

Ability to spot and resist manipulated media news about international affairs: Does political knowledge provide it?



Vasyl V. Kucherenko

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, ITALY

Cindy T. Christen

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

ABSTRACT: This experiment explored relationships between individuals' levels of political knowledge and ability to spot manipulated media information about international affairs as well as susceptibility to influence by such information. The context of the study was the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine. A convenience sample of 146 students at a large American university was randomly assigned to read one of three simulated *New York Times* news reports, experimentally manipulated to favor either the Ukrainian government, the opposition, or a balance of political views. Analysis revealed few significant relationships between level of political knowledge and spotting manipulation in news reports. Instead, trust in the *New York Times* explained a majority of the variance. Also, political knowledge wasn't associated with susceptibility to manipulation. Interestingly, a majority of participants who spotted manipulation nevertheless accepted standpoints the manipulated articles promoted.

KEYWORDS: manipulated media information, framing, political knowledge, media trust, the Orange Revolution



INTRODUCTION

For the majority of people, the news media remain the primary source of information about international affairs. Thus, individuals construct their reality of other nations and cultures from information provided by media. The media frame the information in such a way to convert unfamiliar images of nations, cultures and people to familiar and understandable ones for the audiences. Therefore, Entman (2004) argued, when reporting about world affairs, it is impossible to avoid framing.

News frames appear to play a dual role, facilitating two processes. On the one hand, journalists and editors may use frames for practical purposes: to process large amounts of information quickly, package it concisely, and make it convenient for their audience to use, providing contextual cues for understanding (Pan, Kosicki, 1993). In doing so, reporters and editors often follow traditional journalism norms asserting that the media are to inform the audience in an objective, honest manner. On the other hand, the news frames used might be deliberately misleading, intentionally chosen to influence the audience, thereby supplanting the process of informing with misinforming and persuading.

In this regard, international news reporting deserves particular attention. In 1999, Mann described the general quality of such reporting quite pessimistically:

reporters do not always get the story right; neither do their editors and publishers. This is especially the case when they report about distant lands and unfamiliar cultures ... the readers, who are already conditioned by the prevalent stereotypes, accept the misleading stories as true and react accordingly (Mann, 1999, p. 102).

Although this characterization was offered more than 10 years ago, little has changed since. The quality in reporting foreign news is still being widely debated. An expert meeting on “Transparency in Foreign News Reporting,” conducted in 2008 in Rotterdam, concluded that the selection and construction of news items, the picture of “foreign affairs” displayed to news consumers, was a filtered, distorted, manipulated, one-sided and simplified one (Deprez, Raeymaeckers, 2010).

In turn, such inaccurate information — combined with specific framing of that information — could affect interpretation of media messages and construction of “foreign” reality by audiences and, in this way, manipulate people’s perceptions and evaluations of foreign objects, issues, persons, and events. In such cases, framing cannot be construed in positive terms, as Chong and Druckman (2007) suggested, when it facilitates simplification and convenience of passing on and perception of foreign news by audiences, especially when it comes to unfamiliar topics. Rather, in this case, “it can be viewed as a strategy to manipulate and deceive individuals” (Chong, Druckman, 2007, p. 120). In other words, framing is construed here in negative terms as it contributes to shaping distorted, exclusively negative or positive opinions of news consumers about something or someone. As combined, inaccurate, biased or slanted information accompanied by negative framing represents *manipulated media information* which misinform and mislead a news consumer about an issue, problem, event or person described.

The degree of influence might depend on a variety of factors; this is generally true for any media effects. However, when it comes to the ability to detect or spot manipulated media information and, further, avoid accepting the standpoint the news report promotes, it stands to reason that such proficiency should come from an individual’s ability to critically assess media information. Individuals

possessing such qualities should be resistant if not immune to the effects of such information.

Drawing upon literature showing a positive relationship between political knowledge and cognitive capacity of individuals, it has been assumed that cognitive skills should also be associated with critical assessment of media information. Thus, the experimental study described in this article explored two questions: (1) what relationships existed between individuals' levels of political knowledge and their ability to spot manipulated information in news coverage of international affairs; and (2) whether differences in levels of political knowledge made individuals more or less susceptible to influence by such information.

