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Social Studies Teacher Perceptions of News Source Credibility

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Abstract

Politically tumultuous times have created a problematic space for teachers who include the news in their classrooms. Few studies have explored perceptions of news credibility among secondary social studies teachers, the educators most likely to regularly incorporate news media into their classrooms. We investigated teachers' operational definitions of credibility and the relationships between political ideology and assessments of news source credibility. Most teachers in this study used either static or dynamic definitions to describe news media sources' credibility. Further, teachers' conceptualizations of credibility and perceived ideological differences with news sources were associated with how credible teachers found each source. These results indicate potential inconsistencies in how news credibility is defined and possible political bias in which sources social studies teachers use as exemplars of credibility.

Keywords: media, mixed-methods, politics, psychology, qualitative research, regression analyses, social studies education, teacher characteristics

Since the 2016 election, there has been a significant uptick in critiques and attacks on news media. Although critiques of sloppy reporting and misleading news on the Internet are justified, many attacks on the news media in the current political environment are likely motivated by political gain and a desire to promote mistrust of media institutions. These efforts to discredit media institutions have found fertile ground in a politically divided

society. Individuals frequently tend to dismiss or discount information that does not fit with their worldviews (Lord et al., 1979) and reason in ways that tend to confirm rather than challenge their preexisting opinions (Kunda, 1990). The confluence of several developments in public discourse adds to this troubling landscape, including disagreement about the substance of facts and interpretations of data, the conflation and prioritization of personal opinion over fact, and waning trust in traditional sources of factual information (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). These phenomena have undermined democratic institutions and weakened society's capacity to engage in productive dialogue. In a time of increasing attacks on news media, hardening political polarization, and vitriolic national discourse, it is crucial for education researchers to understand how teachers and students are engaging with the news.

The research presented in this article resulted from an effort to understand the fraught terrain of political discourse around issues of credibility and bias in the news media and the relationship of these attacks and educational practices. The current media situation has significant pedagogical implications, especially in social studies, where best practices include the regular integration of news and current events into the curriculum (e.g., Lipscomb & Doppen, 2013; National Council for the Social Studies, 2005). However, little is known about social studies teachers' notions of news media credibility, and less still is known about those views in a climate in which the credibility of mainstream media outlets have been undermined. How do social studies teachers navigate news media in their classrooms in light of accusations that the media are the "enemy" (e.g., Sinclair, 2018)?

The exploration of these challenges is hampered by the absence of research documenting teachers' definitions of credibility and how those perceptions shape their selection of credible sources for their students. If teachers judge the credibility of a news source based on its agreement with their preexisting opinions, like people in the general population often do (D. Kelly, 2019), their political identifications will affect which sources teachers present to students as credible. This study seeks to explore which news sources secondary school social studies teachers perceive as credible, how they define credibility, and the extent to which their political ideologies are correlated with their perceptions of news media sources.

Credibility and Perceptions of Media

News media credibility is a contested concept. Among journalists, credibility is established by adherence to specific practices that, although not guaranteed to provide truth, produce information that is of public interest and factual to the highest degree possible. A recent handbook from UNESCO notes that journalistic ethics and standards are the foundations of news credibility (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 21). Media scholars who research credibility have considered many indicators to determine what readers and watchers see as credible. In their review of credibility research literature, Appelman and Sundar (2016) described the use of frameworks that address a wide range of qualities. For example, one study focused on competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999) as the basis of credibility whereas another focused on concepts like fairness, absence of bias, concern for community, and trained reporters (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986) as indicators of

credibility. In their 2016 study of news credibility indicators, Appelman and Sundar distinguished between indicators that contribute to credibility (including measures of quality, expertise, and fairness) and indicators that reflect credibility (e.g., accuracy, authenticity, and believability). A consistent finding across media research, however, was that the assessment of credibility is an individual process based on several cognitive and social factors as opposed to disciplinary tools of analysis.

These studies indicate that determining news credibility is a complex, contested process, even for media scholars. Although we recognize that there is not a singular, objective way that teachers ought to be teaching their students to become discerning readers of news sources, we do believe that some ways of approaching this topic are more productive than others. In this study, we approached the consideration of social studies teachers' views of news credibility with the understanding that their capacity to recognize the complex systems at play in presenting the news would contribute productively to their use of news sources in the classroom. In other words, if educators want to create student learning opportunities that contribute to students' capacities to think about complicated processes—like determining the difference between credible and unreliable sources—then teachers need to understand and acknowledge the complexity of making and interpreting the news. Pedagogical encounters that avoid simplified notions of news journalists' roles and responsibilities are more likely to foster interactions with news that, for example, resist characterizations of news as “fake” if reporting is not aligned with previously held beliefs. As such, we assumed that social studies teachers who recognized that gathering and reporting news are complicated endeavors would be better able to guide students' engagement with news sources in productive ways.

Social and political psychologists have found that objective source evaluation is difficult. Kunda (1990), in a review of literature on motivated reasoning, noted that individuals are often driven by numerous nonrational factors when thinking and reasoning, especially when they have an emotional stake in the outcome. Lodge and Taber (2013) argue that the emotive processes that accompany human rational thinking exert subconscious influences on the course of reasoning. Experimental studies (Kahneman, 2011; Lodge & Taber, 2005) demonstrate that emotive and heuristic systems in the brain respond more quickly than rational systems, suggesting that logical thought processes are influenced by these initial emotional reactions. Work on implicit bias (see Gawronski et al., 2015, for a review) suggests that associations that run counter to existing opinions and perceptions are processed more slowly than those that conform to them. One of the more powerful motivators of biased reasoning processes is an individual's social identity (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals who strongly identify with a social or political group are more likely to trust information that affirms their identity rather than information that might cause cognitive dissonance (see also Haidt, 2012).

