and *different standards*, where partisans agree on the volume and valence of the content but disagree on what is fair to include (Schmitt & Gunther, 2004). Studies have generally supported the selective categorization explanation best (Gunther & Leibhart, 2006), though studies of mechanisms have been inconclusive (Schmitt, Gunther, & Leibhart, 2004).

#### **Different standards and motivated reasoning**

The different standards explanation for HMP suggests that when audiences are involved in an issue they adjust what they expect from journalists and their stories about the issue. Motivated reasoning would support this explanation because it suggests that partisans are able to discount evidence that would challenge their beliefs and more readily accept evidence that supports their beliefs (Kunda, 1990). The theory of motivated reasoning suggests that people are motivated to avoid believing two contradictory ideas because it increases the cognitive load required to process information and determine the truth (Festinger, 1957). This avoidance of cognitive dissonance motivates audiences to take the simplest path and continue their current beliefs rather than update them.

Motivated reasoning on the basis of political party identification in-groups and out-groups leads to a host of news processing phenomena, including HMP (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013). Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) testing for the mechanisms of HMP found evidence for

the different standards explanation, and suggested that because partisans believe their perspective to be more accurate than others', partisans no longer desire neutral, even-handed coverage. Instead, they expect their beliefs and opinions to be privileged in news coverage. When researchers more recently tested the various mechanisms for HMP, they found that audiences do hold different standards for mass media based on their current beliefs (Schmitt, Gunther, & Leibhart, 2006). Audiences reported that they held different standards for journalism when controlling for the other mechanisms, but those different standards did not explain the observed HMP (Schmitt, Gunther, & Leibhart, 2006). This suggests that the different standards explanation may be a separate phenomenon more closely related to motivated reasoning than HMP.

#### **Anonymous sources and whistleblowers**

Journalists must balance transparency to the audience and protection of their sources, which means that they must at times leave sources unnamed or “veiled” (Carlson, 2011). While this may at times risk journalists' credibility and put them at risk for manipulation by the source, protecting whistleblowers is viewed as a sacred duty (Boeyink, 1990; Culbertson, 1978). Research has shown stories with unnamed sources increase perceived bias or decrease perceived credibility in the news (Sternadori & Thorson, 2009; Sundar, 1998). After high-profile unnamed source scandals in journalism, polls found the majority of Americans are skeptical of unnamed sources (Sager, 2016). More recently partisans have called attention to the use of unnamed sources in political reporting. Audiences seem to be particularly critical when unnamed sources are used to attack members of the opposing political party (Duncan, Culver, McLeod, & Kremmer, 2019).

Our study tests the idea that opposing partisans may have divergent standards for which

details belong in news articles that reveal information about whistleblowers. First, we anticipate that partisans will render higher evaluations of whistleblower stories (e.g., that the story includes relevant, accurate, and unbiased information) when those stories come from a source with a reputation that matches the audience member's own ideological preferences. Similarly, we assume perceivers will judge news articles in a more positive way when those articles focus on potential wrongdoing by a member of the opposing party.

**H1<sub>a</sub>:** Audiences will perceive a news story as higher quality journalism when they have a similar ideology to a news brand than dissimilar ideology.

**H1<sub>b</sub>:** Audiences will perceive a news story as higher quality journalism when they have a similar ideology to a politician at the center of a scandal than dissimilar ideology.

We also consider that partisans may express divergent standards for future stories about whistleblowers after exposure to news articles from ideologically similar/dissimilar sources that focus on in- or out-party politicians. That is, after a liberal sees a story from a left-leaning source that shares details about a source who blew the whistle on a Republican, we want to know if they will be more or less accepting of additional details about the whistleblower in future news stories. While past research has asked participants to report their perceptions of news stories they have already read, this method has made it difficult to disentangle their standards for journalism from the other two suggested mechanisms for HMP: recall and categorization. We suggest that the novel approach of asking audience members what they expect from journalists following up on a news story will be able to more accurately reveal to what extent audiences expect journalists to report on news differently based on the subject of the news and the news source.

**H2<sub>a</sub>:** Partisan audiences will expect more information should be revealed in a future news story than from a partisan news brand than nonpartisans.



**H2b:** Partisan audiences will expect more information be revealed in a future news story about a partisan politician than nonpartisans.

### **Attempts to reduce partisanship and different standards**

Researchers who study media literacy have found success in reducing the chasm between the perceptions of ideological groups by addressing biases directly. When audiences are reminded about the journalistic process, they tend to reduce their perceptions of bias (Vraga, Tully, & Rojas, 2009). Public service announcement messages about news literacy directly before a news story reduced the ratings of HMP toward both the program and host among some groups (Vraga & Tully, 2015). And, these media literacy messages are especially effective at reducing hostility when accompanying partisan messages rather than neutral ones (Tully & Vraga, 2017). If audiences do indeed hold different standards for how journalists should report on a news story based on their current beliefs, research suggests that addressing those beliefs directly may be a way to bring those standards closer.

Similarly, several studies have tested how addressing the journalistic process in a transparent way on the news story itself could alter the perceptions of news readers. Audiences reported that an information box on a news story that explained the journalistic process in making that story increased the perceived trust in that story (Chen, Curry, & Whipple, 2019). These boxes explained why and how a crime story was reported, and graphic elements were used to draw the audience's attention to the box. As a result, readers reported that the news was fairer and less likely to have an agenda (Chen et al., 2019). In a study that tested the extent to which information about the "story behind the story" including what type of reporting was done, audiences who saw only the "behind the story" information said that it would increase their trust in the news (Murray & Stroud, 2020). However, when the researchers embedded the behind the

story information into a news story, audiences did not pay enough attention to the information for it to alter their perceptions.