The study was carried out in 2005 and employed as a context the Orange Revolution that happened in Ukraine from November 2004 to January 2005, in the aftermath of the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election. The Orange Revolution received news coverage worldwide and in the United States in particular. Based on the level of news media attention, it can be compared to recent events of the Arab Spring, unrest in Egypt and civil war in Syria. Remoteness of Orange Revolution events from Western news consumers made it challenging for them to know for sure what was going on in Ukraine and decide which side of the conflict should be blamed or supported. Many consumers likely relied on the information provided by a particular trusted news medium. This experiment used news reports on the Orange Revolution, manipulated to favor those in power, the opposition, or a balance of viewpoints, to test questions regarding the relationships between levels of political knowledge, ability to spot manipulated information in news coverage and susceptibility to influence by such information.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political knowledge and critical evaluation of news

Based on past literature, we hypothesized that political knowledge should serve as a proxy for cognitive ability to critically evaluate information, and, in particular, one-sided news reporting. Thus, Fiske et al. (1990) argued that individuals' levels of political knowledge is an indicator of the degree of political schemas development. The developed political schemas, in turn, heavily contribute to political learning, more careful consideration of persuasive messages and inferring more accurate conclusions from political communications (Hsu, Price, 1993; Krosnick, Brannon, 1993; Goidel et al., 1997; Nelson et al., 1997; Rhee, Cappella, 1997). In particular, Nelson et al. (1997) explained that more politically knowledgeable citizens are more resistant to persuasive messages because they already know the arguments used and, being more knowledgeable, are more readily capable of deconstructing and rejecting them, especially if the arguments are counter-attitudinal.

Other research also revealed that political knowledge was related to more elaborative processing of the news (e.g., Price et al., 1997; Rhee, 1997). Recent studies confirmed that those with low levels of political knowledge were more susceptible to various media effects (e.g., de Vreese, 2005; Schuck, de Vreese, 2006; Jackson, 2011) and were “more likely to be influenced by newly incoming information in their political judgments” (Schuck et al., 2013). In contrast, individuals having high levels of political knowledge, interest in politics, and cognitive skills were “more likely to hold firm and persistent attitudes toward politics, or political issues or actors” (Schuck et al., 2013).

Framing and schematic evaluation of media information

According to the theory of low-information rationality, people often make conclusions on political topics using mental shortcuts or heuristics rather than participating in more complex elaboration of information (Hurwitz, Peffley, 1987). Using such shortcuts, citizens are able to form opinions about remote world affairs without extensive knowledge about the topics (Brewer et al., 2004). People make judgments about new and unfamiliar events or objects in terms of events or objects they already know well (Kinder, 1998). Interpretation of novel media information, including information about international affairs, is possible in the context of already existing frameworks of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes called schemas (Wicks, 2001). For unfamiliar objects, using specific contextual cues — such as media framing of issues — may facilitate accessing already stored knowledge to process information in a certain way and help to form opinions and attitudes toward a topic (Domke et al., 1998).

According to Kinder (1998), it is particularly important how problems in the text are framed so as to conclude that they have political causes and/or political remedies. Precise frames thus can influence the opinions people form about certain issues. By focusing on particular problems while ignoring others, and framing those problems in specific ways, media can guide formation of political judgments by the audience (Kinder, 1998). Chong and Druckman (2007) stated that “framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (p. 104). Entman (2004) described framing as “the process of selecting and highlighting some aspects of a perceived reality, and enhancing the salience of an interpretation and evaluation of that reality” (p. 28). He argued that frames “programmed” — or primed — citizens’ responses “by activating associations between the information highlighted in the text and concepts already stored in their schema systems” (p. 28).

Framing, according to Entman (1993, 2004), usually serves four functions — problem definition, causal interpretation and assigning responsibility, moral evaluation, and solution recommendations. To frame political events in news coverage, it is necessary to fulfill at least two of the four — the assignment of responsibility and

recommended solution. Proposing causes and remedies for a certain political event through such frames, news media give the audience ready templates for estimation of the issue.