These processes can lead individuals to lend more credence to evidence and sources that support their particular side of the political spectrum (Lord et al., 1979). Researchers in media studies, communications, psychology, and political science have highlighted relationships between an individual's political beliefs and their perceptions of media. Confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and selective exposure has only increased as news media sources proliferate (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Nickerson, 1998).

For example, those with a political ideology often gravitate toward sources they perceive as friendly. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) asked 1,023 participants to choose among news stories with randomly assigned source labels. Conservatives in their sample gravitated toward stories on Fox News, whereas liberals preferred NPR or CNN. Individual politics also sway perceptions of which stories are newsworthy. Pashler and Heriot (2018) found that partisans in their study ($n = 569$) tended to judge stories as more newsworthy when the events described aligned with a partisan viewpoint.

D. Kelly (2019) has noted that individuals also judge the credibility of the news based on content. D. Kelly's experimental study of 701 self-identified Democratic and Republican partisans found that they judged the bias and credibility of an unfamiliar source based on its agreement with their preexisting opinions. People, even partisans, have an expressed desire for credible and unbiased news, but their perceptions of both concepts were determined via comparison with their preconceived notions (D. Kelly, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Recent years have seen an erosion of public trust in the media. A 2017 Gallup/Knight survey found that fewer Americans believe that the media are careful when separating fact from opinion: 32% in 2017, down from 58% in 1984 (Jones & Ritter, 2018). The same survey reported that 45% of respondents saw "a great deal" of political bias in the news, although those perceptions were not distributed evenly among political partisans. Republicans were far more likely than Democrats to respond that there was a great deal of political bias in the media. A 2018 Monmouth University poll reported that 77% of respondents believed the news media reported fake news at least some of the time, and 42% believed that fake news was reported in service of a political agenda (Monmouth University Polling Institute, 2018).

Teachers, like the general population, are likely subject to cognitive biases that sway their judgments surrounding current events and controversial issues in the classroom, including which news sources are credible sources of information (Clark & Avery, 2016). Education researchers have examined how motivated reasoning and emotional realities play out in pedagogical settings (Clark, 2018; Crocco et al., 2018; Garrett, 2017; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; McGrew et al., 2018), as teachers and students engage with evidence and argumentation. The present study extends this research and examines social studies teachers' operational definitions of credibility and whether they rely on their own political identity to assess the credibility of news sources.

Teacher Ideology and Opinions in the Classroom

Much of what is known about the ways teachers engage with news media is through their engagement with current political issues, including teachers' practice of sharing their political opinions in the classroom (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2011a, 2016; T. E. Kelly, 1986; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Most social studies teachers are aware that their views could influence students and often choose to avoid controversies in the classroom altogether (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). In addition to conscious decisions to disclose or withhold their political stance in the classroom, there is evidence that teachers' ideological views are expressed often without being explicitly stated (Knowles,

2018). For example, Niemi and Niemi (2007) reported that teachers often unintentionally express their politics through offhand comments or responses to student questions. Further, Journell (2011b) found that teachers also frame controversial topics as “open” or “closed” in ways that reflect their personal views on the issues.

Although this body of research addresses the ways that teachers’ political ideologies affect the ways they engage in and facilitate discussions of political issues, we did not find any empirical studies documenting how teachers’ political views or opinions shape their choice and use of news media resources in the classroom. Researchers have typically focused on how to build media literacy among students, including how to evaluate source credibility (Hodgin & Kahne, 2019; McGrew et al., 2018), but have largely neglected the perceptions of the teachers responsible for teaching these skills. In the current climate, it is untenable to assume that social studies teachers agree about the credibility of particular news sources or what makes a source credible in the first place. We posit that social studies teachers’ notions of credibility contribute to students’ ability to understand what to trust and what not to trust. For this reason, our research project examined how teachers understand the notion of credibility.

Methods

Secondary social studies teachers were the focus of this study. Although teachers of all subjects use news media in their classrooms, the civic mission of social studies instruction provides a natural link to current events instruction and use of news media to understand political and social issues (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, 2016). Attempts to study social studies teachers’ practice on a larger scale are rare, and previous extensive studies of current events instruction in social studies classrooms (Fitchett & Vanfossen, 2013; Haas & Laughlin, 2000) took place prior to the widespread recognition of the “fake news” era and persistent doubts about the trustworthiness of news and information.

Because of research indicating a strong influence of political ideology on choices and interpretation of news sources (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; D. Kelly, 2019), our primary criteria for choosing states to survey was obtaining an ideologically varied sample of teachers. Using a 2016 election map, we reached out to a variety of “red,” “blue,” and “purple” states. Because of a common perception of the teaching force as trending more liberal, we purposefully reached out to more red states than blue or purple states to obtain more politically conservative teachers in our sample. We first examined the Department of Education websites of many states to identify whether they had a researcher data request portal. We identified 11 states of varying political demographics and requested the names and emails of all public school, secondary, social studies teachers from the state Departments of Education. Of the 11 state Departments of Education we reached out to, 4 red states, Indiana ($n = 5,413$), Kansas ($n = 2,692$), Missouri ($n = 3,624$), and Texas ($n = 30,212$); 1 purple state, Minnesota ($n = 4,437$); and 1 blue state, New York ($n = 17,316$), agreed to provide teacher contact information. Potential participating teachers were emailed a recruitment letter and link to a survey and received two followup invitations to complete the survey.