We suggest a novel approach to reducing the different standards partisans have for journalism: Editor's notes. We suggest that transparency from a news editor about the journalistic process that led to reporting on a news story in a certain way will increase the perceived quality of the journalism among partisans in a way that PSAs (Tully & Vraga, 2017) and information boxes (Chen, Curry, & Whipple, 2019) do. Further, we extend this literature to suggest that a transparent editor's note can affect what audiences expect from a future news story.

**H3<sub>a</sub>:** A transparent editor's note about the extent of the journalistic process in reporting a news story will reduce the gap between partisans' and nonpartisans' perception of the quality of a news story they just read.

**H3<sub>b</sub>:** A transparent editor's note about the extent of the journalistic process in reporting a news story will reduce the gap between partisans' and nonpartisans' expectations of the details in a future news story.

Finally, we ask how the combination of news brand ideology, the ideology of a politician and the transparency of an editor's note will interact to affect the audience's standard for journalism they just read and a future news story.

**RQ1:** How will news brand ideology, the ideology of a politician, and an editor's note interact to affect the audiences' perceptions of quality journalism?

**RQ2:** How will news brand ideology, the ideology of a politician, and an editor's note interact to affect the audiences' standards for what information should be revealed in a future news story?

## Method

### Participants

Participants ( $N=591$ ) living in the United States were recruited from Lucid to participate in an online survey-embedded experiment between February 10 and 13, 2020. Lucid, which provides nationally representative participant pools and results similar to other online samples (Coppock & McClellan, 2019), recruited participants. Participation incentives vary because Lucid gathers participants from 30 providers to deliver a pool that closely matches the U.S. Census. Participants are paid according to their agreement with the provider in cash, gift cards or reward points (Coppock & McClellan, 2019).

The average participant was 45 years old ( $SD=16.5$ ), and had an annual household income between \$40,000 and \$49,999. Participants were 51% female. Participants reported their races as 73% white; 13% black or African-American; 7% Asian or Pacific Islander; and 2% Native American or Alaskan Native. About 11% reported their ethnicity was Hispanic.

Participant partisanship was measured on a 1 (Strong Democrat) to 7 (Strong Republican) scale. Participants were then grouped into Democrats (strong Democrat, Democrat and lean Democrat),  $N=246$ ; Independents,  $N=140$ ; and Republicans (lean Republican, Republicans and strong Republicans),  $N=207$ . See Table 1 and Table 2 for the distributions of participant political identification by condition.

The number of participants needed for this experiment was estimated using an effect size of 0.5 and an alpha value of 0.05. To reach a power of 0.8, 35 participants are needed in each cell. Because this design uses a 3X3X2 design, we estimated we would need 630 participants. The number of participants used in our analysis, fell slightly below that.

## Procedures

The procedures for the experiment were approved Jan. 17, 2020, by the IRB at Virginia Tech. After consenting, all participants watched a 60-second video produced in the style of journalistic news videos where words overlaid photographs to tell the basics of the news story. The video was accompanied by ambient sound not necessary to understand the video. The purpose of the video was to orient the participants to the news issue. The video did not include a news brand insignia nor the political party of the politician. Participants could not move forward in the experiment until the video finished.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to see one of six mock news stories that included the manipulations central to this experiment. After the opportunity to read the news story, participants answered post-test questions about how they perceived the news story they just read and what they would expect to be included in a future news story. Then, participants answered some demographic and sociographic questions. Finally, participants were debriefed that the news story used in the experiment was fabricated.

## Stimulus material

Participants were asked to read a news story about a congressman who had been accused of selling votes because he had large gambling debts. The accusations came to light through an unnamed whistleblower in the government. The politician denies the accusations. Participants were told that although some had called for the politician's resignation, he remained in office. All participants were given the same facts about the scandal regardless of condition. While the video that all participants saw explained the background of the scandal, the news story introduced new information about the identity of the whistleblower. The news story explained that the whistleblower was a "he," that the whistleblower worked at the FBI and was investigating a

gambling ring when he discovered the congressman's scheme to sell votes. Finally, it explained the process through which the whistleblower reported the congressman's actions anonymously.

The news story did not name the whistleblower. See *Appendix A*.

### **News brand condition**

Participants were randomly assigned to read the text news story on the purported website of either (1) MSNBC or (2) Fox News Channel. The websites of these cable news channels were chosen because of their reputations for partisanship. Each news brand condition included the name of the cable news channel, the fonts used on their website, and the general layout of a web news story. The text headline and body text of the news stories were the same regardless of the news brand condition.

### **Politician condition**

The politician at the center of the scandal was either a member of the (1) Democratic or (2) Republican party, depending on the condition the participant was randomly assigned. The party affiliation was mentioned in the headline and again in the body of the story.

### **Editor's note condition**

All stimulus material included one of two versions of an editor's note. The purpose of the editor's note is to provide transparency to the journalistic process by which the news brand decided to publish information about the identity of the whistleblower. The (1) heuristic version of the editor's note is 38 words and explains that the editors considered the potential consequences of publishing information about the whistleblower and ultimately decided in favor of it. The (2) elaborated version of the editor's note is 287 words and explains who was involved in the decision to publish the information, the steps the story went through before publication, and the justification for publication.