Manipulated information

Manipulated media information is defined in this study as one-sided opinions or allegations that contain causal interpretation of the issue or problem described and assign responsibility for it, which might lead a consumer of such news to draw incorrect conclusions about the issue or problem. Manipulated information also often includes emotionally loaded language and/or framing and reasoning devices, strengthening the effects of such information.

One-sidedness refers to the dominance of one viewpoint on an issue in a news report. The presence of only one point of view does not necessarily mean it belongs to only one source (person, organization or institution) cited in the report. In fact, several sources might be interviewed with regard to the issue, but all of the views will “accidentally” coincide. No alternative position on the subject is covered.

Versus facts, *opinion* — or *allegations* usually contain interpretations of facts usually in the form of statements without proof that cannot be verified upon reading. One either believes such allegations or questions them, remaining skeptical until obtaining additional proof of that allegation. In the context of manipulated information, such opinion-dominated news messages also comprise unsubstantiated causal interpretations of an issue or problem described in the report and unclear assignment of responsibility for it to someone or something.

Finally, *loaded language* implies the use of positively or negatively connotated words, phrases or other framing and reasoning devices.

It is hypothesized that the ability to recognize manipulative techniques and not to fall under the influence of such information (that is, not to believe what it proclaims) should depend in part on the extent to which a news consumer is politically knowledgeable. Individuals with higher political knowledge should be more capable of analyzing, evaluating and drawing conclusions regarding news messages, as such people employ more sophisticated, active information-processing strategies in evaluating news messages as compared to less politically knowledgeable people (Fiske et al., 1990; Judd, Downing, 1990; Krosnick, 1990; Hsu, Price, 1993; Rhee, Cappella, 1997). According to Kinder (1998), political sophisticates are more capable of identifying important parts of information, encoding information in more abstract ways, and employing deeper analytic techniques for its processing. Guo and Moy (1998), describing information processing by politically knowledgeable citizens, stated:

It is characterized by mental efforts to go beyond the information presented and the context in which information is presented to attain a more complete understanding and interpretation of the political figures, issues, and events. Here, the interaction between existing political schema and incoming political information weighs more heavily. In essence, active processing of information

develops as a strategy to cope with often incomplete and vague information... Rather than simply filling in missing information with prior knowledge and opinion, active processors make greater efforts to seek truth through mental rehearsals of new information and cross-validation from multiple sources (p. 28).

Such critically thinking individuals, therefore, should to a greater degree be immune to both unwitting and intentional attempts of news media to deceive or mislead with their news reports. As a result, such people should at least recognize when the news they encounter is one-sided, dominated by allegations, and attempting to force people to believe and accept its standpoint in regard to a situation, event, issue or person.

2004 Ukrainian presidential election

In 2004, the “Orange Revolution” occurred in Ukraine during the presidential election period. The political opposition accused the outgoing Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, and political forces supporting him of dishonest conduct during the election campaign in favor of Kuchma’s successor, Viktor Yanukovich, as well as of fraud during vote counting. Huge indignation was added by the suspected poisoning of the opposition presidential candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko spent time in an Austrian clinic being treated for the alleged poisoning but retained a disfigured face and sick body.

As a result, the opposition supporters set up tents in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, and other Ukrainian cities and spent more than two months in those camps. The supporters held daily rallies and demanded honest elections. They also blocked governmental and presidential buildings so that Ukrainian officials could not get into their offices. Such pressure resulted in a second round election voting with the participation of the same two candidates, Yushchenko and Yanukovich. In the repeat voting the opposition candidate, the allegedly poisoned Yushchenko, was victorious.

This strong tension during the election between two presidential candidates was covered broadly by U.S. news media. *The New York Times* published 281 articles about Ukraine from the beginning of the election campaign (July 2004) to January 2005. CNN as well as other television networks regularly covered campaign upheavals (Vorozhko, 2005).

HYPOTHESES

The present study focused on two hypotheses:

H1: People with higher levels of political knowledge will be more likely to spot manipulated information in news articles about the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election.

H2: People with higher levels of political knowledge will be less likely to accept standpoints promoted in manipulated news articles about the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election.

METHOD

Research design

This study employed an experimental/quasi-experimental design. The explanatory variable was political knowledge about domestic U.S. and international affairs. Ability to spot manipulated information about the Ukrainian presidential elections in print news media and the susceptibility of participants' perceptions to such information represented two response variables.