Of 60,828 teachers emailed, 1,361 opened the survey. Of that number, 1,065 completed enough of the survey to record a response (78%). It is unknown how many teachers saw

the survey in their email inboxes, especially given that many school districts use spam filters that may block survey requests. Although our overall response rate of 1.75% is typical of many emailed surveys, the potential for response bias should be considered when interpreting the results. However, the dearth of large surveys of social studies teachers' practices also should be noted. Our survey, limitations notwithstanding, is among the most extensive surveys of social studies teachers conducted in the past 20 years (Fitchett & Vanfossen, 2013).

Table 1 provides a demographic summary of the survey respondents. Using Qualtrics software, we collected information about respondents' courses (e.g., subjects taught, grade level, number of years teaching social studies). We also collected information about the teachers' political self-identifications by ideology and their perceptions of the ideological leaning and credibility of 13 major news sources. In addition, teachers responded to Likert-type-scale and open-response questions about how credible they rated the 13 news sources and how they define credibility. The qualitative and quantitative data were generated from the same survey, but in the first stages of the project, they were analyzed separately. In the following sections, we first describe our approaches to analyzing the data using qualitative and quantitative strategies and then describe our use of mixed-methods strategies (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Table 1. Self-Reported Descriptions of the Sample of Teachers

Description	<i>n</i>
Sex	
Male	409
Female	449
Race/ethnicity	
White	750
Asian/Pacific Islander	4
Black/African American	21
Latino/Latina/Latinx	43
Multiracial	24
Native American	3
Other	6
School location	
Rural	339
Suburban	388
Urban	235
Other	24
Access to tech	
None/limited	34
Moderate	374
Easy	581

Table 1. Continued	
Description	<i>n</i>
Years of teaching	
5 or less	300
6–10	175
11–15	153
16–20	142
21–25	86
26–30	57
31–35	31
36 or more	19
Political ideology	
Strong conservative	99
Conservative	53
Lean conservative	65
Moderate	110
Lean liberal	161
Liberal	69
Strong liberal	161
None of these	127
State	
Indiana	135
Kansas	86
Minnesota	118
Missouri	57
New York	259
Texas	326

Note: Due to nonresponse, not all categories add up to the total sample size.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis occurred in four stages (LeCompte, 2000) and was conducted by the qualitative researchers on the team. First, the researchers read each open field response to gain an overview of the data. Through this process, we worked to establish an understanding of the patterns present across the data and achieve consensus on a codebook with 22 possible codes. We then reanalyzed a common subset of 150 responses using this codebook and discussed findings to assess code efficacy. At this point, we determined that each code could be grouped into one of five code groups: truth, perspective, journalistic techniques, reputation, and no credible news (see Figure 1). To resolve the instances in which responses included language related to more than one code, we decided which conceptual category was emphasized using two strategies: an assessment of the overall tone of the response and placement (e.g., the first term listed) of the coded language. The qualitative researchers worked together to review and code all of the responses again using these five code groups. In the final stage, we collaborated to collapse the five code groups into the three distinct conceptual categories that provided the basis for the quantitative analysis described in the next section.