**Variable construction**

**News brand match.** News brand match was constructed by matching the participant's partisanship with the news brand of the stimulus that the participant was shown. The participants who were shown a news brand with a reputation of partisanship that matches how the participant identified were grouped in the Similar News Brand category. The participants who were shown a news brand with a reputation of partisanship that did not match how the participant identified were grouped in the Dissimilar News Brand category.

**Politician match.** Politician match was constructed by matching the participant's partisanship with the politician of the stimulus that the participant was shown. The participants who were shown a news story featuring a politician identified as a member of the same political party were grouped in the Similar Politician category. The participants who were shown a news story featuring a politician identified as a member of the opposing political party were grouped in the Dissimilar Politician category.

**Reveal details scale.** To measure to what extent participants had different standards for what should be included in a future news story, participants were asked to rate how reasonable on a scale of 1 (not at all reasonable) to 5 (very reasonable) to include four details about the whistleblower in a future news story: (1) the name of the whistleblower, (2) the city where the whistleblower lives, (3) the political party affiliation of the whistleblower and (4) the names of the whistleblower's attorneys. Participants' answers to the four items were averaged to create a different standards scale ( $M=3.04$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ) where 1 indicated it was unreasonable to reveal whistleblower details in the future and 5 indicated it was very reasonable to include those details in the future. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.874.

**Quality journalism scale.** To measure to what extent participants perceived the news story

differently, participants were asked to estimate the percentage of the news story they saw that was (1) inaccurate, (2) journalist's opinion, and (3) irrelevant. The scale was then reverse coded. The estimated percentages were averaged to create a scale ( $M=57.08$ ,  $SD=22.95$ ) where zero percent was poor journalism and 100 percent was quality journalism. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.750.

## Results

### Manipulation check

To check the extent to which participants correctly recalled the manipulations that were key to our independent variables, we asked two manipulation check questions after all dependent variables were measured. Participants were more likely to answer each of the manipulation checks correctly than incorrectly. When asked to recall which news brand was reporting the scandal story they saw, 72% answered correctly. Additionally, participants answered a question about whether the editor's note included bulleted points. This question was used to gauge whether the editor's note was short or elaborated. Here, we found participants answered the question correctly 55% of the time. We found that most of the incorrect answers (63%) were among those who were assigned to the short editor's note. When the participants who passed the manipulation checks were removed, the study was not significantly powered to find interactions.<sup>1</sup> The initial editor's manipulation check caused concern, and prompted a second data collection, launched in March 2021. This addition included a rephrased manipulation check question that asked 120 new participants to estimate the length of the editor's note. With this revised question, 61% answered correctly, as evidenced in Appendix B.

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<sup>1</sup> When considering only the participants who passed the manipulation checks ( $N=239$ ), there was a significant main effect for the editor's note on the "reveal details" dependent variable so that those who saw the elaborated editor's note wanted more details reveals ( $M=3.14$ ) than those who saw the short editor's note ( $M=2.45$ ),  $F(1, 22)=21.45$ ,  $p<.001$ . There were no other main effects for either dependent variable. See Appendix B, Tables 1 & 2.

While the second data collection improved the manipulation check “pass rate,” it still suggests participants were unable to recall the details of the editor’s note. We decided to include the participants who failed the manipulation check in the analysis because the manipulation check was measured after the manipulation, and removing incorrect answers would invalidate randomization (Hoewe, 2017). Mutz (2011) argues that a significant manipulation check is evidence enough to justify its inclusion. Recent analysis suggests dropping subjects who fail a manipulation check introduces statistical bias and can find effects where there are none (Aronow, Baron, & Pinson, 2019; Mutz, 2011).

### **Hypotheses testing**

To test the set hypotheses and research question that assessed to what degree audiences had different standards for the news they just read, an ANOVA model included news match, politician match, and editor’s note conditions as independent variables and the quality journalism index was the dependent variable. The model was significant,  $F(9, 577)=3.15, p=.001, \eta p^2=.032$ , and revealed a significant interaction between the editor’s note condition and the news match condition,  $F(1, 577)=4.06, p=.044, \eta p^2=.007$ . See Table 3. Tests for main effects with Bonferroni correction further revealed a main effect for news match  $F(2, 577)=8.49, p<.001, \eta p^2=.032$ ; and for politician match,  $F(2, 577)=9.13, p<.001, \eta p^2=.031$ . There was no main effect of the editor’s note condition. Post-hoc tests with corrections for multiple comparisons show that independents perceived the news to be a higher quality than either participants with similar ideologies to the news brand ( $MD=10.48, SE=2.41, p<.001$ , or dissimilar ideologies to the news brand ( $MD=7.39, SE=2.46, p=.008$ . Additionally, independents perceived the news story to be of higher quality than those with similar ideology to the news brand ( $MD=8.11, SE=2.45, p=.003$ ; or those with a dissimilar ideology to the news brand ( $MD=9.57, SE=2.42, p<.001$ . These results



indicate the relationship between the ideology of the participant and the news brand and between the participant and the politician affects how audiences perceive the news story, though the effect size is considered small. This offers support for H1a and H1b. While there was no support for the main effect predicted in H3a regarding a main effect of the editor's note, there was support for an interaction, answering RQ1. Means suggest that the elaborated editor's note condition increased the perception that the story was quality journalism for independents, but decreased that perception when the participants had a dissimilar ideology than both the news brand and the politician. See Figure 1.