The pre-test questionnaire measured participants' media use, trust in media, and levels of political knowledge about domestic politics, international affairs and the Ukrainian presidential election. Study participants were then randomly assigned to read one of three simulated newspaper articles. The post-test questionnaire measured whether participants spotted manipulation in news reports accepted the view(s) promoted in the articles. Demographic data such as age, gender and education were also gathered.

Participants

A convenience sample of 146 undergraduate students at a large university in the western United States was recruited to participate in the experiment in 2005. Recruitment from different departments helped ensure adequate variation in political knowledge. Sixty participants were males and 77 were females; data from eight cases were missing. The mean age was 22.9 years.

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions using a random numbers table. Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings and took about 20 minutes to complete. After completing all tasks, the participants were debriefed about the real intent of the study and the manipulated articles.

Experimental stimuli

Three simulated news reports about events surrounding the Ukrainian presidential election in 2004 were used as stimuli. One was written in favor of the political opposition and its candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. The second favored the pro-presidential political forces and their candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. The third presented both pro-power and pro-opposition viewpoints on the situation.

The articles were written by the first author, a former professional political journalist in Ukraine. All articles were of approximately equal length, signed as if written by the same *New York Times* journalist, and bore the same date.

The pro-opposition article employed frames of "democratic revolution," "struggle for justice, liberty and democratic values" against "mass falsification with votes during the election," and "criminal regime" of then-president Kuchma and his

successor, Yanukovich, who was the presidential election winner due to “falsification.” The article described how Ukrainians “defend [their] right to free expression will” and was one-sided, representing only the Ukrainian opposition’s viewpoint.

The pro-authorities article employed frames of “chaos” due to the opposition’s actions. The opposition was described as weak, ludicrous, overconfident, faint-heartedly refusing to recognize defeat of its candidate and “pursuing power by all manner of means.” All of the opposition’s actions were deemed illegal, violating Ukrainian constitution and the laws. The opposition’s supporters were compared to terrorists, and their “revolution” was described as the actions of drunken young people plied with free beer and vodka during protest rallies. This article was also one-sided, representing only the authorities’ viewpoint.

The third article balanced the viewpoints of the opposition and authorities. It was compiled from the first two articles but avoided sharply negative assessments of either side. The opinion of one side of the conflict was immediately followed by the opinion of the other side. The events were described factually, avoiding the author’s interpretation.

All three articles were proofread by a native English speaker, a university professor teaching journalism, and then formatted to look like copies of actual *New York Times* online articles, including logo, date, headings, fonts, Web address of the article, advertising banner and menu bar. All the articles looked identical except for content.

Measurement

Pre-test questionnaire. The pre-test questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part measured participants’ media use (Kwak, 1999; Jones, 2004), and media trust (Gunther, 1992; Tsfat, 2003). Following reliability testing, scales assessing *general perceptions of news reporting* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$) and *international reporting trust* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$) were created by computing the mean scores for the items comprising the respective scales.

Questions in part two consisted of self-assessed and factual knowledge about domestic U.S. politics, international affairs, and knowledge about Ukraine and the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election. Each factual question included two statements on a particular political topic, one true and the other false. Correct answers to factual questions were summed to create indices of *domestic political knowledge* (with 5 as the highest score) and *international affairs knowledge* (with 6 as the highest score).

Post-test questionnaire. The first question on the post-test questionnaire asked participants what side — authorities, opposition, both, or neither side — should be blamed for creating the conflict. Using 5-point Likert scales, participants then rated six statements (adapted from Tsfat, 2003) intended to assess article trust. Further, using 7-point semantic differential scales, participants shared their perceptions of

bias in the article. Next, they rated (on a 5-point scale) whether the article was biased toward opposition or authorities. Finally, drawing from Meyer (1988), five semantic differential questions were used to assess trust in the source of the article, the *New York Times*.

Scales measuring *article trust* (Cronbach's alpha = .76), *article bias* (Cronbach's alpha = .89), and *New York Times trust* (Cronbach's alpha = .87) were subsequently constructed by computing the mean scores for the items comprising the respective scales.