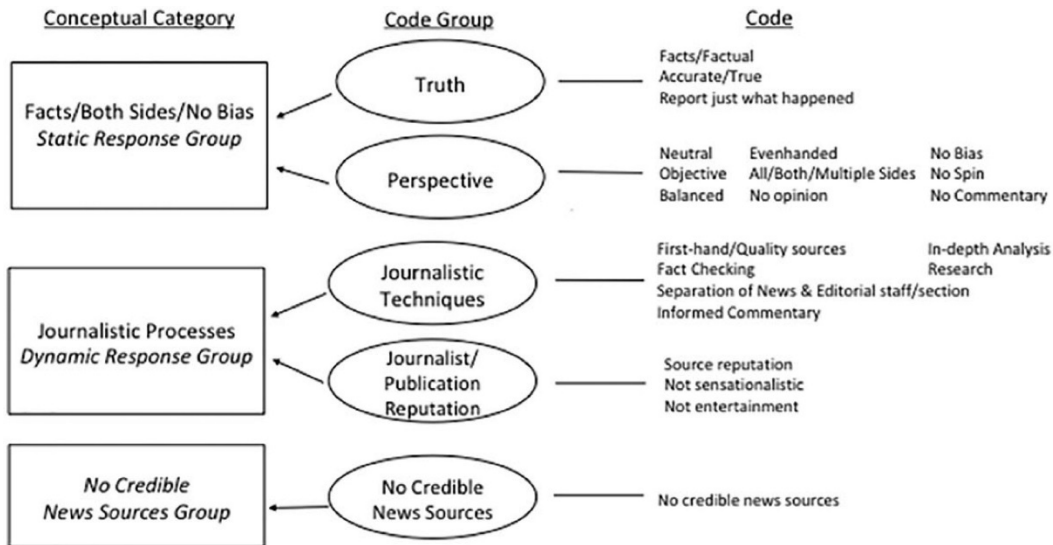


Figure 1. Qualitative code tree

Quantitative Data Analysis

Teachers taking the survey rated both the credibility and the ideological perspective of 13 common sources of news. Respondents rated the credibility of each source on a 0 to 3 scale (*not at all credible to very credible*) and their assessment of the ideological perspective of each news source on a 7-point scale (*very conservative to very liberal*). Later, teachers were asked to identify their own political ideology on the same 1 to 7 scale. Drawing on the data from teachers who identified an ideological perspective, we subtracted the teacher's ideological self-rating from their rating for each news source and took the absolute value to create a 0 to 6 measure of "ideological distance." A score of 0 represents complete perceived alignment between the respondent's ideology and that of the news source, and 6 represents a complete lack of alignment. This measure was adapted from a measure of "partisan distance" used by Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (2008) to predict college professor evaluation scores. Kelly-Woessner and Woessner found higher perceived partisan differences between college students' politics, and those of their professors were correlated with lower evaluations. Such a measure is useful in capturing the magnitude of perceived political differences and their impacts on political thinking and behavior. Ideological distance was used to test a hypothesis that teachers who perceive a significant difference between their political perspective and that of a news source will rate that source as less credible. In this analysis, teachers' ratings of credibility for each source are the dependent variable, and ideological distance is the key independent variable. In all models, controls were added for teacher sex, race, school location (rural, urban, suburban), years of teaching experience, access to technology (easy access, competitive access, limited/no access), and frequency of teaching current events (*never to every day*). Items measuring all variables are available in the online Methods appendix.

Mixed-Methods Data Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative aspects of the method were given equal status and were analyzed sequentially (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 22). Because the qualitative analysis identified quantifiable patterns in the teacher responses to the open-ended question about defining credibility, it was possible to incorporate these findings into the quantitative analysis of the data. Regression models testing the previous hypothesis were modified to include an interaction term testing whether the relationships between ideological distance and perceptions of credibility were moderated by teachers' credibility definitions. We hypothesized that teachers who defined credibility differently might exhibit different relationships between their perceived ideological differences with a news source and their assessment of the credibility of that source.

In addition, a logistical regression model tested to see if different definitions of credibility were more prevalent among teachers of certain ideologies. As with previous models, controls were added to the logistic regression for sex, race, school location, years teaching, access to technology, and frequency of current events instruction.

Results***Teacher Ratings of News Source Credibility***

Table 2 lists the average credibility rating of each of the 13 news sources broken down by respondent political ideology. Teachers identifying as "very conservative" rated Fox News as most credible, with a 2.03 credibility rating on a 0 to 3 scale. The only other news sources receiving an above average (> 1.5) credibility rating from teachers in this group were the BBC (1.66) and the *Wall Street Journal* (1.55). On the other end of the ideological spectrum, liberals at all points on the continuum rated Fox News as least credible. Specifically, teachers identifying as "very liberal" gave Fox News a 0.39 rating, the lowest average credibility rating of any resource among the results. MSNBC received the next lowest rating from the "very liberal" group but still earned an above-average rating of 1.61. In fact, beyond Fox News, the "very liberal" respondents gave all the news sources in the survey an above average (> 1.5) rating. These results indicate that, like the general population (Jones & Ritter, 2018), conservative social studies teachers found most news sources were not credible, whereas liberal social studies teachers found most sources credible.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Mean Credibility Ratings (0–3 Scale) of Each News Source Across Ideology

Source	Ideological Scale							Average Conservative	Average Liberal	Difference: Liberal– Conservative
	Very Conservative to Very Liberal									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7			
ABC	1.13	1.62	1.49	2.00	2.13	2.23	2.15	1.41	2.17	0.76
NBC	1.02	1.72	1.36	1.98	2.14	2.25	2.17	1.37	2.19	0.82
CBS	1.16	1.77	1.41	2.02	2.17	2.26	2.15	1.45	2.19	0.74
CNN	0.64	1.56	1.08	1.83	2.04	2.12	2.07	1.09	2.08	0.99
NPR/PBS	1.35	2.22	1.94	2.39	2.74	2.76	2.85	1.84	2.78	0.94
Fox News	2.03	1.59	1.41	1.05	0.69	0.69	0.39	1.68	0.59	–1.09
MSNBC	0.54	1.26	0.90	1.38	1.39	1.61	1.61	0.90	1.58	0.68
BBC	1.66	2.10	2.14	2.34	2.48	2.59	2.71	1.97	2.59	0.62
<i>New York Times</i>	0.88	1.81	1.45	2.18	2.34	2.49	2.56	1.38	2.46	1.08
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	1.55	2.07	1.80	2.20	2.26	2.32	2.29	1.81	2.29	0.48
<i>Washington Post</i>	0.95	1.86	1.49	2.10	2.20	2.36	2.49	1.43	2.35	0.92
<i>TIME</i>	1.02	1.71	1.22	2.01	2.15	2.22	2.13	1.32	2.17	0.85
<i>Newsweek</i>	0.90	1.49	1.36	1.97	1.99	2.15	2.01	1.25	2.05	0.80

To compare similarities and differences between conservative and liberal respondents, we averaged the credibility ratings of teachers who identified as “very,” “somewhat,” and “lean” conservatives to create an overall conservative credibility rating. We created the same average for liberals. The comparison of these results revealed that the three widest gaps between liberals’ and conservatives’ evaluations of credibility were found in three news sources: Fox News, the *New York Times*, and CNN. We note that these three outlets, in particular, have been frequently and consistently mentioned by the president in his comments regarding news media and their relative trustworthiness.

Teacher Descriptions of Credibility

The free-response question used as data in the analysis described here asked teachers, “What do you think makes a news source credible?” Our qualitative analysis of 718 responses to this question indicated that participants’ notions of credibility could be categorized in one of four groups: facts/both sides/bias, journalistic processes, no credible resources, and uncategorized (see Figure 1).