To test the second set of hypotheses and the research question regarding different standards for a future news story, we used an ANOVA where news match, politician match and editor's note conditions were independent variables and the reveal details scale was the dependent variable. The model was significant,  $F(9, 583)=2.12, p=.026, \eta^2=.032$ , and revealed a significant interaction between the editor's note condition and the news brand match,  $F(1,583)=4.19, p=.041, \eta^2=.0007$ . See Table 4. Tests for main effects with Bonferroni correction further reveal a main effect of news match,  $F(2, 583)=4.07, p=.018; \eta^2=.029$ ; and politician match,  $F(2, 583)=4.7, p=.009; \eta^2=.031$ . There was no main effect of the editor's note condition. The effect sizes for the main effects are considered small. Post-hoc tests with corrections for multiple comparisons show that participants with dissimilar ideologies to the politician wanted journalists to reveal more details about the whistleblower than independents ( $MD=.37, SE=.12, p=.008$ ); and that independents wanted journalists to reveal fewer details about the whistleblower than both those who had a similar ideology to the news brand ( $MD=-.31, SE=.12, p=.034$ ) and those with a dissimilar ideology to the news brand ( $MD=-.31, SE=.12, p=.035$ ). These results indicate the relationship between the participants' ideology and the

ideology of the news brand and the politician at the center of the scandal altered the standards of what the audiences wanted included in future journalism. These results provide support for H2a and H2b. While there was no main effect of the editor's note to support H3c, there is support for an interaction between the editor's note and the news brand match, answering RQ2. Means suggest that while the editor's note condition had no effect on what details about the whistleblower participants who shared an ideology with the news brand wanted revealed, it did have an effect, though small, on those who had a dissimilar ideology from the news brand. This effect was particularly pronounced when the participants had dissimilar ideology from the politician as well. See Figure 2.

### Discussion

In the past several years, the role of whistleblowers in the public sphere has gained renewed prominence and become the source of controversy in journalism. This sets the stage to study this real-world phenomenon while expanding theory about how partisans adjust their standards for current and future journalism based on their political identity. Here, we test an intervention that could be used to decrease the gap between what partisans expect from journalism and increase the credibility of reporting on whistleblowers. Research has shown that unnamed sources are less likely to be trusted by the audience (Boeyink, 1990; Duncan, Culver, McLeod, & Kremmer, 2019), potentially cutting credibility. By testing the effect of an editor's note on partisans, this study tested a simple instrument that could alter standards for future journalistic practices.

The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent audiences have different standards for journalism based on the relationships between their own political identity, the news brand, and the politician at the center of a scandal. The current literature on hostile media

perception shows conflicting evidence for the mechanisms that cause it (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Schmitt, Gunther, & Leibhart, 2006). The extent to which audiences have different expectations for what constitutes “quality journalism” in something they just read and in a future news story would help explain why audiences criticize news media and aid in understanding one of the proposed mechanisms of HMP. While this study did not directly test HMP, it found evidence that audiences not only perceive the quality of journalism they just read differently based on their partisan identities, but they also have different expectations of what future journalism should reveal. The size of these effects is considered small, but the directionality of it comports with existing literature. These results contribute to the literature on HMP by providing evidence that because motivated reasoning biases audiences (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Kunda, 1990), “fair” journalism will be seen as poor quality.

### **Quality Journalism Index**

First, this study looked at how audiences perceived the news story they just read when the ideology of the news brand and the politician at the center of the whistleblowing scandal was manipulated. Audiences reported both of these variables had main effects on their perception of the news story quality so that when the audience member’s ideology matched the ideology of the news brand and was dissimilar from the politician at the center of the scandal, audiences asserted the journalism was of higher quality. This means that when a dissimilar news brand reports a news story about a co-partisan politician who is accused of wrongdoing, audiences judge that story to be of poor quality and have given themselves a reason to dismiss the accusation.

However, the addition of an elaborated editor’s note that added transparency to the journalistic process improved the perception of quality journalism among those who shared an ideology with the news brand and among independents. These findings are noteworthy considering that the

addition of an editor's note on two news brands with a reputation for ideological bias improved how independents thought about the news story.

There was also a significant difference between the quality journalism scale and news brand match holding the content of the news the same. This provides additional evidence that audiences expect different journalistic practices based solely on the reputation of the news brand presenting the news. While HMP literature has found robust evidence that audiences on both sides of an issue will perceive the same content to be biased against them (Feldman, 2011; Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Leibhart, 2006; Vallone et al., 1985), this study provides evidence that political ideological audiences will rate the quality of the same news differently. Ideology of both the news brand and the politician at the center of the scandal were also shown to alter the perceived quality of journalism, suggesting audiences will criticize journalism they just read differently – not based on the actual quality of the journalism – but rather based on the ideological lens through which they read the story. Consistent with previous work on how both content and source cues impact perceptions of bias (Gunther et al., 2017), our results demonstrate that delivering information via a friendly source is not necessarily enough to consistently disarm the defensive processing of mediated content.

Next, audiences reported their standards for a future journalism news story. Results suggest that what details audiences expect from in a follow-up news story is context dependent. Participants with dissimilar political ideologies to the politician wanted more information revealed about the whistleblower than independents. This finding supports the theory that audiences develop different standards for journalism based on their ideologies; audiences with ideologies dissimilar to a news brand require more information to improve credibility.

This study's findings suggest that the editor's note did not have a main effect on the

perception of quality journalism. Transparency alone did not increase the audience's evaluations; however, it did interact with the ideology of the audience, the politician and the news brands to increase the evaluations of the news story by independents. Further, a more transparent editor's note interacted with the audience's ideological match with the news brand and the politician to have an effect on opinions about what details should be revealed in the future.