Prior to conducting the experiment, the questionnaire and articles were pre-tested using a convenience sample of 16 undergraduate students from the same university.

RESULTS

To check article manipulations, a one-way ANOVA was performed. Results for the questions *article is biased toward opposition* and *article is biased toward power* revealed highly significant differences between article conditions: *opposition*, $F(2,139) = 8.090, p < .001$; *authorities*, $F(2,138) = 10.145, p < .001$. Results for the *balance* question narrowly missed significance, $F(2,142) = 0.944$. Post hoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant differences between opposition and authorities, and opposition and balanced conditions for the *opposition* question; and between the authorities and opposition, and balanced and opposition conditions for the *authorities* question. All differences were significant at $p < .05$. The balanced article was perceived by participants as slightly slanted toward the authorities; differences in perceived slant between balanced and power conditions were not significant. Overall, 52 percent of participants in each condition (opposition and authorities) spotted the article's slant (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' opinions about article slant according to article conditions

Article condition	Opinion about article slant (%)			Total (M)
	Slanted for opposition	Slanted for authorities	Neither	
Manipulated toward opposition	52%	24%	24%	100% (N = 42)
Manipulated toward authorities	18%	52%	30%	100% (N = 46)
Balanced	18%	46%	36%	100% (N = 54)

Source: authors' data.

Political knowledge for the whole sample was $M = 8.6$ ($SD = 1.54$).

To test the hypothesis of a positive relationship between political knowledge and ability to spot manipulated media information, bivariate correlations were computed separately for each of the three article conditions between domestic and international political knowledge, article trust, article bias, and whether an article

was biased toward the authorities or opposition. Results revealed a significant negative correlation between *international affairs knowledge* and *article is biased toward the opposition* ($r = -.30, p < .05$) for the balanced article. Results for other conditions were not significant. Linear regression tests between the same variables also did not produce significant results.

Next, the questions *article is biased toward the opposition* and *article is biased toward the authorities* were transformed to create binary “yes/no” variables. Logistic regression was run for each article condition between the transformed article bias variable and domestic political and international affairs knowledge. Only *international affairs knowledge* showed a significant negative correlation at $p < .05$ for balanced condition with the question *article is biased toward the opposition*, confirming the bivariate correlations. When only *international affairs knowledge* was retained in the equation, results showed that viewing the article as biased toward the opposition was again supported only for balanced ($p < .05$) condition (see Table 2).

Table 2. Logistic regression for perceived article bias toward the opposition (by article conditions)

Condition	Variables	B	SE	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
Opposition	International affairs knowledge	-.08	.31	.93	.810
	Constant	.52	1.56	.168	.738
Authorities	International affairs knowledge	-.50	.30	.61	.095
	Constant	1.33	1.36	3.77	.329
Balanced	International affairs knowledge	-.73	.32	.48	.021
	Constant	1.97	1.46	7.21	.177

Source: authors’ data.

To further determine what explanatory variables may have influenced participants’ ability to spot manipulated information in the three articles, stepwise regression tests were run for each article condition. The response variables were the *article trust* and *article bias* scales. Explanatory variables included demographics, *media use to obtain political information* and *information about international affairs*, *general news media trust*, *trust in fairness of international news reporting*, *possessing information about the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election*, *article trust*, *trust in the New York Times*, and *knowledge about domestic and international political affairs*.

The results for *article trust* demonstrated that two explanatory variables — *trust in the New York Times* and *magazines use to obtain information about international affairs* — were significant for the opposition condition, explaining together 36 percent of the variance. However, for the authorities and balanced conditions, only *trust in the New York Times* was significant at $p < .001$. Participants’ knowledge about the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election had no effects.

For *article bias*, the stepwise regression test revealed that the only factor that was significantly and positively associated with spotting manipulated information was *trust in the New York Times*. It explained 46 percent, 42 percent and 18 percent of the variance for opposition, authorities and balanced conditions, respectively.