Participants in the first group used language like “facts” and “balance” in their responses and indicated that sources were credible if they had these features. For example, one participant stated that sources are credible “if they have facts, not beliefs.” Another indicated credibility was identifiable when sources “present all sides of an issue.” Many of these respondents specifically noted that credibility stemmed from the absence of bias, reflected in responses that equated credibility with “unbiased reporting,” “being completely unbiased,” and “unbiased fact presenting.” Among all survey responses, the perception that factual, unbiased, and even-handed news sources were credible was most prevalent, with about two thirds ($n = 492$) of the respondents identifying one, two, or all three of these qualities in their responses. These teachers’ use of static, objective signifiers like “facts” and “unbiased” to describe their perceptions of credibility seems to point to the understanding

that these elements of journalism exist as binaries. In other words, these responses imply that a news text is either “unbiased” or “biased” or that it was possible for a news story to contain “just the facts.” As a result, we described teachers in this category as the *static* response group.

About one third ($n = 148$) of the participants defined credibility in terms of journalistic processes. Responses that fell into this category were identified through the use of language explicitly describing journalistic practices. For example, one respondent stated that credible sources are “well-researched.” Another indicated that credibility is identifiable when there is “verification of sources, corroboration of source material, and inclusion of specific data and quotes.” Others noted credibility was tied to a commitment to “in-depth reporting” and “holding the powerful accountable.”

In contrast to the static, objective terms, these respondents described dynamic, subjective processes in their definitions of credibility. For example, these teachers used the language of processes like “fact-checking” rather than “facts” to describe the kind of sources they found credible. Further, responses that pointed to the positive reputation of the journalist or news organization were also placed in this category. Teachers with these kinds of responses were labeled the *dynamic* response group.

A small group of respondents ($n = 25$) produced answers indicating that no news sources are credible. Responses in this group included statements like “Not sure anything [is credible] anymore, the fourth estate has failed America” and “In today’s world, it is simpler to describe what is not credible.” Some teachers in this category expressed skepticism regarding the business interests of the news industry, stating, “They are all selling a product and will do/say whatever they have to to get viewers” and “All news sources run off ratings so I don’t think they are credible anymore.” Finally, 53 responses were not categorized. Responses like “depends,” “don’t know,” and “if it is not Fox News” were too disparate to comprise additional categories.

Impacts of Teacher Ideology

We hypothesized that the ideological distance between a given teacher and a news source would predict how that teacher rates the source’s credibility. Results of the regression models support the hypothesis that teachers’ perceptions of differences between a news source’s ideology and their own are inversely related to teacher ratings of news source credibility. In other words, a teacher who perceives complete ideological agreement with a given source (i.e., has an ideological distance of zero) will likely rate the source as very credible, whereas those who perceive significant differences between their ideology and that of the source will likely rate the source’s credibility as low. For example, for every point of ideological distance away from CNN a respondent reported, the average credibility rating for that source fell .25 points (on a 0–3 scale). For all 13 news sources rated during the survey, increases in ideological differences were predictive of lower credibility ratings. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Linear Regression Coefficients for Ideological Distance When Predicting Teacher Ratings of Source Credibility

Source	Base Model		Interaction Model		ANOVA Test of Variance Explained
	Ideological Distance		Ideological Distance × Credibility Definition		
	$\beta(SE)$	R^2	$\beta(SE)$	R^2	F
ABC	-.19 (.02)***	.20	.13 (.05)*	.22	4.74**
NBC	-.23 (.02)***	.26	.11 (.06) [†]	.27	3.80*
CBS	-.21 (.02)***	.22	.16 (.06)**	.25	7.92***
CNN	-.25 (.02)***	.29	.17 (.08)*	.32	9.76***
NPR/PBS	-.25 (.02)***	.29	.20 (.09)*	.33	13.53***
Fox News	-.29 (.02)***	.37	.02 (.04)	.37	0.08
MSNBC	-.18 (.02)***	.22	.19 (.08)*	.24	4.67**
BBC	-.10 (.02)***	.10	.22 (.07)**	.15	12.17***
<i>New York Times</i>	-.30 (.02)***	.31	.17 (.07)*	.35	12.03***
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	-.09 (.02)***	.07	.09 (.06)	.09	4.33*
<i>Washington Post</i>	-.25 (.02)***	.22	.11 (.09)	.25	9.51***
<i>TIME</i>	-.24 (.02)***	.22	.18 (.08)*	.24	4.38*
<i>Newsweek</i>	-.26 (.02)***	.27	.17 (.07)*	.28	3.96*

Note: Each model includes controls for respondent sex, race, years teaching, access to computers, and reported frequency of teaching current events. To conserve space and allow for ease of comparison across news sources, the coefficients for these control variables are not reported but are included in the R^2 estimates of variance explained by each model.

[†] $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

To assess whether differing conceptions of credibility changed the relationship between ideological distance and ratings of news credibility, we added an interaction term between teachers' ideological distance from a given source and the teacher's stated definition of credibility to each model (see Table 3). This analysis drew from the prevailing definitions of credibility identified in the qualitative coding: static and dynamic. For 9 out of 13 measured sources, the interaction term between these two items was significant at $\alpha = .05$ (a 10th source was near significant with $p < .1$). This finding suggests that the relationship between ideological distance and source credibility rating may be different depending on how a teacher views the concept of credibility. Analysis of variance comparisons found that models incorporating definitions of credibility and the interaction term explained significantly more variance in credibility ratings than the base models for 12 out of the 13 sources in our survey (Fox News being the exception).