It is also noteworthy that those with dissimilar political ideologies sought more information on the whistleblower as opposed to independents. This could be due to partisans wanting more negative information regarding the opposing party, or could also signal that they have a higher need for cognition. Because the editor's note was particularly effective at improving perceptions of quality journalism regarding a news story audience, and it did not harm what audiences expected in the future, these results suggest that transparency about the journalistic process is helpful in fostering relationships with audiences.

### **Limitations**

This experiment was designed to test the different standards audiences have for journalism while exploring the real-world reactions to journalistic reporting on unnamed whistleblowers in political scandals. While we believe this study sheds important light on these two prongs, the findings of this experiment have their limitations. Perhaps foremost in the limitations was the lack of control conditions for our three main independent variables. To simplify the experiment, the conditions we designed used news brands with strong ideological reputations, and politicians who were given clear political party labels. These results cannot speak to how audiences would have reacted to a more-neutral news source like the Associated Press or stories about a non-political bureaucrat.

While the findings that show effects on the audience of the editor's note are promising, this manipulation has its limitations. All audiences read a version of an editor's note, and we did not test a control condition without one. While we found the elaborated editor's note had additional effects when compared to a heuristic editor's note, we cannot explain the consequences of not including any editor's note. Further, the manipulation check regarding the length of the editor's note had a lower pass rate. A second data collection increased the number of participants who answered correctly, but it is clear that the audience was not able to recall details of the editor's note with a high degree of accuracy. This may be part of a trend in news credibility research that finds audiences are not paying attention to the credibility cues news organizations are providing (Curry & Stroud, 2019; Masullo, Curry, Whipple, & Murray, 2021). For example, audiences who saw a "Behind the Story" box with information told researchers that it would increase their perception of credibility, but it did little to increase news credibility when it was embedded in news story across three studies (Masullo, Curry, Whipple, & Murray, 2021). The researchers, who saw similar manipulation check results (82% in one case and 52% in another), suggests these types of credibility cues must be very pronounced to the audience to have any influence. Future research should vary the type and placement of editors' notes to investigate differing effects. Additionally, researchers who find audiences do not pay attention to credibility cues should continue to report this research as to avoid the "file drawer" problem and aid news organizations about what does not work.

Finally, we note that, as with all one-shot experiments, we know little about the long-term effects of these manipulations. The news story used in this one-shot experiment was fabricated. Audiences likely would react differently to a news story about a politician of whom they had past knowledge. We note that the whistleblower and the politician in the news story

were men, and we're unable to say how audiences would react to women. Many news readers would not as carefully read a story about little-known politicians, and perhaps this is reflected in the correct response rate of our manipulation check. The data reported here were also collected at a time when a whistleblower was in the news connected to the impeachment of then-President Donald Trump. The second data collection in March 2021 should help to allay concerns that the results were limited to one moment in time. Though the second data collection was too small to measure interaction effects, confidence intervals were similar. See Appendix B.

### **Theoretical implications**

This experiment addressed both the different standards that audiences have for journalism based on their relationship with the news brand and the politician at the center of a scandal and an intervention to temper the partisan reactions to those news stories. It introduced two novel ways of researching how partisan audiences perceive journalism. First, it used a measurement of what audiences expect from a future news story and compared it with their reactions to the news story they just read. Second, it used a previously untested intervention – editor's note – to alter those different standards.

The results, which suggest that audiences have different standards for the journalism they just read and what they expect for future journalism, provide further evidence for the different standards explanation of HMP (Schmitt, Gunther, & Leibhart, 2006). While audiences may categorize information differently and recall information differently, we found here that they also expect different details to be revealed to the audience based on the relationship between the audience's ideology and the news brand's ideology. This suggests that audiences may see news as biased against their views because they are motivated to "raise the bar" to avoid the cognitive dissonance that would be required to see journalism by a news brand they disagree with as

“quality.”

Additionally, these results provide for media literacy scholars additional evidence that reminding audiences of the journalistic process can improve perceptions of the quality of journalism (Vraga, Tully, & Rojas, 2009). The editor’s note used here incorporated graphic design elements to draw the audience’s attention and elaborated transparency about the editorial process used to determine that revealing some details about the whistleblower was the right thing to do. Like past studies that used graphic design elements to draw attention to transparency tools (Chen, Curry, & Whipple, 2019), we found the editor’s note increased perceptions of quality journalism. Additionally, we found that explaining the process increased the number of details that those with a dissimilar ideology from the news brand would want a news brand to reveal in the future.

We do not suggest that these findings provide evidence that different standards are the sole explanation for HMP. Indeed, we did not test HMP directly. Therefore, future research should explore to what extent different standards explanations are correlated with HMP, and what portion of HMP is due to different standards, and to what extent different standards and HMP may be separate processes.

### **Practical implications**

These results have practical implications for news editors who are considering coverage of political issues, who manage news brands with ideological reputations, or who are assessing audience criticism of journalism. The intervention used in this study – the editor’s note – is a practical and relatively simple way for news brands to alter the perceptions the audience holds of a controversial story. Here, an elaborated and transparent editor’s note had a significant effect on how independents saw the news story they just read. It also increased the number of details



audience members with dissimilar ideologies to the news brand wanted from a future story. These findings were despite a low correct response rate in a manipulation check regarding the length of the editor's note. Subsequently, editors in news organizations should consider policies that employ more use of editor's notes to transparently explain processes journalists use to report on a story without partisan bias. The note used in this study was factual and detailed, and we encourage more newsrooms to include this type of information simultaneous to the news reported instead of in a separate webpage or buried at the bottom of a story.