Thus, results partially supported Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 stated that participants with higher levels of political knowledge would less likely accept the standpoint promoted in a biased article as to who was to blame for the Ukrainian election conflict. In other words, more knowledgeable individuals should have been less susceptible to influence by manipulated media information. Frequency distribution for blame question by article conditions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency distribution for the question “What side should be blamed for creating the conflict?” (by article conditions)

Article condition	Answer options (%)					Total (%)
	Protesters	Government	Both sides	Neither side	Impossible to assess	
Manipulated toward opposition	1 (2.3%)	35 (81.4%)	4 (9.3%)	2 (4.7%)	1 (2.3%)	43 (100%)
Manipulated toward authorities	26 (55.3%)	5 (10.6%)	8 (17.0%)	4 (8.5%)	4 (8.5%)	47 (100%)
Balanced	15 (27.3%)	11 (20.0%)	23 (41.8%)	4 (7.3%)	2 (3.6%)	55 (100%)

Source: authors' data.

To find whether level of political knowledge influenced susceptibility, multinomial logistic regression tests were run separately for each condition between participants' domestic and international political knowledge and the question asking “what side should be blamed for creating the conflict?” Results were not significant for all conditions.

To explore whether variables other than political knowledge might be associated with susceptibility to influence by manipulated information, additional multinomial logistic regression tests for each article condition were conducted. Explanatory variables included *general news media trust*, *trust in fairness of international news reporting*, *possessing information about the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election*, *article trust*, *article bias* and *trust in the New York Times*. Results of the tests were not significant.

Further analysis found significant negative correlations between *level of U.S. domestic political knowledge*, *general news media trust* and *trust in fairness of international news reporting*. Higher levels of domestic political knowledge were associated with less trust in the news media reporting (see Table 4).

Table 4. Bivariate correlations between domestic political knowledge and news reporting trust

	General news reporting trust (<i>N</i> = 140)	International news reporting trust (<i>N</i> = 139)
U.S. domestic political knowledge scale	-.25**	-.17*

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed), ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Source: authors' data.

In turn, significant positive correlations were revealed between *general* and *international news reporting trust* and *trust in the New York Times*, *article trust* and *article bias*. The strongest associations were found between the two news reporting trust scales ($r = .57, p < .001$), *article trust* and *article bias* ($r = .68, p < .001$), and *trust in the New York Times* and *article trust* and *article bias* ($r = .54, p < .001$; $r = .56, p < .001$, respectively). As opposed to the results for U.S. domestic political knowledge, all of these correlations were positive, meaning that higher levels of general news media trust and trust in the *New York Times* were associated with a greater tendency to trust articles and see them as unbiased (see Table 5).

Table 5. Bivariate correlations between news reporting trust, trust in the *New York Times*, article trust and article bias

	General news reporting trust	International news reporting trust	Trust in NYT	Article trust	Article bias
General news reporting trust	—				
International news reporting trust	.57**	—			
Trust in NYT	.32**	.28**	—		
Article trust	.22**	.24**	.54**	—	
Article bias	.23**	.14	.56**	.68**	—

** Correlation significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

Source: authors' data.

DISCUSSION

Analysis revealed inconsistent relationships between political knowledge and ability to spot manipulation in news articles (Hypothesis 1): individuals with more international affairs knowledge were less inclined to consider the balanced article as biased toward the opposition. For Hypothesis 2, neither international affairs knowledge nor knowledge about domestic politics appeared to affect participants'

susceptibility to influence by manipulated information about the Ukrainian presidential election.

As presented previously, half of the participants spotted manipulated information in the two one-sided and allegations-dominated articles. At the same time, standpoints espoused in the two manipulated articles were nonetheless accepted by a majority of readers in both instances. Such inconsistency has several possible explanations. Firstly, that articles were considered biased has come to be regarded as a common feature of modern news reports. For this reason, accepting the articles' standpoints might serve as more convincing evidence of how individuals actually perceived manipulated news, compared to whether or not they spotted the manipulation. Secondly, the question about assigning responsibility for the crisis might have been misinterpreted as asking whom the article blamed, not whom the participants themselves considered responsible. Thirdly and perhaps most likely, acceptance of the articles' views may have been a result of participants' trust in the particular news outlet that had published the manipulated news reports (the *New York Times*). Future studies should investigate the inconsistencies between detecting information manipulation and adopting the viewpoints espoused in manipulated news reports in more detail.