In all 9 of the 13 cases where the term is significant, teachers who viewed credibility using static terms show a significant inverse relationship between ideological distance and ratings of credibility. In other words, the greater the differences that respondents perceive between their ideology and that of the source, the lower their perceptions of the source's credibility are. For teachers using the dynamic definitions of credibility, on the other hand, the effects of ideological distance on perceptions of credibility were lessened, negated, or reversed. The example of CNN provided in Figure 2 illustrates these relationships, demonstrating that there is a substantially weaker relationship between ideological distance and

credibility perceptions among those who define credibility in terms of journalistic processes. Put differently, teachers who defined credibility using dynamic processes showed a weaker reliance on ideological distance to the news source when determining the credibility of sources than teachers who defined credibility using static notions of truth and bias. Conversely, when rating the credibility of a news source, the results of the interaction model suggest that teachers in our sample who viewed credibility in static terms are influenced more by their ideology than those who define it as the result of dynamic journalistic processes.

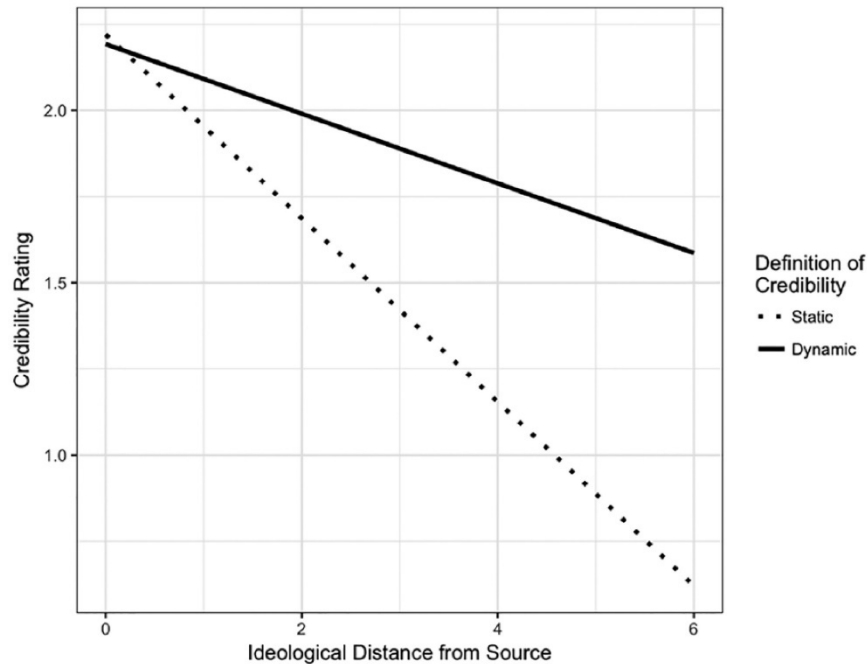


Figure 2. Depiction of the relationship between ideological distance and ratings of CNN's credibility separated by respondents' definitions of credibility.

A logistic regression controlling for teacher demographics and school characteristics found that increasingly liberal ideology was related to an increased likelihood of using dynamic definitions of credibility ($\beta = .32, p < .001$). This finding indicates that self-identified liberals were more likely to use the dynamic definition of credibility than were conservatives. Conservatives in the sample were more likely to offer static definitions of credibility. This result suggests ideological differences in how credibility is defined.

Discussion

Our analysis of teachers' responses about how they determine news source credibility supports the understanding, noted in the introduction, that there is no widely agreed-upon definition of news source credibility. Our findings indicate, however, that the vast majority

of teachers' responses about source credibility could be divided into one of two categories. We assert that the difference between the static and dynamic responses was distinct. The mixed-methods results show that definitions of credibility offered by teachers significantly affected the quantitative results for most of the news sources included in our study. Further, results of this study suggest that there is a relationship between respondents' ideology and their description of source credibility. This finding suggests that a social studies teacher's ideology makes them more likely to present a particular definition of credibility to their students.

The respondents who indicated that "no sources are credible" comprise a small but concerning set of responses that reflect a view of news media as a suspect industry, wholly undeserving of trust. The impetus to frame the media in this way may reflect a disdain for the partisan rancor present in much news media or be a result of attacks on the media from elected officials and other political elites. Alternatively, these respondents may have a standard for journalistic credibility that was too rigorous for the mainstream media sources included in our survey to meet. In any case, if transferred to curriculum and pedagogy, these perceptions would inhibit these teachers' ability to assist learners in need of strategies for discerning credible from problematic sources.

Similar to findings from D. Kelly (2019), there is both an absence of consensus among these teachers about what constitutes credibility and politically divided assessments of which sources are credible. First, teachers in our sample showed a strong connection between their ideology and their assessments of news sources. For all 13 of the news sources tested, the further away the teacher perceived the source to be ideologically, the lower was their rating of credibility. The strength and consistency of these statistical relationships (see Table 3) suggest that perceived ideological similarity is a factor in teachers' judgments about news sources. Next, liberal-identifying teachers in this study found more news media sources credible than did teachers identifying as conservative. This finding, drawn from the quantitative analysis, suggests that liberal-leaning teachers may describe, frame, and present a much wider set of sources as credible in their classrooms than their conservative peers.

Further, liberal teachers in our study were more likely to use dynamic definitions of credibility when describing media sources. Although dynamic definitions of credibility were in the minority of all ideological groups, their increased prevalence among liberal teachers surveyed may indicate a more nuanced view of news presentation and more trust in the journalistic process when compared to conservative teachers. This interpretation of the results is in line with a recent survey showing greater trust in journalists among liberals than conservatives in the general population (Columbia Journalism Review, 2019).