Additionally, the findings indicate that what audiences say they expect from journalism is biased by the audience's own ideology. Some audience members may decry a decision made by a news brand not because of an unwavering sense of journalism ethics, but because of the way they have raised or lowered their expectations to avoid cognitive dissonance. At its most practical, this study suggests that whether an audience member believes journalists should reveal the name and political ideology of a whistleblower changes based on the news brand doing the news reporting and the politician at the center of the scandal. This context-dependent expectation can explain to some extent public opinion news credibility. Audiences may have context-dependent standards for what they consider "fair" coverage, which can make it difficult for newsroom leaders to listen to audience feedback and make an ethical decision. Ultimately, these findings complement HMP research by suggesting that no journalistic decision will be perceived as fair by the full spectrum of audience members. Audiences who see news stories or news brands hostile to their views expect the scales of journalism to be tipped in their favor.

Audiences who see news stories or news brands in line with their worldview are pleased with the news and expect less from future journalism.

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## Tables

**Table 1.***Randomized viewing of stimulus by participant*

Participant identification	Viewed MSNBC	Viewed Fox News	Viewed Democratic politician stimulus	Viewed Republican politician stimulus
Democratic	115	131	128	118
Independent	82	58	68	72
Republican	102	105	96	111

**Table 2.***Distribution of participants by condition*

Condition	News brand match	Politician match
Similar	220	239
Independent	140	140
Dissimilar	233	214

**Table 3.***Audience perceptions of quality journalism*

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	$\eta p^2$
Corrected Model	14455.88	9	1606.21	3.15	0.001	0.05
Intercept	1902599.2	1	1902599.2	3731.66	<.001	0.87
Editor note	223.47	1	223.47	0.44	0.508	0.001
News match	280.96	1	280.96	0.55	0.458	0.001
Politician match	834.35	1	834.35	1.64	0.201	0.003
Editor*News match	2070.87	1	2070.87	4.06	0.044	0.007

Editor*Politician Match	461.24	1	461.24	0.91	0.342	0.002
News match*Politician match	122.91	1	122.91	0.24	0.624	<.001
Three-way interaction	835.16	1	835.16	1.64	0.201	0.003
Error	294185.25	577	509.85			
Total	2221261.03	587				
Corrected Total	308641.13	586				

$R^2 = .047$  ( $Adj. R^2 = .032$ )

**Table 4.***Audience expectations of future news*

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	$\eta p^2$
Corrected Model	24.34	9	2.71	2.12	0.026	0.032
Intercept	5286.28	1	5286.28	4146.70	0	0.877
Editor note	2.43	1	2.43	1.90	0.168	0.003
Politician match	1.83	1	1.83	1.44	0.231	<.001
News match	0	1	0	0	0.989	0.002
Editor * Politician match	0.69	1	0.69	0.55	0.46	0.007
Editor * News match	5.34	1	5.34	4.19	0.041	0.001
Politician match * News match	0.70	1	0.70	0.55	0.458	0.001
Three-way interaction	2.74	1	2.74	2.15	0.143	0.004
Error	743.22	583	1.28			
Total	6237.38	593				
Corrected Total	767.58	592				

$R^2 = .032$  ( $Adj. R^2 = .017$ )



Figures

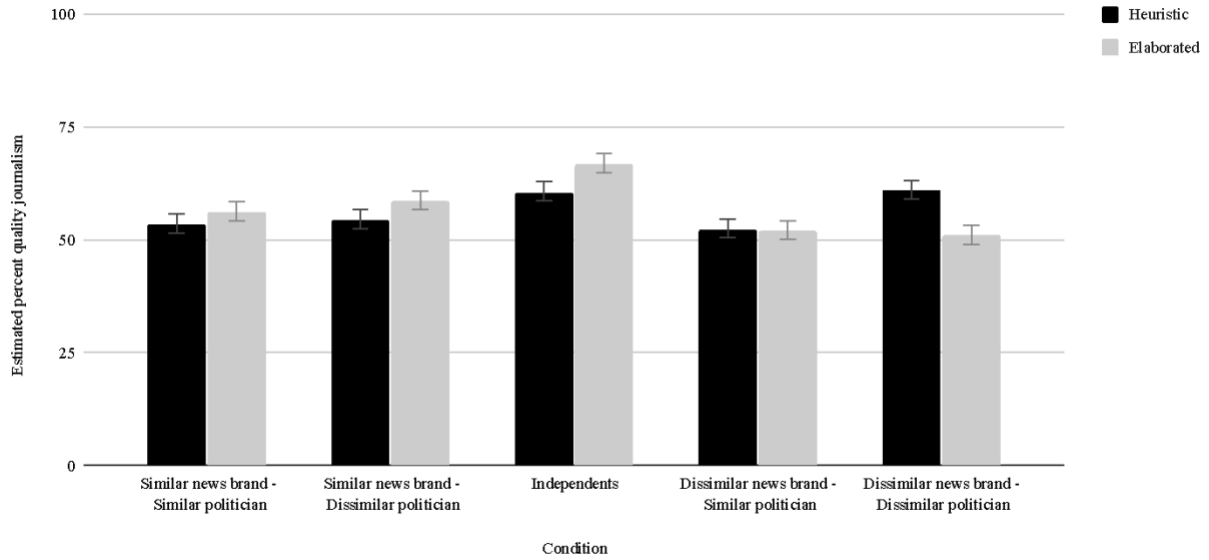


Figure 1. The effect of editor’s note, news brand match, and politician match on audience perception of the quality of the news story.