Evidence obtained in the study supports the last explanation. Analysis revealed that trust in the *New York Times* played an important role in explaining the variance in participants' susceptibility to influence of manipulated news information as well as their ability to spot it. Trust in the *New York Times* was positively correlated with article trust and article bias scale: the more a person trusted the *New York Times*, the more (s)he trusted the article and considered it unbiased. In turn, article trust and article bias were significantly and positively correlated. Thus, trust in the *New York Times* influenced participants' perceptions of pro-opposition and pro-authorities articles as trusted and unbiased, and acceptance of the standpoints they promoted.

Other noteworthy findings were that trust in the publication (the *New York Times*) was positively correlated with trust in fairness of both news reporting in general and international news reporting. In turn, general news reporting trust was positively correlated with both article trust and article bias, while international news reporting trust was positively correlated with article trust only. Therefore, those who trusted the fairness of news reporting in general and international news reporting also trusted the *New York Times* (and vice versa) and trusted that articles were fair and unbiased. These findings suggest a decrease in critical assessment of news media information as a function of increasing levels of general news media and particular news publication trust. What kind of trust precedes the other when attempting to understand the influence of trust on the ability to spot manipulated media information and susceptibility to influence by such information is a question for future research.

In addition, level of domestic political knowledge was negatively correlated both with trust in news reporting in general and trust in international news reporting

specifically, indicating that participants with higher levels of political knowledge were less inclined to trust news reporting. In view of the aforesaid, domestic political knowledge exerted an indirect influence on ability to spot manipulated media information as well as on susceptibility to its effects. Thus, news media trust might mediate the relationship between political knowledge and the response variables.

To further explore whether political knowledge can enhance the ability to detect manipulation in news reports and reject implications offered by them, some conceptual refinements should be made in future studies. First, political knowledge should not be regarded simply as a set of political facts stored in long-term memory (Delli Carpini, Keeter, 1996) but rather as an indicator of more critical evaluation and analytic processing of incoming information. As such, this concept should not be limited to factual political knowledge but should include other aspects of political competence, such as interest in politics, intentionally reading or watching political news, political participation and interpersonal discussion of political issues. Taken together, these indicators should better capture the cognitive nature of political competence as compared to factual knowledge alone. Indeed, past studies have included several dimensions in their measures of political competence to get more valid results.

In addition, future studies should include measures of critical media literacy along with media trust. Less media-literate people might be more likely to accept the “shallow” meaning of manipulated news messages and, as a result, be more influenced by such messages as compared to individuals with higher levels of media literacy (e.g., Aufderhide, 1993; Alvermann, Hagood, 2000; Hobbs, Frost, 2003; Silberblatt, 2008; Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2013).

To increase confidence in the validity of study findings, the effects of manipulated information should be studied using other contexts, topics and types of news media. Employing larger, more representative random samples of participants may also increase the likelihood of revealing significant outcomes in future studies on the effects of manipulated media information, for participants’ levels of political competence, and critical media literacy will be more heterogeneous. To further understand the mechanisms underlying detection and rejection of manipulated news reports, it may be advisable to investigate news topics which are novel or less familiar to participants. This would allow researchers to rule out prior opinions that might contaminate participants’ perceptions of news articles.

In essence, manipulated media information fulfills a persuasive, not informative, function. Ability to spot it and reject standpoints imposed by such news messages is a vital characteristic of the citizens of the modern information society. Moreover, such ability is particularly important in the age of the proliferation of Internet communications, when virtually everyone is able to produce and disseminate “news” of different — and sometimes questionable — quality through citizen journalism channels, social networks, etc. As in the case of the Orange Revolution, recent controversial events such as the Ukrainian Crisis after EuroMaidan, the Arab Spring, sectarian violence

in Egypt, or civil war in Syria may be employed in further research as a context for experimentally studying effects of manipulated foreign news reports coming from traditional news media like newspapers, magazines and television, and from alternative ones such as social networks, blogs and microblogs, and Internet photo and video services. This would not only facilitate comparisons with the present study, but also distinguish between traditional and alternative news sources as to the degree of influence on consumers depending on their levels of political knowledge (or competence), critical media literacy, media trust, and controlling for prior opinions about the issue.

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