Given these results, it is feasible that the same news source can be taught as both credible and not credible, depending on the classroom. We argue that this finding represents a problem for democratic education. In an ideologically fractured media landscape, it is difficult to find common perspectives or understandings upon which to base public discourse. Research on teacher political disclosure indicates that teachers are likely to attempt to adopt a neutral and even-handed stance in response to politically charged topics (Journell, 2011a). Our results suggest that attempts to find balanced or neutral presentations could be shaped by ideology. Although the choice of some news sources over others has

always been part of the political life of teaching, in the current climate, these practices are more charged than ever. Combined with the marginalization of social studies (Halvorsen, 2013; Pace, 2011) and current events in many states and heavy emphasis on textual decoding in many media literacy curricula (boyd, 2017), students may not have the experience or skill set to question the characterization of news sources as credible or not.

Another result of this study suggests that not all definitions of credibility are equally related to ideological bias. The categories of credibility definitions identified in our qualitative coding had a measurable impact on the assessments of news source credibility when incorporated into the quantitative models. Those teachers defining credibility in terms of dynamic processes show a weaker relationship between ideological distance and credibility ratings of news sources than those who define credibility as static. In other words, teachers in our sample who connected journalistic practices with news credibility were likely less swayed by political bias when judging news sources. Although notions of credibility described in the static group—like facts and accuracy—are, of course, critical components of quality news media, these elements may lose their significance if they are mobilized solely to validate the credibility of ideologically aligned news sources. If, on the other hand, dynamic definitions of credibility—like fact-checking and in-depth reporting—weaken reliance on ideology when evaluating new sources, people relying on these definitions may be more open to news that contradicts their worldviews. This consideration is particularly relevant in terms of working toward the possibility of introducing a shared conception of credibility in social studies education.

Limitations

Survey research, although useful for capturing large amounts of data, is limited in many ways, and broad concerns about the accuracy and quality of survey data certainly apply to our study. In particular, several caveats should be taken into account when interpreting the results of our survey. Although we reached out to a large number of social studies teachers across multiple states, our responses may be missing important perspectives from the social studies teaching community. As noted above, email-distributed surveys may be blocked due to spam filters or remain unopened due to participants' lack of time or interest. The low response rate to our survey introduces a concern about response bias. The survey was distributed between May and August of 2018, during the end of the school year and summer break, likely further lowering response rates.

It is also important to note that the questions that respondents chose not to respond to may have affected the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study. One third ($n = 348$) of the respondents chose not to respond to the question that asked for a definition of credibility. The lack of response to this question may have occurred because teachers felt that credibility was too difficult to characterize in a brief response or because defining credibility seemed too politically charged. In any case, the qualitative data analysis could not take the views of these respondents into account. Similar issues arise when using ideological distance as a key predictor variable. Many teachers choose not to indicate an ideology on our survey, meaning we were unable to calculate their ideological distance from the news sources. In the case of both credibility definitions and ideology, an analysis of the missing cases showed no patterns of missingness related to sex, race, or school location. Further,

there were no significant differences in the mean years teaching, access to technology, and frequency of current events instruction between the full sample and the samples with missing responses for credibility definition and ideology (see the online Methods appendix for more detail on missing cases). In addition, the vast majority of teachers taking the survey identified as White. Although the teaching population, in general, is predominantly White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the proportion of White teachers in our sample (88%) is higher than the national population (82%). The low number of teachers of color responding to the survey limits the generalization of the results.

Our framing of questions and concepts may limit the interpretation of our results. One such example is that of ideology. Using ideology as a key predictor in the models for this study excludes individuals who do not place themselves on the standard liberal-conservative spectrum. Further, the single dimension ideological construct used in this study, although common, is not the only way to conceptualize political ideology. Some scholars (e.g., Feldman & Johnston, 2014) argue for a multidimensional understanding of ideology, incorporating individuals' views on economic and social issues as separate constructs.

Finally, our presentation of media sources as monolithic entities limits what we can say about these teachers' orientations to them. Asking respondents to identify the credibility of a resource like CNN may fail to capture respondents' views of the wide variety of programming that exists on the news channel. For example, teachers may perceive the stories posted by CNN beat reporters are credible but that the pundit panels that appear on CNN are not credible. Our survey questions did not provide respondents the opportunity to differentiate their perceptions of credibility based on specific components of a news source's programming.

Directions for Further Research

Because biases against attitude-inconsistent information and sources tend to operate at a subconscious level (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Lord et al., 1979), there is no quick fix that will allow teachers to evaluate sources consistently for credibility regardless of their political leanings. Promoting educators' awareness of their own unconscious and emotional investments in political life may be a first step (Clark & Avery, 2016; Garrett, 2017). Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach to determining news source credibility, our results suggest that teachers and students should be taught a more dynamic approach to credibility and be encouraged to evaluate the credibility of news articles based on specific journalistic features like use of multiple named sources and fact-checking (Hodgin & Kahne, 2019). Research is needed to explore whether such an approach to credibility promotes awareness of good journalistic practices and moves teachers and students away from absolute notions of truth and to emphasize that all sides of an issue do not necessarily deserve equal attention. Such research should include the views of teachers of all subjects.

The variation in teacher definitions of credibility and their relationship to perceptions of source credibility also suggest a need for teacher educators to introduce these concepts in their courses and provide opportunities for application and practice throughout their programs. Our work examining the introduction of news media literacy in social studies teacher education (Schmeichel et al., 2018) highlighted the complexity of learning to teach about news credibility, but further research is needed to understand how news media

literacy topics can be integrated into social studies teacher education as well as other discipline-specific programs.