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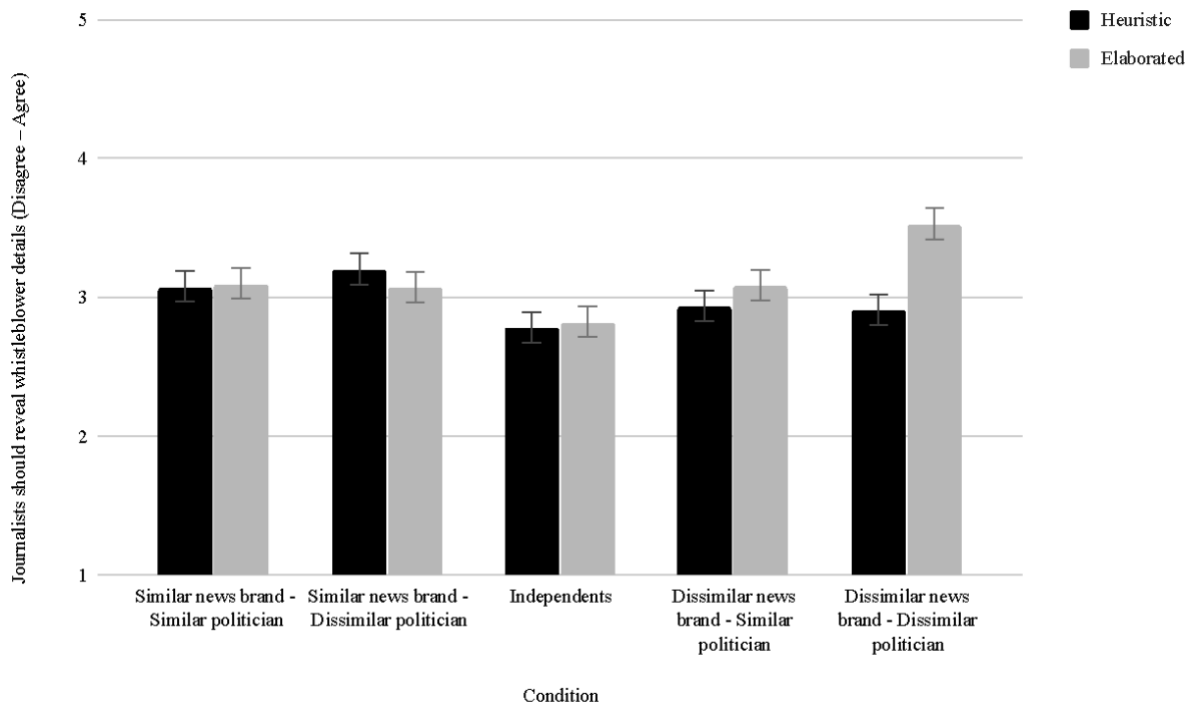


Figure 2. The effect of editor's note, news brand match, and politician match on audience standards for a future news story.

## Appendix A

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**Whistleblower who revealed GOP rep's vote selling is an FBI agent**

02/05/20 09:20 AM

By [Steve Mark](#)

WASHINGTON — MSNBC has learned the identity of an FBI special agent who filed a whistleblower complaint against Todd Johnson, a Republican congressman accused of accepting selling his votes to pay off a gambling debt. MSNBC exclusively can report that whistleblower was investigating a gambling ring when he discovered Johnson's involvement. When he told his bosses what he learned, he says he was told to ignore the information and leave it out of documentation or indictments.

This is the first time it is reported that the whistleblower worked directly on the investigation for the FBI. The special agent first shared information about Johnson with the FBI's top lawyer through an anonymous process. The lawyer shared the officer's concerns with Justice Department officials, following policy. Around the same time, the special agent separately filed the whistleblower complaint.

The revelations provide new insight about how the special agent's allegations moved through the bureaucracy of government. Justice's handling of the accusations is certain to be scrutinized, particularly by lawmakers. MSNBC is revealing the whistleblower's employment and involvement in the investigation so that his motivations and credibility can be assessed by the public.

Lawyers for the whistleblower refused to confirm that he worked for the FBI and said that publishing information about him was dangerous.

"Any decision to report any perceived identifying information of the whistleblower is deeply concerning and reckless, as it can place the individual in harm's way," said Michael Baker, his lead counsel. "The whistleblower has a right to anonymity."

Neither Johnson nor the FBI responded to requests for comment.

**MSNBC editor's note:**

Federal law protects the anonymity of those who use the formal process of filing a whistleblower complaint to expose wrongdoing within the government. We believe that whistleblowers have the right to keep their identity secret through this process. We also believe that sunshine is the best disinfectant. That made the decision about reporting on this story a difficult one for those inside the MSNBC newsroom. We want to be transparent about how we made the decision to report the details we did and withhold other details.

- When the team of reporters told the first editors at MSNBC that they had identifying information about the whistleblower, the team joined a meeting where we went over how they got the information and assessed the quality of the information.
- Next, we consulted with our ombudsman, our on-staff ethics guru.
- The team then wrote a draft of the story.
- A draft of the story was given to our legal team, which cleared it.
- The story draft was then taken to an editorial leadership meeting where printing the identifying information was debated. Some in the room thought publishing the information could give Johnson and his supporters enough to personally identify the special agent. That they said, could result in political pressure on him.

If details in our story were used to specifically identify the whistleblower, we considered the possible threat to his life in addition to his career.