Conclusion

News media are vehicles of information and perspectives that help students make sense of the world in which we live. Learning to interpret news sources and judge their credibility are essential skills for students to master. However, the results of this study indicate that there are likely inconsistencies in how credibility is defined and potential political bias in which sources social studies teachers use as exemplars of credibility. These inconsistencies are embedded in the context of a politically tumultuous time that exacerbates a problematic space of teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. The results also suggest an opportunity for research into approaches and framings that may mitigate the impacts of subtle biases on how news is presented in the classroom.

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Method Appendix

Quantitative Data Analysis

As data came from six different states, a multilevel analytic approach was considered. After calculating intraclass correlation coefficients, we found only negligible amounts of variance attributable to differences between states. Thus, a single-level analysis was preferable.

In checking that the models met the assumptions of linear regression, a non-random distribution of residuals against fitted values was detected. Efforts to resolve this issue of heteroscedasticity, such as transforming variables and fitting curvilinear models were, in some cases, able to improve model fit, but did not ultimately resolve the issue. This suggested a case of impure heteroscedasticity, where missing variables not captured by the survey are unable to be included in the models and may confound the relationships observed. A robust standard errors calculation (Davidson & MacKinnon, 1993) was used to compensate for the violation of assumptions.

In modeling the relationships between news credibility and ideological distance, we opted to report linear relationships, even though, as noted above, curvilinear relationships could have improved the fit in many of the models. We based this choice on two considerations. First, scatterplots of these relationships were often ambiguous. Curved Lowess lines visualizing the relationship between credibility perceptions and ideological distance across most of the 13 news sources did not diverge significantly from straight lines of best fit. Second, there was no clear type of curvilinear relationship that would have best modeled the focal relationship across all news sources. For some news sources a quadratic line would have worked best, while a rational function would have worked better for others. In order to make our results more accessible to a general audience, we opted to sacrifice a small amount of goodness-of-fit for simplicity.

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Missing Cases

Respondents to our survey were not required to complete all the questions in order to have their response counted. Because our survey included potentially uncomfortable questions about political ideology in the context of teaching, we wanted to provide teachers an opportunity to skip these questions and still have their opinions registered in other parts of the study. The incomplete cases resulting from this choice, however, could have potentially impacted the results of the quantitative data analysis. We were particularly concerned about missing cases resulting from non-response to two important questions in our analysis: respondent definition of credibility and respondent ideology. Substantial numbers of teachers surveyed chose not to respond to one or both of these questions. To assess whether missing cases from either or both of these variables would impact the analysis, we compared differences between the whole sample and the sample with missing cases in these two questions ($n = 532$) across several variables. The table below summarizes the analysis. As table A.1 illustrates, none of the mean differences among the variables of interest in the study were significant at the $\alpha = .05$ level. We felt that the subset of the data used for quantitative analysis was adequately representative of the data as a whole, despite the missing cases. Therefore, we chose not to impute missing data points.

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Table A.1

Comparison of Full Sample and Sample with Missing Cases

	Full Sample (n = 1,065)	Sample w/Missing Cases (n = 532)	<i>p</i>
Sex (Female)	52.3%	52.9%	0.83
Race (White)	88.0%	89.6%	0.35
Urban	23.8%	21.4%	0.28
Suburban	39.4%	43.6%	0.11
Rural	34.4%	32.5%	0.46
Mean Years Teaching	12.6	13.3	0.15
Technology Access	2.55	2.55	0.84
Frequency of Current Events	2.90	2.94	0.40
Mean Ideology	4.43	4.58	0.21
Credibility Definition (Dynamic)	23.1%	23.6%	0.82

Survey Questions

Are you currently a social studies teacher working in a secondary school (Middle or High School)?

Yes

No

How many years have you been a social studies teacher?

How would you characterize your school in terms of its location?

Urban

Suburban

Rural

Other (Please specify)

Please list the postal code for state in which your school is located (i.e., MN, IN, NY, TX, MO).

How would you characterize access to computers and/or Internet at your school?

Easy access (such as 1 to 1 laptop/tablet schools or dedicated computer carts in every classroom)

Competitive access (such as computer labs or laptop carts that require signups in advance)

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Limited or No access (the school does not have laptops/computer labs, or there are very few computers in the building)

On average, how often do you address current events in your social studies classes?

- Never
- Once or twice a semester
- Once or twice a month
- Once or twice a week
- Every day

How would you characterize the credibility of each of the following news sources/organizations? (Response options: Don't know, Not at all credible, A little credible, Fairly credible, Very credible)

- ABC
- NBC
- CBS
- CNN
- PBS/NPR
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- BBC
- New York Times
- The Wall Street Journal
- Washington Post
- TIME
- Newsweek

How would you characterize the political or ideological perspective of each of the following news sources/organizations? (Response options: Don't know, Very conservative, Conservative, A little conservative, Moderate or independent, A little liberal, Liberal, Very liberal)

- ABC
- NBC
- CBS
- CNN
- PBS/NPR
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- BBC
- New York Times
- The Wall Street Journal
- Washington Post
- TIME
- Newsweek

In your opinion, what do you think makes a source of news credible?

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Which of the following do you identify as?

- Male
- Female
- Neither/Non-binary
- Other (Please Specify)

Which of the following best describes you?

- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- Latino/a
- Native American
- White
- Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic
- Other (Please specify)

Do you identify with any of these political labels?

- Conservative
- Moderate
- Liberal
- I do not identify with any of these labels

If Liberal or Conservative Selected: Would you say you are a strong [Conservative/Liberal] or not a very strong [Conservative/Liberal]?

- Strong [Conservative/Liberal]
- Not a very strong [Conservative/Liberal]

If Moderate Selected: Do you find yourself agreeing more with either conservatives or liberals about political and social issues?

- Liberals
- Conservatives
- Neither

Reference

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