Ultimately, the leadership team decided on the story you see here. Journalism is about seeking the truth and providing what's needed for ordinary citizens to make informed decisions. We strive to do this while also minimizing harm to individuals who expose corruption.

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Stimulus for MSNBC/GOP politician/elaborated note condition

FOX NEWS · Published 57 mins ago · Last Update 43 mins ago

# Whistleblower who revealed Democratic rep's vote selling is an FBI agent

By Steve Mark | Fox News



Fox News Channel has learned the identity of an FBI special agent who filed a whistleblower complaint against Todd Johnson, a Democratic congressman accused of accepting selling his votes to pay off a gambling debt. Fox exclusively can report that the whistleblower was investigating a gambling ring when he discovered Johnson's involvement. When he told his bosses what he learned, he says he was told to ignore the information and leave it out of documentation or indictments.

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"Any decision to report any perceived identifying information of the whistleblower is deeply concerning and reckless, as it can place the individual in harm's way," said Michael Baker, his lead counsel. "The whistleblower has a right to anonymity."

Neither Johnson nor the FBI responded to requests for comment.

### Fox News editor's note:

Federal law protects the anonymity of those who use the formal process of filing a whistleblower complaint to expose wrongdoing within the government. We believe that whistleblowers have the right to keep their identity secret through this process.

Journalism is about seeking the truth and providing what's needed for ordinary citizens to make informed decisions. We strive to do this while also minimizing harm to individuals who expose corruption. This was a tough call. We believe we made the right one.

This was a tough call.

We believe we made the right one.

Stimulus for Fox News/Democratic politician/heuristic note condition

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## Appendix B

**Table 1.**

*Audience perceptions of quality journalism among the participants who passed the manipulation checks (N=239)*

Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Corrected Model	9	1.64	0.105
Intercept	1	1673.84	<.001
Editor note	1	2.9	0.09
News match	1	0.98	0.326
Politician match	1	0.98	0.324
Editor*News match	1	.00	0.95
Editor*Politician Match	1	2.32	0.129
News match*Politician match	1	0.29	0.95
Three-way interaction	1	1.64	0.589
Error	226		
Total	236		
Corrected Total	235		

**Table 2.**

*Audience standards for future journalism among the participants who passed the manipulation checks (N=239)*

Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Corrected Model	9	3.34	0.001
Intercept	1	1462.32	<.001
Editor note	1	21.45	<.001
News match	1	0.02	0.875
Politician match	1	1.93	0.166
Editor*News match	1	.16	0.691
Editor*Politician Match	1	.87	0.352
News match*Politician match	1	.36	0.549
Three-way interaction	1	1.62	0.205
Error	229		
Total	239		
Corrected Total	238		

**Table 3.***Additional manipulation check question from March 2021 data collection*

Estimate of words in the editor's note (manipulation check)	Assigned editors' note condition	
	Short	Elaborated
100 words	36	22
Percent correct within manipulation	59%	
300 words	25	36
Percent correct within manipulation		62%

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**Table 4.**

*Comparison of confidence intervals between February 2020 data and March 2021 data for dependent variable “quality journalism”*

News match	Politician match	Editor	February 2020 (N=591)			March 2021 (N=120)		
			M	SE	95% CI	M	SE	95% CI
Similar	Similar	Short	53.57	3.05	47.59-59.55	66.60	8.94	48.87-84.33
		Elaborated	56.33	2.85	50.74-61.91	57.06	7.63	41.94-72.18
	Dissimilar	Short	54.55	3.13	48.40-60.70	47.88	7.3	33.4-62.35
		Elaborated	58.72	3.26	52.32-65.12	48.01	7.02	34.14-61.96
Dissimilar	Similar	Short	52.5	3.07	46.47-58.53	50.97	6.53	43.92-69.81
		Elaborated	52.11	2.82	46.56-57.65	48.06	7.02	34.14-61.96
	Dissimilar	Short	61.07	2.94	55.3-66.85	50.08	6.53	37.13-63.03
		Elaborated	51.12	3.10	45.03-57.21	49.04	7.3	34.57-63.52
Independents	Independents	Short	60.72	2.7	55.42-66.02	56.87	6.53	43.92-69.82
		Elaborated	67.02	2.72	61.68-72.36	57.54	8.94	39.81-75.27

**Table 5.**

*Comparison of confidence intervals between February 2020 data and March 2021 data for dependent variable “reveal details”*

News match	Politician match	Editor	February 2020 (N=591)			March 2021 (N=120)		
			M	SE	95% CI	M	SE	95% CI
Similar	Similar	Short	3.08	.15	2.78-3.37	3.25	.41	2.43-4.07
		Elaborated	3.10	.14	2.82-3.38	3.54	.33	2.88-4.21
	Dissimilar	Short	3.20	.16	2.9-3.51	3.65	.33	2.98-4.31
		Elaborated	3.08	.16	2.75-3.39	3.54	.32	2.89-4.18
Dissimilar	Similar	Short	2.94	.15	2.64-3.24	2.48	.35	1.78-3.17
		Elaborated	3.09	.14	2.81-3.36	3	.34	2.33-4.21

	Dissimilar	Short	2.91	.14	2.82-3.38	3.12	.30	2.52-3.71
		Elaborated	3.52	.15	3.22-3.83	3.06	.34	2.39-3.73
Independents	Independents	Short	2.78	.13	2.52-3.05	2.53	.30	1.94-3.13
		Elaborated	2.82	.14	2.56-3.39	2.56	.39	1.79-3.33

Accepted Version